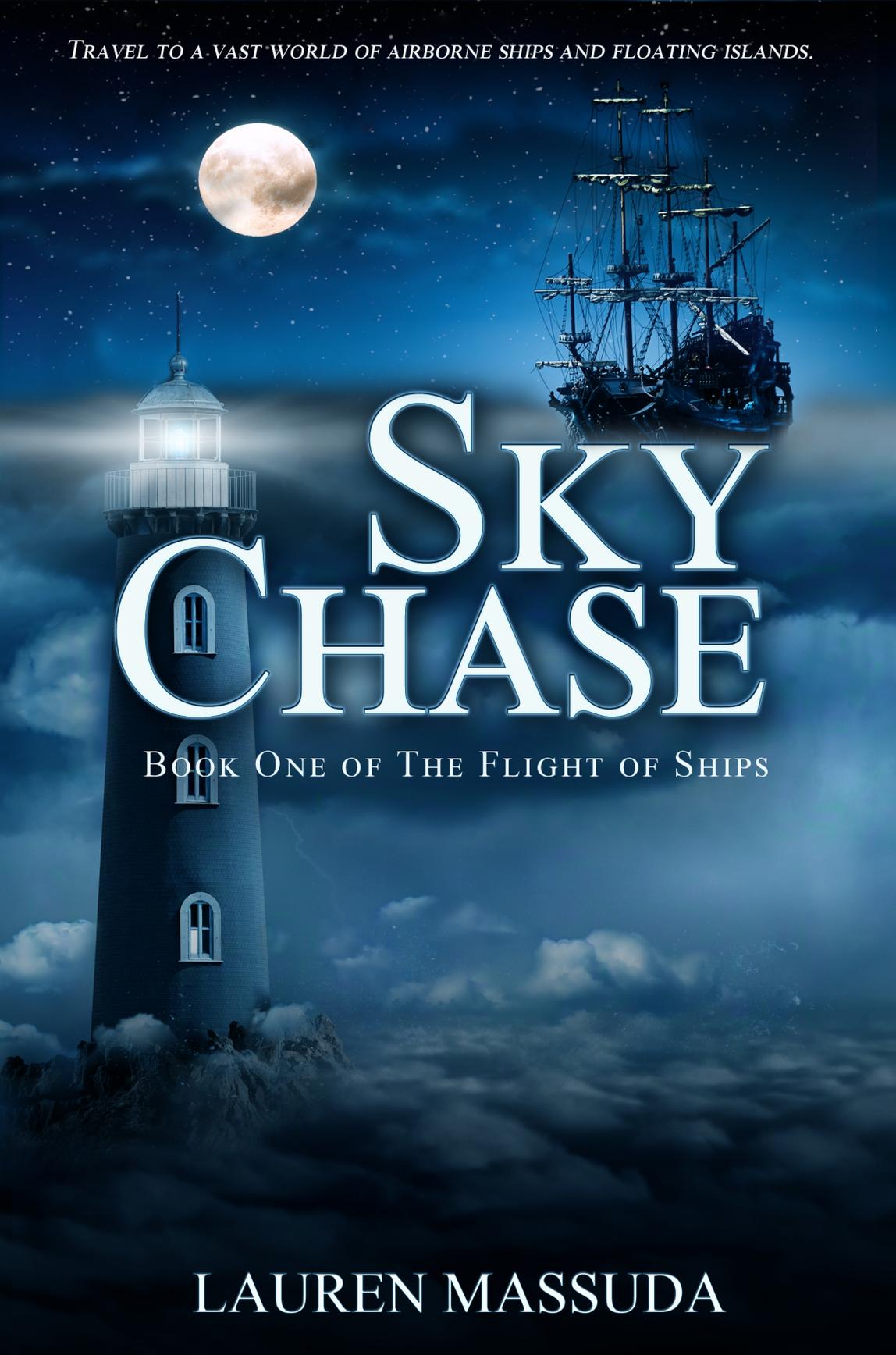


TRAVEL TO A VAST WORLD OF AIRBORNE SHIPS AND FLOATING ISLANDS.

The background of the cover is a dark, starry sky. On the left, a tall, cylindrical lighthouse with a glowing lantern room sits atop a rocky island. To the right, a large, multi-masted sailing ship is visible in the sky. A large, full moon is positioned in the upper left quadrant. The title 'SKY CHASE' is written in large, white, serif capital letters with a blue glow. The letter 'C' is significantly larger than the other letters and is positioned to the left of 'HASE'.

