Opening extract from

The Cloud Hunters

Written by

Alex Shearer

Published by

Hot Key Books

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by Hot Key Books
Northburgh House, 10 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0AT

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-4714-0018-6
Export paperback ISBN : 978-1-4714-0019-3

1

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
This book is set in 11pt Sabon

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc

[environmental statement/paper information tk]

www.hotkeybooks.com

1
jenine

In the middle of the second term, a new pupil arrived at school. Her name was Jenine and she had two scars on her face, running from under her eyes to just above her mouth. They weren't scars from an accident or scars she had been born with or scars from an attack. They were ornamental. They were the scars of ritual and tradition. And they marked her out as a wanderer, as a nomad: an immigrant of unknown origin; and by tradition such people were Cloud Hunters.

Her family's ship had turned up one day and moored in the harbour. Jenine's father had died – lost in a storm, the rumour said – and her mother commanded the sky-boat now; though in truth there wasn't much to take charge of.

The boat was not large and there was a crew of one, a man so deeply tanned that his skin was almost black. His name was Kaneesh. His ears were studded with rings and he had a single-band tattoo which went all the way around his arm, like a bracelet. His head was shaved and his chest

was hairless and he always seemed to glisten, as if he had anointed himself with oil.

Jenine's mother was called Carla, and she, like her daughter and like Kaneesh, had two scars running down towards her mouth. Her hair was jet black and she wore it long and thick, often tied back in a band. She was tall and slim and she looked like a warrior – even when she came to the parents' evenings. She seemed very exotic and the perfume she used smelled strange and unusual. My mother said it was musk. She said it had been taken from the glands of a dead sky-whale, which I thought rather cruel, and bizarre – and somehow intriguing.

Every morning, Carla and Kaneesh would set sail, and every evening they would return. Sometimes the catch had been good; sometimes bad, and they would come back empty-handed, with nothing in the hold.

If they had several bad days in a row, they would journey further afield, which meant that they might not return for a week or more. Carla would then pay somebody to look after Jenine, and to give her board and lodging, so that she would not have to miss school.

She wanted her daughter to have an education. For it's one thing to be a Cloud Hunter because you want to be; it's another thing to be a Cloud Hunter because you have no choice and are qualified for nothing else. Yet, even then, your very looks are against you.

At the weekends, when there was no school, their boat would leave port on Friday afternoon and not return until late on Sunday, or even early on Monday morning, and

Jenine would just be in time for the first lesson. If you asked her what she had done, the answer was always the same.

'We were cloud hunting.'

'You find many?'

'Some. What did you do?'

Well, a whole variety of things. But none of them ever seemed as good, as interesting or as exciting as gliding through mile after mile of clear blue sky, chasing the wisps of distant vapour, speeding towards the faraway patches of cloud, trying to get there before anyone else did, and then coming home with the tanks full of water to sell.

Nothing could compare to that. Not in my eyes. I wanted to go with them, but was afraid to ask, knowing that even if I did ask, I would be refused. Or if I wasn't refused by them, then my parents wouldn't allow me to go.

Yet it wasn't that I lacked the courage to make the journey.

I just lacked the courage to ask to go on it.

It's strange how sometimes it is easier to act than to speak. You'd think it would be the other way round.

Now boys and girls are supposedly different to each other in many more ways than the obvious. And as much as boys may spend a lot of time thinking about girls when they get to a certain age – and vice versa – the fact is that they do not much go around together. At least not until. Until they do, that is. But that was an until which was still a time away.

But in some ways Jenine was like a boy: in the way she thought and the way she acted; so it wasn't so difficult to get to know her. Maybe I even thought that I could capture her, the way her mother's boat captured the clouds, and then I would have the essence of her, possessed and distilled. I thought it would be like chemistry, when you reduce some solution to a mere few droplets and you can hold it in a bottle with a stopper on the top, or in a test tube.

Well, if I did think that, I thought wrong. You can't capture a person that way, or change them from cloud to water. But you can make a friend of them, simply by letting them be and by allowing them to know that you make no claims on them. Then, there you have it – the cloud in your hand, and as long as you don't try to close your fist and your fingers around it, you can keep it; it's yours. But if you do try to hold it, it just slips from your grasp.

