



The background of the cover features a detailed technical drawing of a mechanical arm or claw, resembling a steam-powered gripper, extending from the left side. In the lower right corner, there is a sketch of a winged figure, possibly a dragon or a mechanical creature, with its wings spread. Faint, handwritten-style text is visible in the background, including "The Hawk" and "This is".

# Building Steam

*Book I in the  
Sky Hawke  
adventure saga*

*Renée J. Fleury*

October 13, 1872

My Dearest Kira,

I know what you're after, and I know I have myself to blame. The man you think you are chasing is but a ghost, and by the time you read this, so shall I be.

I did what I must, in order to protect you, and by now you've discovered your greatest ally. Trust in this man, Kira! Despite his peculiarities, he is one of the finest human beings I have ever had the privilege to know. I would not have entrusted your life to him, otherwise.

....My final battle calls, dear valkyrie. Trust in yourself, Sky Captain, and put faith in the allies that surround you.

Godspeed, daughter.

Yours faithfully,

Sky Captain Douglas Hawke

# Building Steam





This is a work of fiction. All non-historical characters are completely fictitious, and any resemblance to other people, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

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Sky Hawke

# Building Steam

*(Book I)*

Renée J. Fleury

*a Sky Captain Productions literary work*

*For the steampunk community.  
We uplift each other.*

# Prologue

Philadelphia, PA  
October 23, 1872  
Time: 7:35 PM

Iron bells. All alone. Tolling... tolling... tolling, in muffled monotony. Rain drove hard upon streets of cobblestone. Amber lamps cast Philadelphia in a fog, shrouding buildings in tight shadow. A horse-drawn coach clopped by, disturbing the wetlands that had collected along the avenue. Walter glanced at the clock tower and pulled his trench coat tighter. The bells mourned the death of the fallen sky captain, and he was late for the funeral. Douglas would forgive him, and Kira would never get.

## HAWKE WEAPONRY MANUFACTURING FACILITY

Established 1832

The tarnished brass letters glared down at him as he hurried into the shadows of the enormous brick building. His boots sloshed through puddles and he coughed in the damp air. The rumble of a passing craft made him look up, but he couldn't see the dirigible. Only the dingy glow of its light made it past the thick ceiling.

The smoky, sweet odor of pipe tobacco alerted Walter that he was not alone. He skirted the main entrance and quickly returned to the darkness, following his nose to the blackest corner of the factory. A shadow emerged: trim, but shorter than he'd expected. Barely a feature could be discerned, his eyes hidden by a fedora and his trench coat several sizes too large. A pipe, simple and clay, stuck out to one side of his mouth, and the perfumed smoke was perhaps his only three-dimensional aspect.

A tarot card lay submerged in a puddle at his feet. Walter squinted, studying the artwork. A robed man stood before a table with a cup, an infinity sign above his head. The Magician.

Walter looked up. "You've dropped something, Mister Doyle."



Walter frowned. "I'm on time for you, aren't I?"

"Time *is* the issue, isn't it, Doctor? Or perhaps, a man *out* of time."

"I have a funeral to attend, Mister Doyle. Hand me the device."

The shadow-of-a-man reached inside his coat and pulled a rolled-up

roll. A leather strap was fastened around it, secured by a brass snap

Puzzled, Walter took it and unraveled the thing. The worn, creased

paper crinkled as it unfurled, and he squinted in the dim light. There

were points set all over the place, against a blank background. An

elaborate frame surrounded this madness, and it was almost like a star

chart, but these points were labeled with locations on the globe. Each

location was dated and several of these dates were from far in the

future. Walter looked closer, noticing the faint lines of longitude and

latitude. So it was a map... an encrypted, meticulous map. His breath

caught. There was only one man who could create such a map, and the

man's name was hauntingly familiar. Carefully, and with baited

breath, Walter unfurled the lower left corner. There, unmistakably, was

Douglas Hawke's signature. He ran his fingers over the ink as rain

soaked the paper.

The man met his eyes. "Knowledge is the best device I can supply you

with. Know the story and you'll know the game. Knowledge is power,

and it's the pursuit of power that drives our foe."

Walter rolled the map and fastened it, tucking it within his trench

coat. "Who are you?"

The man shrugged and adjusted his pipe. The faintest glow of the

lights reached his face and Walter could see stubble along a rigid jaw.

Smoke curled up between them, clove and maple, as the rain drove

onward. "Figure it out."

And into the downpour he walked, away down flooded streets. Walter

never did get his face as the bells tolled their last, in time with the

clapping and sloshing of another carriage.

January 7, 1885

dearest Captain,

You must forgive ~~The~~ intimacy of this letter. It is not without its purpose, however, I would be remiss if I did not make such ~~An~~ inquiry. Having familiarized myself with your company, I am of the understanding that you Inherited Hauke's pony from your father. If I may pry, might you provide details surrounding the late Douglas Hauke's death? My deepest apologies, of Course, for any pain this may cause you. See you in Philadelphia, where I shall Await your response.

Needs must when the devil drives, Captain.

Yours on good faith,

Master P. C. Doyle

May 4, 18

Dear Mister Doyle,

I'm afraid there's been some mistake. I never agreed to meet with you. That is, if you intended to show up at all. The date on your letter suggests you are a well-traveled man... quite dangerous I know.

With that said, I must inquire: Of what interest is my father's death? I take it you are *not* an investor. If your interests do not involve the prosperous finances of my company, I am inclined to discontinue communication. However, Mister Doyle, you have peaked my curiosity. Perhaps the mystery lies there instead.

I am certain our rendezvous will be full of questions. Perhaps more questions asked, than answered. But that *is* what you do, isn't it? Since you are clearly not an investor, and are far too sceptic to be an inventor after my ideas, that leaves but one possibility, *Detective*. You aren't the only one well versed in the science of deduction.

I expect, despite time traveling technicalities, that you will receive this correspondence just fine. See you in Philadelphia, Detective Doyle. Bring your wit and expect answers, for I *will* demand them.



Act II

The Confederate

# Chapter 1

## *Finally, Something Happens in Connecticut*

May 7, 1884

High altitude above Danbury, CT

Altitude: 1,036 ft

Blazing embers flared as coal was heaved into the furnace. Steam surged through copper pipes, hissing past check valves in its blind rampage throughout the bowels of the ship. Blistering hot smoke built up pressure so great the weldings groaned, certain to explode, charging her onward, until the volatile vapors belched from the exhaust pipe. A long gray trail streamed behind as The Cimarron glided forth with a pair of massive canvas wings.

Late afternoon sunlight gave the dirigible a gilded sheen. A large, gasbag balloon lofted the freighter, her canvas fins translucent. The gasbag's ominous gray color made the vessel as formidable as she was silent.

Taut tethers were jarred as the airship took a blow. Grappling hooks crashed through windows and over the balustrade, mooring The Cimarron to a dark, sailed ship. It had no gasbag, floating weightless above Connecticut. The thing looked as though it belonged in the sea, made from its many propellers. A thick bow was carved into a black triangle.

“PIRATES ON STARBOARD!” Kira hollered into a radio-graph. She spun the wheel violently to portside, desperately hoping to flee. The freighter veered slowly, arduously, but a harpoon crashed through the cabin windows. Kira dodged behind the wheel, shielding herself from flying splinters and glass, as the weapon lodged itself in the hardwood floor.

The deafening booms shook everything as The Cimarron struck her hardest blows. It wouldn't be long before the pirates retaliated.

She darted to the row of smashed windows, crunching over the broken glass. Filthy, disheveled men poured onto The Cimarron. They hung from their vessel, a tethering cable the only thing preventing them from falling a thousand feet to their deaths. Above, the ceiling groaned as all hell broke loose on deck. She heard the pop of revolvers, the screams of the injured and dying, and the swashbuckling clang of cutlery. Her crew of twenty mechanics and mercenaries had defeated pirates before, but never this many.

She should have kept a better vigil, should have never become so uncomfortable in a tranquil sky. Bastards had undermined them, come upon them below at a rate that would have exploded the pipes of an ordinary ship. But the pirate ships could handle the extra heat. Their furnaces, she knew, were among the largest, and their pipes were lined with lead.

Kira charged up the steps, broke through the hatch, and thrust herself into battle. A cannon boomed from the pirate ship and she braced for impact. The Cimarron jarred and it was as though Kira herself had been struck. She *felt* the impact in her own side and she staggered at the damage her vessel had taken.