SKY CHASE

BOOK ONE OF THE FLIGHT OF SHIPS

LAUREN MASSUDA

SKY CHASE

THE FLIGHT OF SHIPS

BOOK ONE

LAUREN MASSUDA

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SAMPLE CHAPTER

1

– CORDELIA –

THE HORN'S BELLOW STARTLED ME AWAKE, and I snatched my boots at the foot of the bed. When I heard Flint yelling, "The Black Sting has arrived!" in a booming voice, adrenaline pulsed through me and I was out the door, but not before grabbing my crossbow. I swiftly loaded the arrows and kicked open the door that led to the upper deck. The morning sunlight blocked my vision momentarily, but, when everything cleared, I turned to the rouge-colored sky.

The Black Sting, a giant manta ray, soared about fifty feet above me and my crew, who had all spread out amongst the deck. The creature flew straight into the clouds and disappeared momentarily before engulfing the airborne ship in its shadow. Its fins slapped the wind currents and caused the white sails of *The Raging Storm* to tousele wildly.

The Black Sting's long, slender tail swished from side to side, cutting through a cloud that swiftly dispersed at its touch. I turned to my crew members who had all gathered at

Sky Chase

the lower deck. They carried weapons that ranged from crossbows to swords.

I raised a hand and yelled: "Get into your stations! Fire at my command!"

"Yes, Captain!" the crew cried in unison.

The young men and women carrying crossbows hurried to the upper deck with me, while the others stood below in defensive stances. They raised their bows on accord and pulled back their postures slightly, awaiting my signal.

"Steady, steady!" I exclaimed.

The Black Sting swooped down, its fins expanded, gliding with the quick wind currents. Flint took the helm and veered the ship away, dodging the attack. The Black Sting swirled in a hastier circle, swooping around the rotating ship in a flash of blue and black. It released a screeching wail as it widened its oval-shaped mouth.

The Black Sting swept upward, spiraling like a whirlpool, going faster and faster until I finally yelled, "Attack!"

Arrows ripped through the air in streaks of silver, flickering in the morning light. The arrows pierced the creature's skin and threads of blood spewed out. The creature screeched, swerving to the left as more arrows whizzed like a rain of needles.

The Black Sting ducked under the ship and shoved its body into the keel, causing the ship to jolt and tilt sharply to one side. The crew skidded back, but held tight to the railing before they could topple out.

"Steer her straight!" I exclaimed, clenching a banister.

Flint maintained a tight grip on the wheel before steering the ship back into place. Everyone else, once taking a split second to get composed, rushed back into their positions just as the Black Sting flipped back towards the ship. It spiraled in at an incredible speed as its tail whipped into the deck, ripping out pieces of wood.

"Keep shooting!" I shouted, aiming my own crossbow at the Black Sting and firing.

The creature attempted to dodge, but arrows rained through the air in every direction. The Black Sting screeched and blindly soared forward into the ambush. The weight of its wings struck the men and women, knocking them down, but those who sustained balance inflicted more damage upon the creature as it dove in one last attack. It thrashed its wing into one crewmember and knocked him over the deck's baluster.

"Mark!"

I rushed forward and grabbed his shirt before yanking him back on the ship. He stumbled to the floor, breathing fast while clutching his chest. Mark threw his head up at me. Relief washed over his freckled face "Th-thank you, Captain," he breathed out.

"Save the compliments for later," I said, and helped him to his feet.

"Y-yes, sorry," Mark rubbed the back of his head.

"Get back to your —" I paused as my attention flew to the sky. My blood ran cold.

The wounded creature fled the ship with its fins flapping frantically away. It soon disappeared behind the clouds, leaving behind wails that echoed throughout the spacious sky.

"It got away ..." Mark huffed. "What now, Captain?"

"We're going after it," I stated firmly and faced Flint at the helm. "Turn the ship around, we're going after the Black Sting!"

"Wait, Captain!" Eamon marched over to me, his olive skin glistening with sweat and his copper hair bouncing in the unceasing breeze. His dark green eyes were sunken with exhaustion.

But I pressed on and demanded, "Are you questioning my order, Eamon?"

My crew surrounded us in a wide semi-circle. They whispered amongst themselves, but I shot them a glare which settled them into silence.

"It's too late to catch up to the Black Sting," Eamon replied. "Besides, it's wounded and probably won't be able

to attack for some time. Another ship should be able to kill it soon. We're not the only ones sailing the sky."

I grimaced and said, "We've been tasked to kill the Black Sting. No one else was asked to do so. If another ship gets all the glory, we'll lose credibility."

"Captain," Eamon said with composure, closing his eyes. "I assure you: we won't lose any credibility. But if you really want to catch it ... why don't we take a break now and search later? We've been searching for three weeks and I'm sure you and the rest of the crew would like a rest."

I stared wordlessly at Eamon for several seconds with furrowed eyebrows. I didn't want to stop searching, but everyone was clearly exhausted from the fight, and it didn't help that it was the brink of morning. I, too, was exhausted, but I certainly would not show it to my crew. Plus, we had to fix the ship, and I didn't want to deal with any more damage if it got hit again.