I didn't mind the teasing, or if the others said she was my girlfriend, which she wasn't; she was just a friend who happened to be a girl. I didn't overdo it either, or spend too much time talking to her, or make an obvious point of it. I was just friendly, that was all; I was just keeping a friendship warm, just waiting, biding my time, and then one day I would find the courage to ask the question. And with luck, the answer would be yes.

Although now, when I look back, I realise that I had far more than one question to ask.

2
morning

Sometimes I would see the Cloud Hunters leave port, in the cool breath of early morning. It was hard for me to make my steps continue on their way to school after that. They were all I could see, all I could think of. And to me, right there, right then, there could be no finer life, no greater excitement than to be sailing aloft in search of the great, soft, cotton-wool clouds.

But I was just a school student, and my father and mother were administrators and office workers. They wore smart clothes and suits and kept regular hours. They could never have been Cloud Hunters in a million years. For the Cloud Hunters were like gypsies and renegades, with earrings and jewels, hennaed hands and tattoos, bracelets and bands of gold, and with dark, mysterious looks.

They were outcasts and adventurers, and I longed to be one of them, the way that a volunteer, knowing nothing of war, might long to be a soldier. The reality of war, its pain and fear, its terror and discomfort and deprivation

meant nothing. All the naive onlooker and would-be recruit could perceive was war's romance.

Yes, I wanted to go with them, wanted to fly away, to chase the clouds, to sail above the sun and into the far reaches of the upper air.

I knew I would never get to go, never, not in a week or a month or a year of Sundays, or any days at all.

But then my chance came, and I took it, and just for a little while I became a Cloud Hunter too.

So that was what happened.

That was my good luck.

And this is my story.

3
traders

My father worked for a merchant shipping company: a sky-trader. There are so many islands here, and their produce so diverse, that there is a constant shuffling of goods between one isle and another.

The trading boats are vast affairs: huge, flat container sky-ships, hundreds of metres long. Or sometimes the cargoes are transported in great barges, one tied to the next, all pulled along in convoy by a tugboat at the front. There are usually a few security outriders too, who patrol up and down along by the barges, making sure that nobody tries to steal anything. There's always the danger of piracy on the high skies. The great container ships and barges ride on the solar wind in a ponderous, stately fashion, making slow but sure progress, lumbering along like pods of sky-whales.

As well as watching out for pirates and hijackers, the patrols have to keep the hulls of the boats free from sky-lice and sky-riders. Sky-riders are small, cat-sized, whiskery

creatures, with squashed-looking faces and smooth coats, parasites in their way, that travel by clinging onto the undersides of the boats. They can fly under their own steam when they want to, but mostly they don't. They prefer to travel under your steam instead of their own. They're basically bone idle, and all they want in life is a free ride.

For the most part, they're harmless, or at least they are when it's only four or five of them. But one follows another – as they like to be sociable – and soon, if you're not careful, the whole hull of a boat can be covered in sky-riders, all holding on tight with the suckers on their feet. Soon you've got a colony of them and they're weighing the boat down.

Even one of the great barges can start to sink in the sky, if too many freeloaders latch onto it. Then, as it falls, it will pull the other barges with it, until they all lose buoyancy and suddenly plummet towards the fire of the sun beneath. Then it's too late. Even if the sky-riders abandon the hull to save themselves, the boats go on plunging down under their gathered momentum. Whole cargoes and many lives have been lost that way.

So the outriders constantly patrol the barges on small craft. They keep the sky-riders moving with prods and kicks (for they're thick-skinned and it doesn't do to be too gentle with them) and they try not to let them settle. It's an interminable job at first – you swat them, they come back; you swat them again, they come back again. But once you are out in the Main Drift and far from land, the

sky-riders are fewer and you're safe until you approach the islands again.