"KIRA!" The London inflection of the First Officer was ragged as he called her name.

Kent charged from port, dodging battle. He fired his revolver into the faces of three oncoming pirates, each from a different direction, and kept running.

At five-foot-seven, Kira made as much of a statement as her ship. Her black hair was in a tight ponytail, its long ends and deep red highlights peeking out the back. A royal blue corset-vest, accented in black brocade and silver buckles, fit snugly over a white ruffled blouse, whose black pants were tucked into tall boots.

"Man The Cimarron! Fold her wings! Destroy them!" she ordered, and she pulled a tarnished copper grappling gun from its leather sheath at her hip. She thrust her revolver into her boot, out of sight, and aimed the

Brass-buckled boots hit the enemy hull and she scrambled up the side, praying no one cut her loose. Cannons blazed below, the ships locked in a broadside battle to the death. The pirate vessel shuddered with each blow that The Cimarron struck.

She grasped for the balustrade, one leather-clad hand and then the other. Fingerless gloves didn't prevent splinters as her nails dug into the wood. She'd hauled herself up when a dagger ripped through her arm. Kira slipped, nearly losing her grip, and now dangled from the ship, pinned to the gunwale. Her blood seeped through the glove. A hefty man towered above. His grizzled face was mostly hair and a grin. Grinned she could see the multiple teeth he was missing. The rest were a yellow-brown, as putrid as the breath she could smell from down there. Perhaps it was his body odor. She didn't know, but if the pain wasn't enough to make her heave, that certainly tested her limits.

"Going somewhere?" he growled, and tore the dagger from her hand. She bit her lip as her eyes watered, yet she held tight to the balustrade. He sliced the tether, sending it over the edge with a whiz. Her grip weakened as the pain grew. Must've hit a tendon. There was no way she could pull herself up with the one hand. She was lucky she still had a grip.

"Let me help you with that, Captain." The pirate chuckled as he lifted his weapon. "It's too bad you have to die," he said with a perverse sneer. "I would have enjoyed fucking the likes of you. Haven't had a good bitch in a while." He shrugged. "But I can find others who'll put up more of a fight."

The knife came down but so did he, as a bullet hole marked his forehead. Kira's revolver smoked and she kissed it before she tossed it over the ship and grabbed the balustrade with her other hand.

Hauling herself on deck, she grabbed the fallen dagger and spit on the corpse of her assailant. "Prick."

Another man charged at her but she thrust the knife into his gut and sent him over the edge of his own ship.

Her revolver lay just a few feet away. Its brass barrel and copper scrollwork inlay were unmistakable, designed by her own hand. A filthy

n in both kneecaps. He collapsed with a scream, cursing and writhing in pain.

*Three shots left, she told herself. Make them count.*

Kira tore the grappling gun from his belt. "Where's your captain?!" He spit in her face and she decked him. She won a yelp, but that wasn't an answer.

"I'm not going to ask you again. Where's your captain?"

She studied him as he struggled, her revolver aimed at his head. His brown eyes stared into hers with a mix of fury and fear. He was leaner than most pirates she'd met, and younger. His buckled vest was a red and black plaid and he wore leather bracers, one armed with fountain pens, tucked under his sleeves. Beneath a scraggly beard was a strong jaw and his hair, though disheveled, was a curly dark brown. He could have been handsome, were he not complete scum.

"Shoot me, bitch. Do it!"

Kira aimed the grappling gun at his shoulder. "I'm not so sure you can do that." She tilted her head. "You won't die from this wound. Not immediately. I won't kill you if you don't answer. I'll find your captain and make him suffer, just like you."

Her right hand throbbed and she tensed on the grip of the gun. If she didn't find this shithead soon she wasn't sure she'd have the strength to use her arm that she'd need to take him out.

The man beneath her huffed through tight sealed lips.

"Have it your way, then." She squeezed the trigger, but whipped around and clocked another man in the face. She shot the hook into his belt, latching between his legs, and pulled. He went down with a scream and she quickly cleared the space between them. Drawing her combat dagger, she ran it across his throat and turned back to her prior engagement.

First Officer Townsend's voice carried, and she could hear him shouting orders aboard The Cimarron. The boom of the cannons echoed and she braced for impact. Everything jarred as her vessel took a blow. She stumbled, catching herself on a wooden crate that was bolted to the deck. Kira pointed the revolver at her wounded prey



He only stared, defiance in every line on his face. She clicked the trigger and he flinched, but held his silence.

“You’re loyal.” Kira lifted the gun. “Stay alive and you might have some potential.”

She turned from the lad to seek out the captain on her own. He’d likely die anyway.

The whiz and clunk of grappling hooks made her turn. Several crewmates were boarding the enemy airship, clamoring over the railustrade before the pirates had a chance to cut them loose. Good distraction. Made her job that much simpler.

Kira slipped away from the madness, into the first hatch she could find. If her experience with pirates had taught her anything, it was that their captains tended to hide within the underworld of their vessels, shouting orders and rarely facing combat.

The hull was dank, lit only by sparse gas lamps that hung from crude hooks. The stairs and warped floorboards creaked as she walked, but she would hear over the cannons. The entire ship rumbled and shook from below with every shot she fired, and every impact The Cimarron made.

Voices carried down and she tensed her wounded hand on the grappling gun. A dark, narrow passageway was to her right. Kira slipped into the shadows, awaiting her company. Blood continued to seep through her glove and her entire arm throbbed.

Three grimy, rugged men slipped by, a single woman among them. Blonde ringlets were piled beneath a fedora, frizzled ends sticking out in all directions. A black, underbust corset shaped a tiny waist and exaggerated breasts that all but spilled from a black satin shirt. A high collar, heavy black kohl, and pale powdered face gave the appearance of an empress, and a lace-fringed petticoat finished the look, its twin tails trailing behind as she walked.

Kira held her breath as they passed. So this was the bitch in charge. She had to be. Female pirates were few, and none carried themselves the way she did.

Kira crept into the dim light as soon as the four were a short way

The pirates drew their guns but their captain held out a hand. The wench was aimed at Kira, a miniature brass crossbow attached to the tip of the woman's hand. The tip of the arrow was flared into a grapple; Kira's own design.

"Down, lads," commanded the captain in a thick southern drawl. She smirked as she sashayed closer. "I'll handle Sky Captain Hawke myself."

The men stayed where they were, yet their weapons remained drawn. "What did I say, boys?" Ice-blue eyes held Kira's. "Put those away. You can fire off your hand cannons later."

The pirates did as ordered, and looked between themselves. Not a single one dared question her, which told Kira all she needed to know. "Now, Sky Captain," addressed the wench.

Kira drew her revolver and the captain closed the space between them, aiming the crossbow at her head. Her fist was closed and all she had to do was squeeze it to release the trigger.

"Captain Arryn, if you please."

"Captain Leila Arryn. A living fucking legend. I can't say I'm pleased to meet you." Kira had always admired the tales, but prayed that they would never cross paths.

"I don't have to kill you, Sky Captain. All I want's The Cimarron." Captain Arryn giggled. "Besides, it would be a shame to waste a legend such as yourself." She put a hand on her hip. "...And yet, somehow I find myself facin' nothin' but a disappointment."

*Disappointment?* Kira wanted to pistol whip this cunt.

"If I'm such a disappointment, Captain, why do you want my ship, and why are you using my weapon?"

Captain Arryn gave a little laugh. "Oh, this isn't your design, honey. Not anymore." She pulled back the sleeve to reveal an intricate rotating barrel. When the eight arrows had been spent, a small barrel took the place. An ammunition belt fed the gun, its brass bullets extending all the way up her arm.

"Well, shugah? Aren't you impressed by my little mod?"

"Not bad for a pirate. However, if I were to steal another smith's

ance. A good kick sent the pirate to the floor, but an arrow ripped deep into Kira's pelvis, and another through her inner thigh. With a howl she doubled over and Leila stood, aiming her bound wrists at Kira's chest.

Kira kicked upwards, knocking the grappling gun from the crossbow and received an arrow in her right ankle. She faltered, suppressing a wail of agony, and charged.

Shots rang as the pirates fired, but Kira grasped their captain, pulling the tethers loose, and wrenched her hands behind her back. She pounded her hostage, facing her outward as a shield.

"Keep shooting! DO IT!" she yelled. "Or are you all too pussy-whipped to kill your own captain?!"

The firing stopped, but Arryn screamed, "FIRE! Take her out!"

