

# Sky Pirates

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Chapter one

It's a wet night tonight. Rain is thumping on my window like an elephant trying to barge its way through. Normally it just pitter-patters on the glass as if there are fairy folk weaving magic in the weather, but tonight it's more like a giant wants to smash through my window and destroy the contents of my bedroom. The wind is blowing fiercely too, knocking down fences that are rotten and mouldy. There is the faint rumble of thunder and a modest flash of electric lightening.

Swirling darkness spills right the way through my pitch black bedroom as I toss and turn, struggling with the sleep that I so desperately need. The bright chocolaty hued ringlets that generally bounce around my head like some sort of crazy plant are stuck right up my ear canal, making the position I am curled up in even less comfy. Little bug things are fluttering around - it *could* just be my hair mucking around with my sound wave things - in the midst of gloom enveloping my normally cosy room. It's like, at night, it gets all eerie and weird, and everything normal turns into freaky monsters. My cat, Mercury, is curled up right next to me and purring contentedly, yet she sounds like some sort of killer motorcycle or something. There is a gross smell wafting around, which is probably just putrid milk or something daft like that, yet it smells like a thousand poisons just waiting to unleash their fiery tendrils.

Hi. I'm Eliza. Posh name, I know, so don't even bother trying to tease me about it. It might be a pinky, girly, icky name, but I am nothing like that. I hate pink, girly, icky stuff. It all makes me want to gag. I mean c'mon people - *pink*? Talk about the most disgusting colour in the whole entire world (excluding puke-green/yellow). And you'd imagine that someone called Eliza would listen to classical music or something, but in actual fact I'm in this TOTALLY wicked rock band, playing lead guitar. You'd imagine that they would love books and writing and all that, but I HATE books and writing just hurts my fingers. To put it in simple form: I am not your everyday Eliza.

I roll over again and try to think about dreamy things. It's no good though: the best I can come up with is the face of the bogey monster, and that isn't exactly the makings of a perfect, boy-filled dream, is it? It's more the makings of some freakishly abnormal horror movie-filled dream, with oozing creatures and little beasties. Maybe I should picture the face of Barry Grey, the hottest lad in my class? It's easy enough; just stick a pale face in the centre of your mind. Then add mysteriously dark eyes, tufts of funny blonde locks, a cute button nose and a perfect smile, and you're done. No spots, no blemishes, no ringlets of puss. Just a perfect boy with a perfect personality. Oh ... I forgot the huge sticky out ears. The only things that ruin his otherwise faultless appearance.

A light flickers on outside and shines through my `a b c' curtains. I sit up. Rubbing my eyes and getting rid of any unwanted sleepies, I sigh and look around my murky bedroom. The light has banished any exhaustion that was flowing through my veins, even though I know it can't be who, or what, I hope it is. I mean, why would father come back home to us at twelve midnight, 3 years, 2 months and a day since

he left? Why would he return to my mother and her horrible deceiving ways? He wouldn't, because he has a shred of common sense and decency unlike that horrible woman that I hate so much and unfortunately have to live with.

The light gets brighter and brighter as I consider my options. Should I try once more to go back to sleep and then give up, or see what the light is by gazing anxiously out of my dusty bedroom window that has only ever been opened once and is absolutely coated with grime?

Guess which one I choose.

I crawl over to the end of my bed and brush the curtains out of the way with a swift flick of my bony wrist. Brushing a stray curl out of my face, I quickly pull the blinds up and squint outside. For a single moment, I think it might just be a streetlamp that has suddenly started working or someone's porch light set off by a wandering pussy. And then I notice it out of the corner of my eye. It's only for a split second at first: just a slight glimpse of shining wood, glimmering with dampness through the tormenting rain and hail. But then; the rising figure of a giant ship, the sails billowing in a non-existent wind. A sinister figurehead is plastered at one end, shaped as a naked woman holding up a pipe - that looks as though it should be smoking - delicately as though it might break at any second: mosses and grime shroud it. Finally, I spot with widened eyes: the vast circular end to a long and round spyglass which, at one end, is held up to the eye of a strange, menacing figure, and, at the other end, is pressed right up to my window, the grim black eye pupil searing straight through it.