As I huffed out a sigh and rubbed a temple, tension eased off my shoulders and I waved a hand dismissively. "Fine. We'll head back home, but it'll only be a short time until we return to our task."

"Thank you, Captain," Eamon said. "We're sorry we weren't able to kill the Black Sting."

"The next time we find it, we officially end it," I proclaimed, gritting my teeth. "That creature has been terrorizing islands and destroying ships. If we don't kill it next time, more lives will be lost and it'll be our fault." I turned on my heel and headed back toward my cabin. My buckled boots clinked into the floorboard. While I walked, I called to Flint, "Turn the ship west. We're heading home."

"Yes, Captain." Flint nodded and maneuvered the great vessel of *The Raging Storm* in the opposite direction.

Before I settled into my cabin, I turned back to my crew below. I noticed no one had taken any major blows; they were all able to stand on their feet despite having bruises and cuts. But just in case, I asked, "Did anyone get hit by the tail's tip?"

"I got hit by the tail, but not the tip. I'm good though," Bernard said, feebly rubbing his side and flinching at the pain.

"All right," I said, and then noted the broken pieces of wood scattered on some portions of the deck. "Those who aren't injured fix up the ship; those who are, rest up."

"Yes, Captain!" the crew exclaimed in unison.

I nodded and shut the doors of my cabin behind me. Stained glass decorated the slightly arched ceiling, giving the octagon shaped room a bright, vibrant touch. Morning sunlight streamed through the glass and highlighted the map that filled the back wall. An oil painting of the world, it depicted the plethora of islands called the Caelum Islands, suspended above a field of clouds. There was no land below the clouds. The world was made of islands in the sky, and my home was Domus, the largest island. It rested right in the center of the painted map, with its name displayed in fancy cursive above.

The job of *The Raging Storm*, and dozens of other ships, was to protect these islands from creatures like the Black Sting and from criminals. Every ship had a captain to command, and I was the youngest one. I started my training when I was eight and I learned much quicker than anyone else.

I finally became captain at age thirteen, and this accomplishment made my crew and I fairly renowned across the world. But despite that, my father was never keen about the idea of me becoming a captain. My mother once was, but she was killed when protecting Domus from an invasion years ago.

When I told Father I wanted to become captain, he was wary about my decision, even before Mother was killed. The job of a captain was dangerous, after all, but I constantly assured him I could handle it.

I sat at my desk and collected some letters that I had purposely neglected to read. I didn't regret my decision when I finally got around to reading them. They were all from my father. He meant well, but he worried way too much about me. Before I could read them more in depth, a knock sounded at the door, followed by Eamon's voice.

"Can I come in, Captain Cordelia?"

"Yes," I beckoned, though my attention was on the letters. I heard Eamon entering the office and then the soft click of the door closing.

"What is it, Eamon?" I asked.

"Nothing. I was checking to see how things were going."

"Not too good." I inhaled sharply, slapping the letters onto the desk.

"What's wrong?"

"My father." I leaned back in the chair, rubbing a temple. "He sent me tons of letters asking about my well-being. Plus, he tells me that Caleb's birthday's coming up and doesn't want me to miss it this time."

"Well, this is your family — of course your father would be worried. After all, you've been gone for almost a month, and you have a little brother, too. How old is he? Four?"

"Five. He'll be six in a week," I said briefly, adding more pressure to the temple.

"Oh, that gives us plenty of time to return home by then."

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. "Yeah, yeah ... might as well head back before Caleb throws another tantrum. Little brat ..." I muttered the last two words under my breath, but Eamon caught them.

"You shouldn't call your brother that, Captain. He's only a kid."

"An annoying one at that," I spat. "You don't have any siblings, so you don't know what it's like to have a brother who's ten years younger than you."

"I do have a few younger cousins though," Eamon noted. "Perhaps going back home will make you feel better. It doesn't hurt to visit family every once in a while. Even if you don't always get along with yours, they're always there for you."

"You're so sappy, Eamon." I rolled my eyes. "Never mind. We'll head back home, stay for a while, and finish our job afterward."

"And how long would a while be?"

"I don't know ... a day?"

"I think everyone would want more than a day — how about a week?"

"A week is too long. Three days tops."

Eamon sighed, defeated. "Fine. Three days."

"Good," I said. "Is there anything else you want?"

"No, nothing, Captain," Eamon said. "I only wanted to check if things were well with you."

"Everything will be well once that creature is dead," I exclaimed.

"It will be done soon, Captain," Eamon said. "Would it help if I make you some tea? It'll calm your nerves."