Kira yanked her back by the hair and put a bullet in the head of each pirate. Leila fought, earning her freedom for a moment until Kira seized her. She head-butted the harpy, kned her in the chest, and slammed the butt of the revolver into the side of her head. The captain slumped. "Let's go, bitch." Kira dragged her by her disgustingly small waist. "Who's the disappointment now?" With the fleeting strength she had, Leila hauled Captain Arryn out of the hull, into a bloody scene on deck. Most of her crew lay dead, pirates battled other crewmen as soon as they arrived, and cannons blazed from both ships. The Cimarron listed heavily, one wing limp and torn to shreds. Her birdlike tail was half missing, though the rear propeller remained intact. The streamlined, rounded hull had massive holes and one of the three cannon ports was completely gone.

"CAPTAIN ON DECK!" bellowed Kira, as she held Captain Arryn up by the hair, bloodying the blonde frizz. Her grip and stance were growing weaker by the moment, but it was enough to make the impression she needed. The empty revolver was shoved against her temple.

The pirates turned, pausing long enough for many of her crew to get the upper hand. Several pirates were shot dead, while others were thrown to their knees.

lugged her to starboard as the cannons stopped firing. An eerie stillness settled over the ship as thick smoke passed between ally and enemy.

Captain Arryn stirred and Kira clocked her in the temple again. Problem solved.

“PIRATES! Your captain has been captured by Sky Captain Hawke on the Cimarron. Your ship has, from this point on, been commandeered. You will cease your assault on The Cimarron *immediately* and you will lay down your weapons.”

Gunfire rang out on both ships as battle erupted again, but the disobedient were quickly squelched.

“First Officer Townsend!” she called.

From the center of the top deck, Kent came running. “First Officer Townsend, reporting, Sky Captain Hawke!”

His tall, lanky form, welder’s goggles, and light brown hair appeared over the balustrade. “Oversee the execution of every single pirate on The Cimarron.” She turned to her men aboard the pirate vessel. “Crew on deck, execute every living man and return to ship.”

She scanned the dead for red brocade, to find the young man lying against the crate. He still breathed.

Kira turned to one of her crewmen, a burly ape of a man with hair everywhere but his head. “Danielson,” she addressed.

“Yes, Sky Captain.”

“See the man in the red brocade vest?” A wave of agony tore up through her pelvis and she suppressed the urge to hurl. Kira struggled through several shallow breaths and braced against the gunwale. “I want you to take him alive. He’s the only exception. Board The Cimarron and bring him to Doctor Tennant. See that he gets treated for his wounds before throwing him in the brig.”

“Aye, Cap’n.” Danielson shot the arrested man in front of him and kicked his way over bodies to the injured lad. The young pirate struggled as he was apprehended, though the hulking mercenary was unaffected. He tossed the kid over his shoulder, grappled onto The Cimarron, and swung. Kent greeted the pair on the other side.

As the hook secured, she glanced back. "Fire at will."  
Shots rang out, both before her and behind, as she sliced through the water. Her boots clunked against the freighter, prying a howl from Kira. And she slipped, nearly plunging from her ship.

"KENT!"

The first mate rushed over, hauling in her line with the help of a couple crewmen.

Strong, callused hands pulled her and Captain Arryn on board.

"Made a friend, did ya?" welcomed Kent.

"That's a word for it, Kenneth." She let the bound wench crumple to the floor. Kira dragged herself to starboard, each step more labored than the last, limping over bodies. She waited until every crewman was back aboard.

There were still living men below deck on the enemy vessel. The cannons aimed upward at The Cimarron's gasbag.

She grabbed a radio-graph from its stand. "Blow her side."

Six Gatling-gun ports opened above the cannons, their silver barrels protruding with mechanical clunks. Fire rang like a melody. The smell of gunpowder had never been so sweet, and the sight of The Roc being battered to splinters was absolutely magnificent.

"Jail her," Kira ordered without taking her eyes off the spectacle.

"Alert, alert Doctor Tennant that I require medical treatment for a ruptured tendon in my..." Kira fell dizzy and heaved several sharp, shallow breaths. "...in my right hand." She braced against the radio-graph stand as a blinding flash of pain jolted up from her pelvis. She gasped at the bolt embedded in her abdomen and blood spread from the one in her thigh.

"You're sure that's the only medical treatment you need?" Kent stared in horror at the arrows and bloodied clothes.

She met his hazel eyes and caught her breath. "If he misses the obvious you have my permission to shoot him."

Her first mate saluted with a grin. "At once, Sky Captain."

Captain Arryn roused as she was apprehended by two crewmen. A pained groan escaped and her eyes opened a sliver. She blinked,

The firing ended and the pirate ship was nothing but a listing mass of splinters and smoke. Debris rained down onto Danbury, over a thousand feet below. They'd reel it in to dispose of it properly at the nearest junk port. If anything salvageable remained she'd have Kent oversee the harvest and repair of The Cimarron. With any luck, the spoons hadn't been damaged.

The freighter was going to need a lot more than a few spare parts though, but she could be back in business within a couple months. Kira didn't want to think about the condition of her cargo. She looked down at her injuries... or herself.

"Come now, Lovely!" piped Kenneth. He nimbly picked his way over the dead, looking gleeful. Grease and blood stained his shirt, his hair was disheveled, but his gray vest was spotless. It was always spotless because it had never known a speck of dirt.

Gingerly he took her elbow. "Don't want to keep the good doctor waiting. He's got a lot of patients today, but he'll serve his captain first." He examined both her shoulder and hand, careful not to touch her, and looked down at the dark red stain that was spreading from her pelvis, and all the way down her leg. "Kira, that's *serious*. I honestly don't know how you're still standing!" Kent shook his head and carefully buckled the brown leather bracer from around her right forearm. "Come, let's get you out of this mess and into something more comfortable... I'm quite concerned." He couldn't let her walk like this. "May I carry you?"

"I'll be fine." Kira rolled her eyes but faltered against him. Her head throbbed, and she could barely think straight anymore. "I honestly don't know..." She heaved a couple breaths. "...how I put up with you, Kent." He ever-so-carefully scooped her up, and a crewman opened the hatch. "Because I'm the only ray of sunshine on this entire bloody ship. Coincidentally, I'm also the only one who knows how to properly repair a ship."

"Don't flatter yourself."

"I see someone's got the morbs today." He smiled, trying to allay his fears at her condition. "And don't go replenishing your stock

She could feel him running, but her eyes wouldn't open, and it was the best. At least now she felt numb, and everything was quiet.

y 9, 1884

Quite an attack on our vessel. Sky pirates, and not just any. We found ourselves matched by the famous Captain Arryn. She took out most of our crew, and the rest departed at port. As a result, we are now docked at Danbury Sky Port for an extended stay. We're alive, though, which is more than I'd expected for during that battle. Kira knows no limits, which is I'm sure what saved us. It's also got her in pretty shape.

I'm quite concerned. A fever's broken over her now. Doc performed an impromptu surgery and has ordered her on constant bed rest. The arrow punctured her womb, so to avoid future complications, Walter moved it all together. He numbed the area as best he could, but Kira wasn't sedated for the procedure. I pray to never hear such agony again.

I won't let her near the wheel, for fear she'll work herself to death. She isn't to work for at least six weeks, and her mental state has been... troubling.

I have assumed the duties of the captain while she recovers. Repairs are entirely in the hands of the sky port. A mechanic by the name of Joseph is in charge. I've dealt with him before. An honest man he is, but with any luck he won't see our bird again after this.

What I don't understand is why we have not brought Captain Arryn and her crewmate to the blows. That should have been done yesterday and I could have gladly fulfilled that order. But Kira wants to wait, and has insisted they stay in the is. I do hope she isn't thinking of keeping them.



It's 11:30 a.m. Time to check on Kira and relieve the doctor from the wheel. With any luck she's sleeping and hasn't attempted command.

First Office of The Cimarron,  
Kenneth J. Townsend

## Chapter 2

### *Sapphires and Patina*

May 21, 1884  
Hambury Sky Port  
Hambury, CT

There was a time when the sound of a harp would have been out of place on board *The Cimarron*. However, little surprised Kira anymore and even less impressed her. Yet, this broke the mold on both accounts. Not only did Captain Arryn play the harp, she was *good* at it.

Kira listened from within her quarters, looking wistfully at her violin on the wall. It had been a while since she played. Emotions she'd forgotten were stirred by the harp, and her fingers longed for the feel of the strings and bow.