"What the-?" I start, peering warily through the large circle and watching the eyeball blink. I have no chance to finish, however, as the ship rises right up the base of my window and crashes directly into the cold stone, outdoor windowsill, spreading rubble everywhere. The figurehead *seems* to blink and open its mouth in shock but I'm sure it's just a trick of the light. Letting out a shrill squeak, I dart back to the head of my bed and force some sleep into my system - where it doesn't settle. The bright light flares out and once again the street is set in complete darkness, including my bedroom.

Outside, there is an extremely loud purring sound, much louder than Mercury's was earlier. It bounces right off my ear drum and echoes throughout my skull, making my skin shudder and goose bumps appear. Gasping loudly, I shove my cold hands right over my ears but it doesn't do a single thing. Over the purring I can hear deafening voices ordering others about. A strange clunking is getting louder and, by the sound of it, closer. Scarier.

I pull my duvet completely over my head to block out life as we know it. It doesn't work as a deafening bang is heard and echoed throughout the whole street. A giant metal ball smashes right through my window and lands on the carpeted floor with a bang that would wake the dead. I leap out of bed and stare at it for a moment, wondering what on earth it is, why on earth it just smashed through my bedroom window and how on earth it hasn't crashed down to the lounge below. It's a cold metal hunk of death, just lying innocently on the floor and dripping with hail and rain. How would you feel if that suddenly landed in your bedroom, setting the curtains flapping around madly? In fact, how would you feel if a giant floating ship was hovering outside of your window? Terrified, right?

There is a low, rumbling, persistent panting. I hurl myself back into the ruffled folds of my duvet, and start madly thinking. I'm sure that whatever is now entering my room through the smashed window can tell I'm under here because the covers seem to be shaking more than my actual body. My bedroom

window is gone. What will my mother say? The curtains are fluttering crazily: as is my brain. What on earth is going on here?

Someone is in my bedroom.

Somebody is stepping over the shards of smashed glass.

Someone, some strange freak, is trespassing in our property.

Some weird pirate ship person, with a rasping breath, is walking through my stuff.

“Come out; come out, wherever you are.”



Chapter two

I cautiously step onto my windowsill and peer downwards, as the wind whips my extensive chocolate locks around and flaps my long nightdress crazily. The ship is floating beneath my window, next to the wall above my parent's bedroom window that is ridden with colourful and strong-smelling ivy, at least 12 ft below me. I have a major case of intense vertigo before the so-called `Captain' pokes me with his spyglass and I topple through my smashed window. Soaring through the air, I reach up to try and grab an ivy leaf or stem but instead find myself grabbing old and empty cobwebs and small, fluttering bugs that squash right into my hand and splatter guts, puss and blood every where.

My skin rips against the hard twigs and sticks that are randomly sticking out of the ivy curtain, making me squeal in agony as the knobby bits carve huge, bright red grooves in my bare arms. A huge spider scuttles across my face and I scream louder than life itself. My hands latch onto a stiff ivy stem that just holds me, and I try to stop flailing, try to stop falling. It simply scolds my hands, splitting the skin, and makes tears burn at my eyes. The captain is above my head, slyly swinging down a makeshift ivy ladder with the grace of an elephant. I land on my side with a thunderous thump and a screech on the stiff wooden floor underneath. A small gap in between the planks of wood nips my skin as I land, and the whole world goes wobbly, spinning, and my eyes flicker between the colour black and the view in front of my eyes. My wrist snaps underneath my weight but I don't feel anything as I'm far too cold and I wouldn't notice if a cannon, like the one that landed on my bedroom floor, landed right on my head and balanced there for a moment. Hail splatters over my defenseless body, pounding my head. For one second I'm seriously paranoid that The Captain can see my bum underneath my nightdress, but the next minute he's whipping me up sharply and tugging on my spindly arm so I can't worry about tiny trivial matters.