The strange thing is that, on land, sky-riders are often treated as favoured pets. You find them in people's kitchens, snuggled up in a basket and chewing on titbits, or sitting on their owner's knee. My own grandmother had one. She used to call it Sky-Puss and let it sleep by the window, next to her knitting. But it wasn't much use for anything. If it ever saw a sky-rat, it just stared at it and watched it fly by. It never bothered chasing it. It was simply too much trouble.

Our whole world here thrives on trade. One island grows fruit, another makes machinery. And although most islands are more or less self-sufficient, no single place can produce everything it requires. So there is always travel and great caravans of traders crossing the sky, moving like nomads across a vast desert waste.

And then there's water. Water is wealth and water is prosperity; water is influence; water is power; and water is politics. It's like oil used to be in the old world, so the history books say. Some countries had oil and some did not, and those that did could control the price or trade oil for concessions and favours. Wars were fought over oil, and have been fought here over water too. The richest people in the system are not the ones with the most land; they are the ones who own rivers and reservoirs.

Those islands without natural water sources, or without the wherewithal to collect water for themselves, rely on Cloud Hunters to bring it to them, for both drinking and

irrigation. Without this source of supply, many would perish.

There is never a shortage of customers, only ever a shortage of clouds.

I asked Jenine to bring me in some cloud water one day. I wanted to taste it. So she did. They had harvested it just that weekend. It was cool and sweet. You could almost taste the distance in it, taste the adventure of finding it, taste the journey, taste the romance. I told her so, but she said I was mad and that all it tasted of was ordinary water – which isn't much of a taste at all. She said the taste wasn't in the water, it was in my head.

But it didn't seem that way to me.

4
trackers

But a Cloud Hunter's life is not always easy. Sometimes there are long, cloudless weeks and prolonged drought. The vapour doesn't seem to rise and the clouds don't form, and the Cloud Hunters can trek for days on end and see nothing but perpetual blue. Great for your holidays, not so good when you're trying to make a living.

Yet, eventually, if you travel far and long enough, there is always, finally, the haze of herringbone in the distance, or the dense puffballs of dandelion white, just waiting to be harvested and turned into water.

There are times, too, so Jenine told me, when the cloud in the sky is so dense it is like fog. You cannot see where you are going and must navigate on instruments alone. The tanks are soon full of condensed vapour then; your clothes grow damp; your shirt sticks to your back. You fill the auxiliary tanks and wish you had storage for more. Instead of hiding the location of your precious treasure from other Cloud Hunters, you trigger the beacon and

radio out a signal to let them know that there is plenty here for everyone, which would otherwise go to waste.

Then you sail for home, your ship almost sinking in the sky, like a swollen balloon, a blister near to bursting. It never ceases to amaze me, the way white clouds turn to clear water and how the insubstantial turns to substance.

There are several different varieties and purities of water too: some to wash with, some to cook with, some only to drink. The latter is sometimes treated like rare, fine wine, and kept bottled in the cellar for special occasions. Connoisseurs sip it and roll it around their tongues, talking of 'good textures' and 'outstanding harvests' and 'vintage years'. So water isn't just water, not to some people – even if Jenine thought it was.

Now, in the old days, in the old world, people used to go hunting for whales. (Real sea whales, not like the sky-whales here.) There was always a lookout then, perched up at the top of the ship's mast in the crow's nest, scanning the horizon, with his hand shielding his eyes and a telescope at the ready. When he saw the spume of foam from a surfacing whale, he'd shout: 'There she blows!' And the captain would turn the ship around and they would set off in pursuit.

With Cloud Hunters it's the same. On every boat there's someone, called a tracker, whose job it is to sense where the clouds are forming and to decide in which direction to travel. Even when the sky is blue and cloudless in all directions, for as far as the eye can see, the tracker knows where to go.

It's a bit of science and a bit of an art – with a little dash of intuition thrown in. Some maintain that it's an instinct or a psychic power. But whatever it is, a good tracker has it, and can sense the formation of clouds as much as four or five days' travelling away. And the captain will always go with the tracker, and point the ship in the direction he says – though you can never know for certain that the clouds will be there. You can only believe. And hope. And sometimes doubt.