Her legs moved under her, swiftly, and she took the violin from the wall. She blew the dust from its cherry surface and peered through the f-hole into its heart at the faded, printed name and date:

Antonius Stradivarius Cremonenfis.  
faciebat anno 1721

It had been a gift from her father, the day she and *The Cimarron* left their home port of Philly. She brushed her fingertips over it.

"I miss you, Dad," she whispered. "How's it been twelve years already?" Kira shook her head and a lump formed in her throat. "I wish you could see me now."

She smiled grimly to herself and plucked a string. Its off-key twang sent a shiver down her back and a resonant pang through her heart. She closed her eyes as she listened to Captain Arryn's flawless melody and a tear fell.

The music drew her deeper into her own mind and more tears fell uncontrollably. She buried her cries into her arm, and she wept from the deepest part of herself.

“It’s been twelve years, Dad. I’ve been Sky Captain for *twelve years* and I can barely take it anymore! It’s like I’m trapped up here, you know?” She sniffled. “How did you do it for almost forty?”

She heaved a deep breath, attempting to compose herself. Kira took a faded photograph from the corner of the mirror above her chestnut writing desk. Creases and scratches crisscrossed over the image of her sixteen-year-old self, in a jumpsuit, beside her dad. There stood fearless Sky Captain Douglas Hawke, burly and bearded, wielding an enormous wrench over one shoulder. Grease and sweat coated both of them, standing on the deck of her father’s dirigible, The Manticore. His ship had been so much simpler than The Cimarron, having no wings and the propulsion of a single rear propeller. It had been smaller, but it packed as much of a punch.

Kira groaned and another tear fell. “The Cimarron is flightless, Dad. Her wings are badly damaged, she has holes in her hull, and we’re all stuck in the hangar at Danbury Sky Port.” She shook her head and cracked a smile. “I wish you’d been around to see that battle. Took those pirates right out.” She sighed. “Maybe you did see, I don’t know. I just wish you were here, and I wish I had your guidance. I could really use it about now.” Captain Arryn’s melody broke through her thoughts and it gave her a shiver. She looked down at the Stradivarius. It begged to be played. “I’m not good enough to play with her anyway...”

“Kira Love.”

She jumped at Kent’s voice. He knocked.

“I think there’s something you should know about Captain Arryn.” All in a beat she took the rosin from a drawer in her desk, grabbed the bow, tightened the strings, and ran it over the amber block.

“May I come in?”

“No.” She whipped the door back, revealing a startled Kent.

“I know about Captain Arryn, Kenneth. I can hear.”

He raised an eyebrow. “The Stradivarius? Are you going somewhere

She winced and slowed, gritting her teeth in spite of her injuries. Kent hurried to her side. "Kira, dear..." He looked her over, shaking his head. "It's only been two weeks, love. Please stay off your feet." She turned to him and huffed. "I'm fine, Kent. My injuries are trivial."

"They aren't trivial and you'll do as I say. I won't take no for an answer."

"Oh? And who put you in charge?"

"You did, Sky Captain, the moment you made me First Officer. It's my duty to ensure my captain is in shape to lead, and right now you aren't."

Kira crossed her arms, but Kent only rolled his eyes. In one swift movement, before she could protest, he'd scooped her up, gingerly as he could, and now looked down into furious brown eyes.

"Hush. Nothing from you."

"I should flog you."

"Go ahead."

She swiped down his goggles to his neck and glowered.

"Now, dear, were you on your way to Captain Arryn's quarters?"

She wanted to struggle free of his arms, and knew he'd set her down. But she only sighed. Kira gripped the neck of the Stradivarius. Her mangled hand throbbed.

"I was, actually." She glanced at the ripped leather glove that covered her wound and drummed bare fingers over the strings. Again, she winced.

Kent sympathized. "Are you sure you want to go in there? Look what she's done to you. It's her fault we're stuck in Danbury for four months."

"I miss it, Kent. I need to play, and if this is how I get Captain Arryn on my side, all the better. I'm not going to fight with a captured pirate captain. That's pointless."

He carried her down to Arryn's quarters and Kira closed her eyes as the melody grew louder.

"You should've brought them both to the gallows. Didn't sky pirates show your father out of the air? Last I checked, you hated them with a

end.” She shook her head. “And she was free. She had what I didn’t have now... well, it’s like I’ve caged her.” Kira looked into his eyes. “Does that make any sense?”

Kent felt for the woman in his arms, and he worried for her. “You’re out of your mind, Kira. She took from you something far more personal.” He examined the bandaged patch on her pelvis, just visible beneath her blouse and open vest. “It’s only been a couple of weeks. You couldn’t even be out of bed. Don’t you think you’re putting a little too much trust in our pirates?”

“Think of it this way: where are they going to go? If they escape and make it out of Danbury, then what? They’re no longer our problems. Is Captain Arryn really going to slip into my quarters one night, while you sleep on a cot at my side, and murder us both?”

“She could.”

Kira shook her head. “If your quarters were intact, and you didn’t end every night with me, I might be worried.”

“There’s always Tuomas. He’s also a pirate, dear. Two of them against the three of us? And with your injuries?” He shook his head. “I don’t like those odds.”

Kira frowned. “Then did I make the wrong decision?”

Kent sighed and set her down at Captain Arryn’s door. It was plain oak, chestnut with black hinges and a brass door latch, like the rest of them. Only Kira’s had a large compass burned into the center to distinguish it.

“Don’t second guess yourself, Kira. I trust you, and Walter does too. Just... be careful, alright? Watch your back.”

She drew a deep breath and the music stopped.

Kent put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m going in there with you, whether you like it or not.” He pulled a long blade half out of its sheath from his hip and met her eyes. “I haven’t forgotten her arm cannon,” he whispered. “You may have confiscated it, but I don’t trust her. There’s a trigger on the handle of this knife. It’ll shoot from the hilt above the blade.”

Kira heaved a sigh and nodded. She knocked. “Captain Arryn?”

"I know who's at mah door, Sky Captain. I heard you an' the First Officer walk up."

"May we come in?"

"As if I have any choice but to say yes."

Kira frowned. "You do have a choice, Captain. If you refuse, then I'll leave you to your solitude. No repercussions." She eyed the violin, hoping the pirate would not decline.

There was another long pause. Finally, she spoke up. "Door's unlocked, Sky Captain."

Kent sighed. "Ready when you are, Lovely. In fact, let me go first."

Kira tried to argue, but he slipped past her and opened the door. She picked the Stradivarius under her injured arm and readied her good hand at the revolver as she followed.

Captain Leila Arryn sat behind her harp, hands folded over crossed legs. She wore a simple, off-white sleeping gown and nothing else. A lamp burned to her left, accentuating her mess of golden curls that cascaded over one shoulder. Full lips and a porcelain face were soft and untouched by makeup.

Those blue eyes were ice as they met Kira's.

There was a long, awkward silence between the two women. Kent had no desire to get between them, but this could easily turn into more than a cat fight.

Kira cleared her throat. "You're quite the harpist, Captain Arryn."

The pirate shifted and her gaze traveled to the harp. "I s'pose I could be thankin' you for salvaging it from the wreckage of my vessel."

"That's a start, Captain."

Again their eyes met with a coldness that chilled Kira.

"Well there ain't nothin' else to do when you're chained to your quarters."

"That will change, once you prove yourself."

The pirate crossed her arms. "I ain't provin' nothin' to you, Kira. You're not my captain and this ain't my ship!"

Kira sighed and pulled a wooden chair from the desk to her right. "You'll have to excuse me, Captain. My injuries demand rest, and I've

Leila eyed the Stradivarius as Kira placed the bow over the D string. "You any good with that thing?"

Kira smirked. "I guess we'll find out."

The pirate's eyes held a wild gleam as she plucked the first melodic string. "Sudden death battle, Sky Captain?"

Kira ran the bow over the four strings and quickly tuned it. The peg on the top right had always been a little stiff. "Actually, I was thinking more in terms of harmony, Captain Arryn."

She closed her eyes as she began to play. Slow, drawn out notes of melancholy filled the room, each more meaningful than the last. Kira breathed deep and her heart swelled as she lived her music. Her fingers knew every string, each note before it was played, and her bow knew exactly where to fall and when to rise. She succumbed to the deepest part of herself and she *played*.