"Hmmm ... I'd like that, actually," I considered with a small smile, then I added: "Make it mint."

"Sure." Eamon nodded.

While he walked off to make the tea, I leaned into my chair and caused it to tilt back. I closed my eyes, trying not to concentrate on anything while my focus latched onto the darkness within my eyelids. I inhaled and exhaled softly, and my body gradually relaxed. In the close distance, the sound of tea pouring into a cup comforted me, unlike the constant noise of my crew talking from outside. They were so loud, but soon their voices became nothing more but buzzes in my ears.

Soon the fresh scent of mint glided to my nose, and I opened my eyes. Eamon settled the cup of tea in front of me before taking a few steps back. My face lit up, and I picked up the cup. I sniffed it once more before taking a delicate sip.

"It's good," I commented.

"I'm glad to hear, Captain."

Eamon started to leave, but then paused as he took notice of my desk. Letters and papers were strewn all over its cherry wood surface, and crumpled up pieces of paper lay abandoned on the carpet. Books stood piled on one side of the desk while maps lay sprawled on another. The actual surface of the desk was barely identifiable due to all the supplies swarmed across it in a huge collision. I've told myself that I needed to clean the

desk, but I've never gotten around to it since I'm always occupied with more important matters.

"Can you promise me something, Captain?" Eamon asked. His tone had gotten unusually quiet.

"What?"

"Don't do any more work for a while and sleep," Eamon instructed calmly. "It's not good for your health if you keep working nonstop."

I pursed my lips and took another sip. The warm liquid flowed down my throat, leaving behind a minty-sweet aftertaste. I glanced down at the remaining liquid. I vaguely saw my reflection swaying in the subtle motion of my hand moving the cup.

"Fine."

"You should also clean your desk," Eamon also suggested. "I don't think I've ever seen the surface."

I huffed and set the cup down with a soft clink. "Anything else before I kick you out?"

"Nothing," Eamon said. "I just want you to keep your promise."

"I said that I'd keep it, didn't I?"

"Yes, but —"

"You worry too much, Eamon." I got up from the chair and went over to rest a hand on his shoulder. "I'll rest and I'll clean up the desk. You should also get some sleep; there are circles under your eyes."

Eamon smiled. "I'll do that."

I patted Eamon's shoulder before rounding back to my desk. "If no storms come our way, we should be back home within two days. I'll reply back to my father and tell him we're heading home. We'll rest for three days, gather up supplies, and then return to the ship. After we kill the Black Sting, we'll come back home until our next task."

"Alright, I'll go inform the crew," Eamon said.

"Thank you." I smiled subtly and then waved him off. "You're dismissed."

Eamon saluted me before heading out of the cabin. I gazed up at the stained-glass ceiling before my eyes fell to the mess that was unfortunately my desk. I sighed and closed my eyes.

“Falling asleep would be easier than cleaning that desk,” I muttered to myself.

My body relaxed into the cushion and tension eased from my muscles once I felt fully adjusted. The noise outside appeared to lessen.

“Finally, peace and —”

A shrill squeak interrupted my moment of bliss and my eyelids flew open. Eamon’s pet ferret, Amabel, pounced onto the desk, causing papers to fly and a quill to roll off. The ferret continued to pounce until I grabbed it by the scruff of its neck. I shot up from my desk.

“Eamon!”

The doors flew open. Eamon burst in with a hand clutching his sword, as if some real danger had arose. But there was no danger, just an annoyance.

“What in the world is your ferret doing here?” I demanded, shoving the squirming rodent forward.

“I’m terribly sorry, Captain.” Eamon hurried over and took the ferret into his arms. “I don’t know how Amabel got in here.”

“You need to keep an eye out,” I retorted, glaring at the ferret that currently cuddled under Eamon’s chin.

“Sorry, Captain,” Eamon said, holding Amabel close to him. “I’ll make sure she stays in my cabin.”

“Good. Get back to your station. Now,” I ordered.

“Yes, Captain.” Eamon saluted me once more and quickly exited the cabin.

I huffed and glanced out of one of the windows. A speck of black flew in the distance like a fly crawling on the window’s glass. My eyes squinted. I wondered if it was the Black Sting ... or perhaps it was something else. Either way, I knew I shouldn’t dwell too much on it. I didn’t want to hear anymore of Eamon’s lectures.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lauren Massuda wanted to be a writer ever since her grade school principal read her poem to the entire school. She was 12 at the time, and the memory sticks to her to this day. Lauren graduated from Goucher with a B.A in English and a Creative Writing concentration. She also participated in UCLA's Professional TV Writing Program and turned one of her scripts into a 120-page screenplay. She hopes that one day, her script could be transferred to the silver screen, but she's content with the fact that she can share her debut novel to the world.

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