"Oh great, The Captain's got another one," a voice out of the unfathomable darkness mutters sarcastically. I'm about to ask what on earth the voice means by `another one', but The Captain yanks me harshly again and leads me to a small gap in the floor. He climbs down a rickety ladder, into a dimly lit cabin, dragging me along uncomfortably across the floor.

"Sit," his rumbling voice demands. I swivel around and spot a small, wobbly stool. Sitting on it, I study The Captain as The Captain studies me back warily. He has a long mass of graying, jet black hair that is held up in a half-ponytail, which flows over his well built shoulders. There is also a bit of a moustache growing, along with a slight lump of hair beneath his mouth and then a whole heap of hair attached to his rounded chin. His large, tufty eyebrows are furrowed in a stern expression above an innocent, almost-black eye, but his flawlessly-chiseled cheekbones seem softer and calmer. A large gold earring hangs in one of his ears and a black eye patch is covering up one of his amazing eyes that are seemingly enchanting me away to a faraway land. Around his head is wrapped a red and black striped bandana-thing. His filthy shirt is ripped at the sleeves and chest, but around his neck dangles a large golden key.

“Um...” I break the silence awkwardly and he inwardly glances at me before sitting down on the other side of a posh, oak desk, sticking his bare, grimy feet up onto it with no shame. Disgusting.

“You want to know who I am, don't you?” he asks knowingly in his stiff, slightly-drunken English accent. I half expected him to have one of those sailor accents, like in all the movies. But no. Obviously not. He pockets the rusty spyglass as I nod shyly and he chuckles. “Well, nobody other than my very own daughter knows that most valuable secret; none at all other than her know my true name, so it's not in me to simply tell one of the new `uns.”

“Oh.” I mumble. He draws a sword from some secret pocket in his ripped, mud-coated trousers, and examines it thoroughly for a moment.

“The Captain, they all call me, just for the record. That's what you'll be calling me too, if you want to see your thirteenth birthday.”

“I'm thirteen already.” I remark indignantly.

“Well ... your fifteenth birthday then. It's a very explicate name,” he adds with a smirk.

“Yeah,” I agree, not too sure of just what I'm supposed to be saying. I pull my sleeves over my hand and fiddle with one of the pens on the desk. I try to lift the other hand but my wrist doesn't want to do as it's told. I gaze at it carefully, and nearly faint with horror. It is coated with drying blood and I can see a little bit of the bone sticking out of the skin. It looks just a little worse than The Captain's feet.

“Um...” I mindlessly say over and over again, trying to get him to focus on it.

“Um? You want to know where you are, I'm guessing.”

“Damn right,” I mumble, suddenly feeling a feast of fierce fiery flames building up inside me like a volcano waiting to explode. Suddenly my wrist doesn't seem as important as the family - excluding my mother - that I'm leaving behind against my will. I mean, how will little Jodie and Billy cope when they realise I've disappeared? It'll be like when I found out that dad had just abandoned us with no income and no news of where he was. I was only twelve, so it was only a year ago (practically), and it was the most horrible feeling ever. I felt like a giant part of my body had amazingly gone missing and it was never coming back. I stayed cooped up in my bedroom for a month, not talking to anyone unless I had to ask them what they wanted for tea or something. That is, until mum found her new bloke, Matthew. He's a little jerk. They're always all over each other and yet they're both about 50 years old. It's disgusting. Minging Matthew will never replace my father, no matter what he does or how hard he tries to win over Jodie and Billy. He'll never be able to play football like my dad could. He'll never have as much imagination as my father had. Most of all, he can't steal away my dad's soul and personality, as he tries so hard every day to do. “And I want to know why you stole me away from my home!”