Tears that she didn't feel streamed from the corners of her eyes. She played with every chord and her fingers danced with every note, her music spilling as though it were her own blood. It had been so long. It had been *too long*, and yet she still knew, as she had always known, how to play.

"I don't believe it," whispered Leila.

Kira's eyes opened and her bow drew away from the strings.

"A damn Stradivarius. In all my years I nevah thought I'd see one." She drew a long, deep breath and nodded to Kira. "Harmony it is, Sky Captain. For tonight, anyway."

Kira smiled. "I'll take tonight, Captain Arryn." She looked up at Keaton and retuned the top peg. "Take a seat, First Officer. We're going to be home in a while."

September 2, 1884

A rare calm aboard The Cimarron. Kira is completely consumed by her violin, while Doc handles the wheel. She's relentless on those strings this time, and needs the release it brings... Says it's her only source of freedom. I do worry for her.

Recent correspondences have left me to ponder. She's been in contact with a Mister P.C. Doyle. This fellow, in my opinion, is not to be trusted. Anyone who hides behind a shady pseudonym is after the wrong thing. And yet she's fascinated. Says she's arranged for a meeting in Philadelphia. She certainly will not go alone!

...Such notes of melancholy. Can't I take some of that pain from you, Sky Captain? You wouldn't let me anyway, even if you knew.

Getting back to matters at hand, it is with the gravest concern that I wonder at these letters. We shall see about this Mister Doyle when we reach Philly. I'll take the bloody pirate wench with us if it must. Perhaps she'll serve as a shield. Kira could be so lucky to be rid of Captain Arryn. Another fascination of hers that I don't understand. Perhaps not meant to, but I cannot deny the fascination that Kira holds over me. Such a maddening contradiction my captain is.

I think I shall retire for the night. Kira has stationed at the helm at 4 a.m. Mustn't fly the ship to the ground. I do hope she'll give the bow a rest soon. I could drift off to the sound of the radiivarius, but it is she who needs the rest. Alas, expect this beautiful tirade to extend into the weeks. It always does.



## Chapter 3

### *Building Steam*

September 20, 1884  
Danbury Sky Port  
Danbury, CT

FeatherLite coal blazed, smokeless and hotter than ever, hissing through shiny copper valves. They shuddered with the furious heat, renewing vigor that challenged any who opposed. The freighter lifted herself with a tremendous flap that was felt by the whole crew. Her articulated wings may as well have had feathers, for they were elegant against their freshly stretched canvas and cherry-stained bones.

A full load was in her belly, capable of fueling the dirigible for three months. FeatherLite burned cleaner than real coal and it weighed practically nothing.

The Cimarron rose from Danbury Sky Port, the brown and copper skyscraper that had been her sickbay for four months. Each flap thundered as the valves hissed, wingtips nearly brushing the molding and mortar.

A locomotive passed below, chugging beside White Street, toward the station. Only its trademark whistle alerted anyone to its presence, drowned by the deep rumble of The Cimarron's furnace. It roared as it gave life to this invincible bird, lofting her higher with every flap.

The stark white fins of the balloon caught a breeze and listed the vessel to portside. The cabin drew dangerously close to the tip of the building. Its hooked, gilded beak clunked against the sloped roof, knocking multiple shingles loose. She flapped again, drawing the cabin over the roof, jeopardizing the new landing gear.

The rear propeller sprang into action, humming louder than the furnace, and guided the ship away from disaster. With a tilt of her tail

mes of the homes the only contrast in a city of earth tones and copper.  
m.

“Last call for jumpers!” Kent’s English trill was chipper and he  
nned at his own jest. He strode to the bow, running his hand along  
e smooth, polished balustrade.

Captain Arryn gazed out over the city, her black hourglass figure  
houetted against the cloudless sky. Her hands were folded at the  
ist, over the tresses in her long dress. A classic Danbury top hat wa  
ked to the right, accenting her blonde ringlets.

Kent walked up beside her, noticing the scowl she wore. “If you’re  
ng to jump, dear, may as well get it over with now. Much less work  
ck and pay for cleanup when we’re hardly out of the city.”

The pirate’s dusky-shadowed eyes didn’t leave the horizon.

“You’re not as funny as you think you are, Kenneth,” called Kira. R  
d in her blue jacquard and silver buckles, she strode from port in a  
oken gate, and she was unamused. “Leave Captain Arryn alone and  
mentor Tuomas. You’re both needed in the engine room.”

He looked as though he wanted to protest, but he shut his mouth.

“Now.” She pointed to the cabin hatch.

“Yes, Madam.” He saluted and slunk away.

Kira shook her head and looked down at Danbury. Horse-drawn  
riages clopped along the avenues and feathered, crested oviosaur  
uled supply wagons. People appeared as insects. Only round paraso  
parated the women from the men. Bright green fields surrounded th  
y, their sprawling boundaries separated by crooked stone walls. Far  
yond, rolling hills went on endlessly.

“Is everything alright, Captain Arryn?”

She didn’t speak immediately, her eyes scanning some unknown  
nts along the horizon. She rarely spoke, unless addressed first, and  
s seldom seen on deck. On the occasions they played together, they  
d little dialogue. Captain Arryn and Tuomas kept to themselves, and  
ra wondered at plans for mutiny.

The pirate offered her a glance. “I s’pose that depends on your  
ñition of the word, Sky Captain.”

Kira wanted to inquire about her life as the infamous pirate queen. Was it exciting? Challenging? How did she manage that ship full of rough, piggish men? What would it be like to get to know Captain Arryn? She was beautiful, and clearly born to money. *Why* had she turned to piracy? Kira had so many questions, but it was best not to rip at a raw wound.

"I hope I got your sizes right. You said a 20-inch waist?"

"That's correct."

Kira grimaced, but couldn't help admiring the dedication it took to cinch her waist to that size. Again, *why*? "I tried to tailor to your style as best as possible. Life's never been easy for us women, and it's even harder up here in the air. I may run a tight ship, but I'm not cruel. Inform me if you need anything else, Captain."

She met Leila's eyes, difficult to read. Captain Arryn was a caged bird, and Kira sympathized. The pirate had once *known freedom*... something Kira had only accepted for a cruel illusion.

"We could be allies, Captain Arryn. Come to me when you are ready." Kira turned to walk back to the cabin hatch.

"Mayhaps you'd have somethin', Sky Captain Hawke, if I weren't your damn prisoner."

Kira let a moment pass between them. She looked out past the others and over her shoulder at Leila. "I don't address my prisoners as captain."

She resumed walking, leaving the pirate to her solitude.

The hatch was a large square door in the middle of the deck. Its wood was darker than the rest and a worn brass latch was recessed to avoid glancing hazard. The latch clicked and the door opened with a groan. Kira descended the wooden steps, enjoying their familiar creak, and closed the hatch behind.

The cabin was spacious, furnished little, and well lit by a row of lanterns and bulbs along the bowed walls and in the ceiling. A meeting table stood toward the back, in front of the liquor cabinet, and the wheel was at the front. Windows lined the rounded interior, giving an immersing view of the sky.

Every port knew and respected Sky Captain Kira Hawke, and The Cimarron was practically legendary. Ground-dwelling limitations didn't hold her up in the air. Of course, that came with its own set of problems, but that was life, and this was uniquely her own.

Still... Kira looked out at the sky and a longing settled into her head. She thought of Captain Arryn, a woman who'd defied everything she was told to become the fearless pirate she was meant to be. She sighed, wishing for the freedom that seemed to come from such a life. There was a sense of personal satisfaction that radiated from Captain Arryn. While Kira struggled just to look at herself in the mirror. If she had everything she needed, why didn't she feel complete?

She leafed through her charts on the stand and pulled the paper out from beneath. It was creased, the printing worn from age, and from the many hours Kira had spent deliberating over it. She ran her finger along the blank line, which still demanded a signature, and she stared at the federal emblem up top. The crosshairs-and-eagle of the Federal Fleet stared back. The mission seemed simple enough: retrieve the bounty, hand over the prisoner, and go home... wherever that was. But if she followed through, she'd have to sign this document. She'd be handing herself, her crew, and her ship over to a government-sanctioned life of piracy, and she'd become that, which she hated most. She'd built The Cimarron as a war ship, in defense against the scourge of the sky. She'd be damned if she let herself become one of *them*.

Sky pirates had been the death of her father and yet, because of this contract, she seemed fated to join them. She didn't ask for this! *He'd* pushed her over, behind her back, and then he'd left her, with *his* mission complete, and without so much as a goodbye. She'd run from herself every day since.