For it takes some nerve and courage to journey on into the empty blue, your own water supplies getting lower, and with not a wisp of a cloud in sight. But on you go, sailing on the solar wind. Maybe a breeze blows up, too; so you open the wind sails to catch the uplift and speed on into the void. You pass islands, some above you, some beneath. Some are close enough for you to be in their shadow; others are far below, in regions to which you never venture. There are different, hotter lands down there, with different kinds of people in them. If you went on descending, you would eventually come to islands so blisteringly hot that nothing human lives there, just plants and reptiles and the sky-fish of the deep, with skin like cooked leather. Or so people say. Only, if nothing human can live down there, how would anything human know?

Perhaps, as you sail on, a shoal of sky-fish passes. If you throw a line over the side, baited with a juicy insect or two, you can catch a meal; if you throw a net over, you'll catch a feast.

Or maybe a sky-jelly will come into view, drifting on

the air, almost transparent, a great bulbous mass of pulsating veins. Its tendrils trail underneath it, stretching down for hundreds of metres. As long as it's not one of the poisonous varieties, you can haul it in and cook it. Sky-jellies are mostly water. They may not sound too appetising, but you'll devour them when you're hungry and thirsty enough.

No, a cloud-hunting boat is nothing without a tracker. Sometimes they're referred to as 'divines' – because that is what they do: they divine where the water is, or where the clouds are going to be, or are most likely to form. People used to do this once with hazel twigs to search for wells in droughts and deserts. Hold the Y-shaped twig lightly in your hands; when it swivels and points down, dig at that spot – and there's your water.

Sometimes a tracker's only command is to stay put. They sense that this is the place to be. No need to search for clouds now; they will come to you. So you close the solar panels, reel in the wind sails, and set the satellite anchor to keep you in position.

Then you wait. Maybe for long, silent hours, in the warmth of the sun and the faint stir of the breeze. In the distance a pod of sky-fins gambols by, leaping and capering, always playful, without a discernible care.

Long hours pass and the following hours seem longer still. Waiting takes its toll. You look at the tracker and start to doubt him. His face is inscrutable, his half-closed eyes are small slits in his sunburnt face; or he wears sun-shades and his eyes cannot be seen at all. You sleep, you

wake, you take turns at watch, and still the clouds don't come. Then a whole day passes, then two days, three days, four. And still the clouds don't come. Your throat is a dry cavern now, parched as a sand dune. Your voice is a croak. You sound like a frog, but your skin is dry, burning. You roll down your sleeves to cover your arms; you pull down the peak of your hat. You crawl under the canopy and hide in the shade away from the relentless sun.

Another day and your tongue is swollen in your mouth. You can barely swallow, hardly speak. But what's there to say, anyway? And still the clouds don't come.

You look at the tracker, despairing now, accusing. 'You told us to stay here. Had we kept sailing we'd be safe now and the holds would be brimming with water. But no. We're still waiting, and the barrels are dry. And still the clouds don't come.'

The tracker says nothing. He lies in the shade, immobile, inscrutable. Does he really know what he's doing? Or is he also starting to doubt?

Time tries to pass, but it can hardly move; it crawls like a snail on a hot afternoon. A sky-angel swims by, followed by a sky-clown, their markings vivid and surreal, making them seem like the strangest, most miraculous creatures in the universe. Or perhaps you've begun to hallucinate from lack of water.

You move your eyes to watch them, as you lie under the canopy, dry, parched and shrivelled in the everlasting blue. The sky-angels dive to the lower levels. A shoal of

ugly-fish takes their place, drab and dreary and boggle-eyed, with faces like bags of stones.

Still the clouds don't come.

And then –

The tracker stirs. He moves a finger; he opens his eyes wider. He smiles and slowly uncoils his legs. You watch him. Why is he moving? There's nothing to move or smile for. But he reaches up and pulls himself to his feet. Yet why does he waste energy in standing? Lie down, man. Don't be a fool.

But then you smell it: cool and moist; you taste it in your mouth; you feel the air grow damp. Drops of condensation wet your lips. Your blackened tongue peeks out, like a starving rat from a hole in the skirting; it tastes water.