“Very well, little lady,” The Captain grins, showing of a mouth of rotten, yellowing teeth. I wince as I pull my wrist onto the desk, deep in thought about dad. Tears are brimming at my eyes and they're burning up as if a fire has unexpectedly appeared. The Captain pauses, and looks at my wrist. Pulling out a large wad of bandages and sorting it all out with the exact touch and softness that dad often had, he

continues: "You are on a famous sky ship known as The Midnight. We take away little children and teens that are not asleep by the edge of night: midnight. Now, before you go totally berserk on me, Eliza, we take them away," he quickly includes before I can shriek an outraged cry of pain and indignity, "Because if we didn't, the evil and completely unpredictable midnight horses would ... well ... come and feed on all of you teens and kids awake at midnight."

"Midnight horses?" I question, withdrawing my hand which is now covered in an untidy bandage. The word `dad' totally exits my mind as the words `midnight horse' and `sky ship' enter it.

"Oh, yes, they are terrible creatures, you know," he leans across the desk so that I can smell his putrid breath, as he says with a hoarse whisper: "They come at midnight, blending in with the dark night sky, and they knock their hooves on your window. If nobody answers or even looks up, they go to the next house. But, if you merely shudder or tremble, they smash their way through and-"

"Like your cannon did to my window?"

"Well ... yes, I suppose that's precisely right. And then if they see you awake or whatever, they gobble you right up; only after piercing you with their fiery horns that glow a vivid orange, of course. Then they swap you with the worst changeling they can find."

"The worst WHAT they can find?" I ask, horrified. The word 'changeling' sounds slightly disturbing and I'm not too sure if I really want to know what it is.

"Changeling," he repeats with an irritated sigh.

"Which is?" I demand.

A faery replica of you - only bad," he grimaces with a totally straight face, "The midnight horses take the worst one that they can find and make sure it is absolutely identical to you. Then the next morning when your family wakes up, the changeling starts attacking them and worse."

I stare at him worriedly and tap the pen on a large, round, dusty globe that spits filth and dirt at me. Maybe being eaten and replaced by a changeling would be worse than being on this floating ship. I mean, imagine poor Jodie and Billy being attacked by a `changeling'. I suppose it wouldn't be too bad if the Minger and the Mum got attacked, but I would hate it if my siblings got hurt.

The ship is slowly tipping from side to side, making me guess we're `sailing'. That could be part of the reason that The Captain is slurring his words now and swaying around: although I'm guessing that it's also because he's slurping down some wee-coloured stuff from a transparent bottle and going more crimson by the second.

"Ok, ok, let me get this straight," I begin, trying to understand and coughing through the cloud of dust and grime - and the smell of booze. "These ... midnight horses ... they come at midnight without anyone seeing them, and eat anyone that is awake, and then swap them with evil faeries which will attack the eaten person's family? And to stop them from actually killing and replacing kids, your sky ship, called so originally: The Midnight, *snatches* the children away instead?"



“Exactly,” he nods, beaming broadly and picking a bit of grime out of his tooth with the huge, shiny sword. “But we only take the kids that are near to where we are. Otherwise it means traveling hundreds of miles every night and our ship can't do that. It would also mean that the ship would get a lot fuller more quickly than it already does. At the moment there are only ten or so kids on board, including you. The midnight horses don't kill everyone either. They too only kill the ones only in the neighborhood. We could see a whole group of them heading your way, meaning that you were particularly energetic still, so we had no choice but to-“

“Right,” I mutter, frowning. He chuckles again and stands up, swaying a little bit drunkenly.

“The eye patch is just for show, by the way,” he suddenly mentions, lifting it up and showing off another hypnotic eye that winks happily at me. It's outlined with thick black eyeliner and, as I look closer, so is the other one.

“Oh.” I mumble, as if I'm discovering something incredibly amazing. Then I consider something that I've been wondering curiously about for most of our conversation. “What exactly is a sky ship?”