Kira looked again at the mission, and at the coordinates. Her bounty seemed to be in Manhattan, and not the Manhattan she was familiar with. She was certain it was this mission that had gotten her father killed. The sky pirate that took his life had only been a trained dog. And now *she* was involved in this conspiracy? What did it buy her? Freedom from the law?

Kira's throat tightened as she thought of her father, and she wiped away a tear before it could fall. No. She couldn't do this. She wouldn't do this! She put the pen back and shuffled the contract back beneath her charts. With a deep, grounding breath she composed herself and looked around at The Cimarron. At least this birdcage felt like home, and *she* owned it.

Kira turned to the other hatch and continued on down into the echoing corridor, where she stopped in at her quarters. She grabbed from the writing desk the last letter she'd responded to, and exhaled slowly as she unfolded the stiff parchment.

January 7, 1885

Dearest Captain,

You must forgive *The* intimacy of this letter. It is not without its purpose, however. I would be remiss if I did not *Make* such *An* inquiry. Having familiarized myself with your company, I am of the understanding that you *Inherited* Hauke Weaponry from your father. If you may pry, might you provide details surrounding the late Douglas Hauke's death? My deepest apologies, of course, for any pain this may cause you. See you in Philadelphia, where I shall *Await* your response.

Yours must when the devil drives, Captain.

Yours on good faith,

Master P. C. Doyle

She stared at the date. That was over three months from now. And the sporadic capitalizations? She grabbed a fountain pen from its brass holder and wrote out the letters beneath his signature.

*What?* Was this “Magician” her bounty? Kira glanced at the radivarius, hanging on the wall. What would Dad have done? She picked it up and set the letter down. At least this one wasn’t demanding she give up her life away. This stranger had just *assumed* she’d meet with him. How could he know something she didn’t? And she was a little baffled by the whole thing. After all, time travel was quite illegal. Kira shook her head. She didn’t have time for this now, but she’d get to the bottom of it once the ship reached Philly.

She left her quarters and continued down the lodging corridor, to the engine room. Passing the lab, she paused to watch Doctor Walter Tennant at work. An eerie blue glow emanated from the sphere in front of him. He stood over it with a metal prod, his dark goggles reflecting the electric light. An aged, wrinkled face was furrowed in concentration, his gray hair unkempt.

“I’ve almost got it, Sky Captain! Just a few more tweaks and... well, you’ll see.”

Kira shook her head. As brilliant as he was, when it came to his experimental technology, the most he ever managed to do was electrocute himself. Based on the metal prod in his hand, she could see that today would be no different.

“Try not to kill yourself, Doctor. I need you alive.”

He lifted his goggles and frowned. “Go on and mock me, Kira, but there isn’t a soul on this ship who can do what I’m about to.” He huffed and pulled the goggles over his eyes. “Just try finding a man with fewer scruples, of a more prestigious education. I assure you such a man does not exist!”

Kira rolled her eyes. “I never questioned your intelligence, Walter, merely your sanity. And if I ever find such a man I will be certain to let you know.” She left Walter to his experiments before she became a witness to an accidental suicide.

Beyond Doctor Tennant's madness she could hear the clanks and creaks of another comedy act. Kent’s voice carried over the roar of the engine.

“You bloody bird!” Another loud bang, twice, as he kicked something

the wall, grabbed a metal scrap from a box on his workbench, and hurriedly fixed the breach.

“Do you *see this*?” He gestured to Tuomas, who stood watching him noddy bloody craftsmanship.”

“Go easy on her, Kent.”

He stepped out from behind several massive steam pipes and lifted his goggles. His eyes were clean and neatly framed by soot. Grease stained his hands and arms, and his face was wet with sweat. “Have you seen this madness, Kira? There's steam buildup, which is causing a leak in the vapor line, and slowing The Cimarron. I can't find the right valve to release it, nor should I have to. That's the last time I'm trusting her to Danbury Sky Port. I've never seen such incompetence!”

Kent turned to Tuomas. “Except maybe from him. Bloody pirate would ruin a damn thing. Can't we drop him off at the nearest junk port? I'll bet he'll be right at home!”

Tuomas glared at Kent, but said nothing.

“Is this true, Tuomas? Are you refusing the First Officer's instruction?”

He crossed his arms and remained silent. The youth had cleaned up his dark curls neatly pulled back and his scruff shaved to a manageable length. He'd traded his red brocade for a brown leather apron, over a green shirt and trousers. His arm bracers were buckled tightly, attaching fingerless gloves that covered bandaged hands. Brass rimmed, tinted welding goggles rested above his brow.

“I won't have insubordination on my ship. If you won't work with First Officer Townsend, I *will* drop you at the nearest port and you'll be on your own. You may be loyal to Captain Arryn, but you are no longer on The Roc. Start acting like one of the crew and you will be well taken care of. I assure you there is safety in numbers and you won't do better on The Cimarron.”

Tuomas looked between them, ever as obstinate. Kent looked as though he wanted to berate him, but Kira shot him a look.

Finally, the youth spoke up. “I'm not a mechanic.” His heavy Finnis



“Were you ever a whaler?”

He nodded. Finally, she was getting somewhere with this kid.

“That sounds like quite the life, and well paying. Why become a pirate?”

He looked down, as though deciding whether or not he would answer. Kira went for a different tactic.

“You don't have to share that.”

Tuomas shook his head and looked up. “I was a whaler for four years until Cap'n Arryn attacked me ship. She came down upon us, an' we harpooned The Roc, but she ripped 'em right from our vessel, an' her crew boarded. Between bein' outnumbered an' that crossbow she wears, we didn't stand a chance. Lost our entire ship that day... I was the only one left. She affixed our harpoons to The Roc.”

“And you're loyal to this woman?”

He sighed. “She saw potential in me the way you did, an' she spared me. Never was high rank, but I was respected.”

Kira offered a hand and to her surprise, Tuomas shook it. “Welcome aboard The Cimarron, Tuomas. If you prove yourself, over time you may make rank. I run a tight ship but I'm fair and I reward hard work.”

“Thank you, Sky Cap'n.” The words sounded forced, but he'd said them, which was more than she'd expected.

“So, if you aren't a mechanic and you're no longer a whaler, where do your strengths lie?”

Kent scowled. “Once a pirate, always a bloody pirate.”

“Kenneth...” She glared daggers into him and he shut up.

Tuomas thought, and he went to answer, but a deafening crack cut him off as an explosion jarred them. Everything trembled with a low, pitone hum and Kira braced herself against Kent until with a sudden rudder, the ship fell still. The three looked between themselves and sniffed at the unmistakable stench of electrical smoke.

Kira raced down to the smoking lab, coughing and gagging on the thick smoke. Its blue tinge and harsh, metallic smell nauseated her as she searched blindly for the doctor. “Walter!” she cried out. “What the hell did you do, Walter?!” The Cimarron had *just* been repaired, and



‘Are you hurt?!’

Kent rushed in behind her.

‘Where’s the doctor, Kira?’

She coughed and pointed. Kenneth barreled in and escorted him out, leading them all up to the cabin. The hatch opened before they could reach it and Captain Arryn stepped down.

The look on her face told Kira enough. She shot into the cabin and barged to the windows at the bow.

Far below she saw nothing but water, expansive in every direction ahead of them. At twelve o’clock rose a city, its tall profile familiar, unlike any she knew.

‘Uhhhh, Kira Love...’

‘I know, Kent.’ She stared blankly out at the horizon, a sinking feeling settling in. A nervous huff escaped. ‘I don’t think we’re above Connecticut anymore.’ She scanned the airspace, looking for anything familiar, but all was clear and something was missing.

Kira scrambled up to deck, threw open the hatch, and looked up past the balloon. She looked around, down over the balustrade, and ran to the stern. Captain Arryn had followed, doing the same.

The women looked at each other. There was no buzzing, no resonant hum, and no deep rumble of passing aircraft. All was quiet, save the whoosh of The Cimarron’s wings.

‘Where are the other airships?’

Captain Arryn shook her head. ‘Your guess is as good as mine. I’m afraid we’re alone.’ She looked at Kira. ‘What *was* that commotion, anyhow?’

She searched again for any sort of craft, but in vain. ‘That was Doctor Tennant blowing up the lab and I have a feeling he’s done far worse. Are you alright, Captain?’

‘I nearly fell to my death, but I’m no worse for wear.’

Kira dug her nails into the rail and clenched her jaw. She turned back to the hatch to find the doctor.

Below deck Doctor Tennant still wheezed. His apron, shirt, and overcoat were singed and his hair stood on end. The goggles on his head

She thought of the blue sphere she'd seen in front of him and shook her head. "What did you do, Walter? What was that thing?"

"That, Sky Captain, was the Tachyon-Neutrino Photon Accelerator. It's a little something I've been working on. In theory it should have shifted the ship just enough to match the set day and time. By the looks of it, my theory and experiment was a success."

"A success?! You nearly killed Captain Arryn, you nearly killed yourself, you blew up a portion of The Cimarron, and I have no idea of where the hell we are! Where are the airships, Walter?! Why are we above an ocean? Where did you send us?!" She dragged him to the nearest window. "Where the hell are we and what the fuck did you do?" Doctor Tennant stared out at the open water. "Your haul to Philly will have to wait." He closed in and muttered, "You know we're on a tight timeline and there's a lot at stake." Walter looked out the bow and nodded. "I see we've reached Manhattan, Sky Captain."

"*Manhattan?*" She feigned ignorance, not ready to reveal the truth in front of Kent. "I've made plenty of runs to Manhattan, Walter. The skyline doesn't look like that."

"Well..." He squinted at the approaching skyline. "It may not be the Manhattan you're used to."

Kira looked at him, incredulous, and her stomach knotted. He'd actually sent them there, through some portal, but *how*? Cautiously, she asked, "What exactly did you call that thing you were working on?" Walter sighed. "It was a Tachyon-Neutrino Photon Accelerator, Sky Captain, and I'm afraid you aren't going to like the explanation..."

"What the good doctor is trying to say," translated Kent, "is that he sent us elsewhere." He met her eyes. "We're in another world, Kira." "Another reality, actually; a parallel universe, if you will," corrected the doctor.

She grasped at his shirt again but only shoved him away. Berating Walter wouldn't help them get back. Only she could do that now. The hatch opened, and Captain Arryn descended. "Sky Captain awake..." She glanced back up. "We have company."

Kira charged up the steps, nodding to the pirate, who held the hatch

asted multiple gun ports, their shuttered portholes discreetly flush with the hull. A parabolic row of tinted windows was at the bow. Ventilation pipes rose and fell at the back, behind the smoke stack. The ironclad's many portholes may have been hidden windows, or they could have concealed weapons. A matte finish gave the formidable steamer a sinister look. Toward the back of the airship, a white emblem stood out. An eagle with spread wings, with the crosshairs in the center announced that the Federal Fleet had arrived. Her stomach dropped.

"Get below deck, Captain Arryn, and lock yourself someplace they can't look. Take Tuomas. You were never here and I haven't seen you since now."

The pirate nodded and hurried into the cabin. Kent emerged and stood silent and ashen when he saw the ship.

"This can't be good, Kira."

"What was your first clue?"

He put a hand over his brow and squinted. "Do you think they know about Captain Arryn?"

"Doubtful, but I won't put their lives in jeopardy. Captain Arryn is wanted by The Fleet. She'd be arrested on sight and Tuomas would be executed without question."

"You could only be so lucky."

A shuttered hatch rose, and the dull clunking of gears could be heard. A rope ladder descended to several feet above The Cimarron. Kent went to his revolver but Kira shook her head.

"We'll play along unless we're forced otherwise. Don't challenge the status quo."

A man leapt from the hatch, grabbing the ladder halfway down. His long black trench coat filled like a sail behind him, while his wide brimmed hat didn't budge. He quickly scaled the iron rungs and jumped down onto the deck. Heavy black boots landed with a *thunk*. Two belts of ammo crossed over a black vest and fed the large firearm slung at his hip. He was grizzled, covered in a red beard, and his gray eyes were grimacing. Kira stood her ground as he approached, though she wanted to flee. Her encounters with the Federal Fleet seldom went well. They were nothing

“Sky Captain Hawke and First Officer Townsend, I presume,” His voice was deep and gravelly.

Kira tugged at her lapel, the hawk-skull-and-wings. “Looks like it, but that may depend on who's asking. With whom am I speaking?” He looked her over with a perverse sneer and produced a copper badge displaying The Fleet’s emblem. “Sergeant Henderson of the Federal Fleet, Ironclad 739. Do you know why we've halted you, Captain?”

In the past she'd owned up to her mistakes and was lucky enough to get off with a warning. Considering Walter’s “blunder” however, and her newly fledged mission, she felt it best to play dumb. Maybe they’d forgotten about the mission all together, and she could just go home. The less information these bastards had, the better.

“I'm afraid I am at a loss, Sergeant. We're currently on a routine haul in Manhattan.”

Sergeant Henderson looked over his shoulder at the skyline. His crooked jaw angled to one side. “Doesn't look like the Manhattan I know.” “What do you imply, Sergeant? Have we breached restricted airspace?”

He cocked his head and studied them both, likely searching for lies. Finally he crossed his arms. “You're in violation of federal law, Sky Captain.”

Kent stepped before Kira and she wished he hadn't. “For what, exactly? Last I checked it wasn't a violation of law to haul freight into Manhattan.”

“It's not, Officer, as long as you're within your own realm. I don't know how you did it, and by the looks of it neither do you, but you've managed to fly yourselves into a world that knows nothing of aircraft and The Fleet intends to keep it that way.”

Kira and Kent looked between themselves. His eyes held a look of defiance, but Kira knew that maybe, if she had to, she could get them out of there.

She crossed her arms. “Then what are *you* doing here? That ironclad certainly looks like an airship to me.”

Cold sweat beaded on Kira's neck. "How did you find us?"  
"We happened to be in the neighborhood around the time you appeared. Saw the disturbance on our radar and followed you through the rift." He glanced out at Manhattan. "I really don't care how you got here, but Admiral Jameson will board shortly to read out your sentence." He huffed a chuckle. "Try negotiating your way out of this one. She won't have the same sympathy you're used to, but it'll be fun to watch a good cat fight."

The droning hum of the ironclad filled Kira's ear. Its resonance offered a sense of dread as she stood. Was there no getting out of this? *If we do make it out*, she thought, *Walter can stay in Manhattan*. Gears turned overhead and she watched the same hatch rise. A slender figure stepped into the gray light and promptly descended the ladder. She could make out a revolver strapped to the woman's hip and a flight aviator's cap on her head. Her hair was hidden within the cap and she was clad in black. As she grew closer Kira could see a boned, corset that gave definition and shape to her figure. She leapt from the ladder and promptly disappeared until she landed on the deck.

Kira and Kent again exchanged looks, but of bewilderment. What happened...

"I haven't seen a cloaking device in quite some time," said Jameson. "Not since The Fleet outlawed them seven years ago. You of all people should know that, Sky Captain Hawke."

Kira looked at Kent, who shrugged. Until now she wasn't aware that Marron *had* a cloaking device, and she'd built the damn thing.

"Being that I don't work for the Federal Fleet, I must have missed that memo, Admiral."

The admiral raised an eyebrow. "I don't think you want to play that one, Sky Captain. Would you really put your crew's life in danger like that?"

"So far as I'm aware, Admiral, my crew is perfectly protected, as long as I tow the line. Looks like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be, so I think it's time you moved along."

the holster, another on the belt around her middle, and a third at the back of her cap. Five gold bands were embroidered onto straps on each shoulder.

Kent suspiciously eyeballed Kira. "Is there something you'd like to inform me of, right about now?"

The admiral held out a badge. "Admiral Olga Jameson. An explanation won't be necessary, Captain. You've trespassed on a neighboring realm without orders, giving The Fleet full permission to commandeer The Cimarron." She looked Kira in the eye. "You'll be boarded onto Ironclad 739 and your vessel will be towed to the nearest drydock within our realm, where it will be recommissioned." She sneered. "You're lucky that decision wasn't left to me. I'd have it scrapped."

"You can't do that!" blurted Kent. "You think we planned this? It is our fault we got into this mess."

Kira bit her lip and held her tongue.

Jameson turned to him and placed her hands on her hips. Kira wished Kent had just stayed quiet.

"Whose fault is it, then? As I understand it, you're First Officer Townsend. That means you're in charge of The Cimarron's daily operations, second in command to Sky Captain Hawke. So if you mean to tell me that you had nothing to do with this, then you can point me in the direction of the one at fault. We'll promptly arrest your mutineers and take them off your hands, but that doesn't get you out of this."