He sighs ignorantly and rolls his eyes at me like I'm a total idiot. Hello! I'm in the top sets at school! Idiot = not me!

“It ... is ... a ... ship...” he declares slowly, “that ... sails ... in ... the ... sky!”

“O ... K ...” I reply sarcastically, and then roll my eyes exasperatingly and turn away with my arms crossed angrily. The Captain, who isn't so sinister or amazing as he appeared at first, sniggers and starts to clamber back up the rickety ladder, proving my theory that our little conversation is over.

“Oh, by the way - the other children will be in the mess room,” he adds, popping his head upside down through the trapdoor, which the ladder evidently goes through, and dropping his bandana by accident.

“But I -” I start, but it's too late: he's already gone.

“Want to go home.” I mumble into the silent, thin air.

Chapter three

I quickly walk into the mess hall and come face to face with ... well ... mess, actually. Lumps of disgusting food are stuck to the half of the walls and there are huge wet patches on the floor which I really don't want to know about. A group of filthy looking kids are crowded around one of many splintering tables all lined up in a row, that should really be outside as it has a white and blue umbrella stuck into a hole in the middle. The Captain's `office' is just behind the end bench and there is a small window looking out along one row of benches. Another row of benches starts behind his office and carries on down the hall. Attached to the walls are rusty lockers that apparently never get used.

Just next to the grubby stick that's holding the umbrella up (on the splintering table, which is veiled from view of The Captain as it is the first bench of the hidden row), a bright green bottle is spinning around and around as 14 eyes watch it eagerly, hungrily. Sat on top of the table, just behind the bottle and leaning on the umbrella stick, is an average sized girl who looks very much like a guy because of her hair that just reaches her collarbone and is just one shade darker than mine, and the baggy shirt and trousers she is sporting with pride. She's shrieking happily and waving her arms around wildly as the bottle spins jaggedly. Something tells me she's a rather annoying girl. I watch them warily from in front of the closed door of The Captain's office.

“Round and round the bottle goes - who it'll land on, no one knows!” she and another girl chorus, wiggling their bushy eyebrows mysteriously. Rolling her eyes at something one of the boys said, the other girl has wiry black hair that flows past her shoulders and is wearing a tight top that shows off too much skin, along with a pair of baggy jeans which are ripped at the knees and spotted with dirt. Tucked into her belt is a small wooden sword, which is just for show, I guess. Well, that's what I think for one naïve second. Then I notice that all the others have one as well.

As it stops spinning, the bottle neck is pointed at another of their gang: a boy about the same age as the two girls with slightly over-large front teeth and amazingly bright blue eyes.

“GNASHER!” sings the girl on the table jokily. The boy, apparently called Gnasher, grins happily; showing off the two huge front teeth that give him his name and which are yellowing a little. His eyes are shining and as he moves out of the umbrella's shadow I can see that he has freckles coating his whole nose area. Along with a shirt is ripped at most places, his feet are bare and almost as bad as The Captain's, and he has a red and white spotted bandana on which is covering up a heap of brown tendrils. “Truth, dare, double dare, love, kiss, or hate?” asks table-girl. He flickers those sapphire eyes in thought.

“Kiss,” he declares. The whole group screams with delight and he shrinks back from the noise.

“Ok ... anyone got any ideas?” asks the wiry-black-hair-girl, taking command even though table-girl looks more leader material. Nobody says a word. The only noise in the whole room is the sound of glop slipping down one of the walls. “Timmy?” she asks, pointedly staring at a chubby boy who has raised his eyebrows in sarcasm. He lifts his head up and looks at her through gleaming emerald eyes in surprise before shaking his head, floppy black hair lashing through the air, and returning to a daydream. “Xanthe?” she asks, this time looking directly at a beautiful girl who looks like a rather round, golden haired angel sent from above. She also shakes her head miserably. Wiry-black-hair-girl sighs. “I’m out of ideas,” she grimaces, also leaning her head on a perfectly manicured hand.