Kent looked at her with a mixture of bewilderment and frustration. She touched his arm. "We'll be alright."

An ultra-low frequency pulsed from within the heart of The Cimarron. Kira looked down at the deck and all around as everything went silent. The power died from the ship and the intruders looked up at the ironclad. It too had gone quiet, though it still smoked from the war exhaust stack.

She stared at Kent. "What the hell was that?"

Admiral Jameson reached for her revolver and Kira kept a hand ready at the grappling gun. She eyed the brass mechanics and buttons.

rough the air. She ventured a glance at her ship, to find a massive e in the center. Tuomas stood below, aiming up at the ironclad with enormous brass-and-copper weapon she'd never seen before. His ggles were down, the cannon mounted firmly in his arms, and the ctor and Captain Arryn stood on either side of him. He threw a lever on top and blasted a thick red beam into the side of the ironclad with the same deafening pulse. The airship cast a ring of energy in its implosion, sending shrapnel hurtling onto The Cimarron, ripping through her wings like paper.

Henderson slung the rifle from his belt and aimed for Kira, who had no time to react. The hammer clicked, he squeezed the trigger, and a shot rang over the deck.

Jameson took aim as Henderson landed face first with a heavy *thud*. Henderson's gun still smoked and he now pointed it at Olga.

Jameson screamed as the grappling gun tore into her knee. Kira yelled, knocking her on her ass and stood, aiming the revolver at her head. The air was burnt and singed and chunks of the ironclad rained down to the sea.

"Get off my ship."

Olga groaned, holding her leg, and her eyes were furious. "All you had to do was give up your weapon-happy friends over there and we could have negotiated. Now you're stuck here and The Fleet won't rescue you until you're found!"

"What a pity." Kira wrenched Jameson's arms behind her back and dragged her to the starboard balustrade.

"You're not going to live through this, Sky Captain!"

Kira hauled her half over the rail. "Correction: *You're* not going to live through this, Admiral."

"We *will* find you, and we'll take much more than The Cimarron!"

"That's a risk I'm willing to take." With a good shove Olga plummeted, raining into the water with the rest of the federal debris. Kira helped Kent throw Henderson's body over and she looked down, hoping to see the moment Jameson made impact. She was no longer in the air and Kira couldn't distinguish her black-clad body from



ese past five years.” She touched his cheek, hoping to distract him. “Are you hurt?”

“Hardly!” Kent puffed out his chest and Kira rolled her eyes. “Are you, dear? I thought I'd lost you...”

“So did I, Kent. Thanks for saving me.”

He shook his head. “For you, anything. You never have to thank me.” Kira sighed as she caught that look. Kent had saved her more times than she could remember, and she knew this wouldn't be the last. He kissed her eyes and stroked her hair. With a sad smile, he turned his attention to the gaping hole in the center of the ship.

“Excellent work down there! To whom do we owe the pleasure?” Kira stared, mortified by the damage, and incredulous at his chipper demeanor. “There is a *hole* in *The Cimarron*, Kenneth, and you're praising them?!”

“Nothing a good mechanic and a little care can't fix. Or would you rather have joined our friends down there in the ocean?”

She crossed her arms as she walked to the edge of the hole in her deck. Tuomas lifted his goggles and lowered the weapon. Captain Arryn stood beside him. A tricorn hat, accented with red and black feathers, red roses, and a raven's skull, was slightly askew atop her curls.

“So you're a gunman.”

Tuomas nodded. “I was a harpoona' aboard the whalin' vessel an' T. c.”

She examined the horrendous damage. The floor groaned and nearly collapsed beneath her, wood had been blown to splinters, and she was looking clear through a cargo bay, into the ruined lab where they stood. “I don't know what that weapon was, but—”

“A sono-magnetic ruby pulse cannon, Sky Cap'n.”

Kira looked immediately to Walter. The mad doctor grinned and patted a hand on the youth's back. “Fixed your problem, didn't it? Fine young lad you've got here! Took to my inventions like a fish to water.”

“You got us into this mess!” Kira glanced at Kent, who was curiously watching her, and she crossed her arms. “I'm sure all of Manhattan saw that explosion! And a cloaking device? What could you be thinking?!”



She simmered, and again surveyed the damage. At least her pirates seemed to be coming in handy. She looked down at Tuomas and sighed. "Good work, Tuomas. Might I get your surname?"

He looked confused but responded, "Tuomas Virtanen, Sky Cap'n." "Well, I'd like you to be my weapons officer. I've needed a decent marksman for some time." Maybe if she gave him a little leash, she could count on his loyalty. A good gunman was worth his weight in gold.

Tuomas looked at Captain Arryn, and he stared down at the pulse rifle in his hands. Finally, he looked up. "Yeh maimed me, Sky Cap'n. You took me from my ship, an' you imprisoned me on yours. All I've got left is my ship, an' I'm lucky I kin still stand." The pirate looked her in the eye. "An' now yer about t' trust me with your guns. Why?"

Kira smiled. "You've certainly got a brain in there, Tuomas. You're free to be questioning me." She tilted her head. "The way I see it is that you're aboard *my* ship, and you've got no place else to go. Even after I wounded you and took you prisoner, you came to my defense and saved me. All." Kira shrugged. "Now, I could certainly view that as a way of putting me into a false sense of security. You and Captain Arryn could have easily overpower the three of us, especially with access to the armory. You'd both have a fully functional airship in no time, but you'd be within an alien realm, with no way of getting back, no access to the Federated Coal, and you'd be completely outmatched, once the Federation returns." She gestured to the weapon in his hands. "But I prefer you to be so paranoid, and I value your skill as a marksman. So what'll you do?"

"Yeh drive a hard bargain, Cap'n. I don't really have any choice, but I'll be nice to have some respect. I s'pose I'll be takin' my place, then." "Congratulations, Tuomas. You are now Weapons Officer Virtanen." He walked up beside her and she smiled. "Not bad for a pirate, aye, isn't it?"

He frowned and looked reluctantly at Tuomas. "I'm sorry I doubted you, mate. Though to be fair, you are a *terrible* mechanic."

Officer Virtanen smirked. "I destroy things, First Officer, I don't fix them."

The squeal of a metal lever made her look at Walter, who lifted a handle on the far wall. The invigorating sound of returning power lifted her spirits. Once again, The Cimarron hummed, and the lights flickered in the cabin. But the ambient roar of the engine grunted and quickly quieted.

“Officer Townsend.” She turned to find him halfway through the hatch.

“Already on it, Dearest!” With a wave, Kent disappeared into the join and she cringed as the hatch slammed shut behind him. The ceiling crumbled as he descended into the corridor, whistling as he rolled down to the engine room.

She shook her head and looked out at the skyline. She’d set their course for Manhattan... or wherever they were. It didn’t seem more than ten miles, and with any luck they might find a decent mechanic. And the man she was looking for.

“Captain Arryn.”

“You called, Sky Captain?” She was coated in gray dust as she placed her hands on her hips. Even in the midst of disaster, she was ever as elegant.

Kira thought of the man *she* had to find, but she’d do that on her own. “It will be your job to find a mechanic, skilled in repair of sea vessels, who doesn’t question The Cimarron. Ships are the closest things we’re going to find in this realm.”

“I think I can handle that little task.”

“Good, and I’ll be returning your arm cannon.”

“Oh? Puttin’ your trust in me already?”

“Not at all. I never said it was loaded.” Kira smirked. “You’ll get a single bolt. You shouldn’t need that to convince a mechanic, but you’re going to need to defend yourself. One look at that weapon should quell any disputes.” Her hands went to the grappling gun and revolver at her waist. “Don’t betray me.”

She walked to the bow and placed a hand on the balustrade. A foreign Manhattan lay dead ahead and she had no idea how they’d turn home. Maybe she should have just gone with them. Now that

July 10. 1884

tn: Sky Captain Hauke

I glimpsed your daughter today. Lovely she is, and ever  
our child. Trust that she has met capable hands, who will get  
through the coming storm. However, the ~~enemy~~ also made an  
appearance. He *is* close, and we *likely* haven't seen the last of  
n.

Supposing our communication may shortly end, I give you  
the warning. The danger in this man is that he cannot afford  
! And, Sky Captain, he powers an entire future on false  
tenses.

ster P. C. Doyle