“Oh, oh, oh! I've got one!” a seriously tiny boy with fluffy black curls that spring out all over the place stands up, waving his arm around in the air. He reaches toward the bottle and lifts it right up to his mouth, smirking evilly. The whole group holds their breath. “You have to kiss Milly - on the lips!” he roars, and his laughter echoes through the whole bottle, bouncing off the mess hall walls and probably sinking into the glop wedged onto them.

Table-girl screeches slightly deafeningly and shoves the boy who made the suggestion, making me guess that maybe, just maybe, her name is Milly. She seems like a bit of a big mouthed weirdo, to be honest with you, and I'm not exactly sure that I want to make friends with her. She's like this mate I had when I was about 10. She was really big mouthed and annoying and no one liked her apart from me. The day she quieted down was the day she got more friends.

“Frizzo, you have a weird sense of humour!” she says, glaring at the little one with crazy hair. He grins evilly.

“I know,” he laughs, showing off a cheeky smile “It runs in the fa-“

He's cut off as Milly screams, giggles, and flies off the table. Gnasher wittily steps closer to her with his lips pursed and even I can't hold back the giggles at the look on Milly's face. It's hilarious. It's like she's split between being amused, disgusted, and interested, and she looks like a FOOL! Gnasher stops closing in on her and opens one of his eyes to the sight of everyone in fits of giggles, including me. He too bursts into peals of laughter, and, after a moment, Milly catches on and starts sniggering as well.

As they all, one by one, fall quiet and blissfully spin the bottle once more, a really tall boy who can't be older than 14 yet has to double over simply to fit into the room, swivels around to check maybe the time on the wall, and notices me standing all alone in the doorway, just wearing my nightdress. I shyly wave at his and he turns back to the group with a frown.

“Timmy, check it out!” he whispers, just loud enough for me to hear. Something tells me he's putting on a stage whisper. The chubby boy turns around and spots me. “Who do you think she is?” the tall boy asks, nervously turning to fix his strange purple eyes on me once more. Timmy shakes his head, eyes glued to me. He nudges wiry-black-hair-girl, who nudges Gnasher. One by one they all realise that I exist and start staring at the lonely figure that is I.

“Hey,” Milly says sourly. I wave anxiously again, “Can we help you?”

“Um, I'm n-“

"You're new, aren't you?" Gnasher asks curiously. I nod timidly. How did he know what I was going to say; or was I that obvious? "In that case, ignore everything that Milly says to you. She's a hard shell to crack but when you get to know her, she's nuttier than a fruit and nut cake."

"Oh ... right," I mumble, trying to figure out what on earth he meant, and start walking closer to their little gathering.

"Erm ... what do you think you're doing?" asks Milly, jumping off the table on which she only just leapt onto, and standing right up to me even though I'm at least a cm taller than her. "We don't even know who she is. She could be an imposter, trying to learn secrets for the midnight horses," she hisses to the others. They all roll their eyes.

"Like I said," says Gnasher, walking to me and tugging my arm towards the rest, "Ignore her. So like, who are you? Oh don't worry, you can tell me in a moment. Allow me to introduce ... Gnasher!" he grins, suddenly pointing to himself, "Milly, of course!" he gestures to Milly who sullenly glares at me, "Ruby!" ah! So that's wiry-hair-girl's name! "Xanthe!" Round angel girl, "Frizzo!" crazy hair kid, "Timmy!" round and tubby, "And finally, Will!" this time he points to the really tall boy, who is having a fit of laughter at something Timmy did. He has bright blonde hair enveloping most of his really large head, and is shirtless - oh la la! "So who are you?"

"Eliza," I say, grimacing at my own name. Xanthe and Milly try - and fail - to conceal snorts of laughter. "I know: it's a gay name." I scowl.