Finally you see it. Real? Or a mirage? Your own thirst, maybe, manufacturing illusions?

But no, the cloud is there. It begins to form around you, in wisps and slivers. Soon, it's a thin mist, and then it grows denser and darker. You feel cooler, then cold. Before you know it you can barely see your own hand in front of your eyes.

You shout to the tracker – (oh ye of little faith!) – laughing, drinking in the moisture, wallowing in the damp, clammy cold.

'You were right! It's here now! It's here!'

So now to work. You call to the rest of the crew. The cloud is so thick you can only make out the others as dull shapes on deck. You feel your way to the familiar controls;

you start up the engines and turn on the condensers. The suction pump starts and draws the moisture down into the tanks. It's as if the whole boat were thirsty, gasping for water to save its life. And it gulps and swallows the vapour down with an insatiable, unquenchable appetite.

It takes hours to fill the tanks. You go below to get some waterproofs on or you'll start to shiver. Then back on deck. The hair on your head is as wet as if you'd taken a shower. Visibility is no more than a few metres. The blue of the sky is a memory; the heat of the sun has gone. But the condenser goes on humming, until at last the tanks are full and water is spilling from the overflow and the deck is sopping.

Time to go. You turn the wheel and set a course for home. The tracker sits at the prow, a smile on his face, a well-earned flask of water in his hand and a plate of fried sky-shrimp beside him. He looks at you as if to say, 'You see, I told you so. But you wouldn't believe me, would you? You lost faith. You had your doubts.'

You pretend otherwise, that you never wavered and you believed in him all along, and you always will. But you know that's a lie. There will always be that element of doubt inside you, and, probably, inside him too. Nothing's ever that certain. Even the best of the hunters gets it wrong sometimes. Nobody is infallible; no one always gets it right.

I'm one hundred per cent sure about that.

5
invitation

'I'm inviting someone back for dinner,' I announced one day when I got home from school.

My mother feigned delight. She was always telling me that I ought to be more sociable. But now that it had actually come to it, the inconvenience possibly outweighed the pleasure.

'Oh, that's – that's wonderful,' she said, with just enough hesitation to imply that it might not be. 'Not on a school day, I hope. What with all the homework –'

'Friday,' I said.

You couldn't argue with Friday. There was the whole weekend ahead of it. You couldn't be expected to do homework on a Friday.

'I suppose that will be all right. Who is it? A boy in your year?'

'A girl,' I said.

She looked at me.

'A girl?'

'Yes. But don't panic,' I told her. 'Not a girlfriend. Just a friend, who happens to be a girl. Or a girl, who happens to be a friend. However you want to see it.'

'I see.'

'And I ought to warn you that she's got scars.'

'Scars?'

'Running from here to here.'

'Oh, how awful.'

'No, they're not. They look pretty good.'

'Was it an accident?'

'No. Nothing like that. In fact, they look so good I was thinking I wouldn't mind some myself.'

'Now you listen to me, Christien! Don't you even dare –'

'I was only saying, Mother. I'd never do it,' I admitted. 'It would be too painful anyway. She said they have to drink something first which makes your face go numb, then they get a very sharp knife and they –'

My mother was looking green.

'I think I've heard quite enough. And this is the girl who's coming here? For supper?'

'If that's all right.'

(Well, I assumed she was coming for supper. I hadn't actually asked her yet. She might have been intending to go off with her mother in the boat, but I suspected not. The week had been damp and muggy, with clouds everywhere. There was no need for them to go out at the weekend. The boat must have had full tanks.)

'Well, I don't know . . .'

She couldn't say no, though. Had she said no, it would

have gone against everything she and my father had always told me – about tolerance and integration and not being prejudiced against minorities and all the rest. So a reserved, 'Yes, I *suppose* so' was the only answer she could give. And that was exactly what I got.

'But I don't know what your father's going to say.'

I couldn't see him saying anything. All I could imagine was him staring at Jenine's mother if she came to the door to collect her daughter after supper, his jaw slowly dropping at the sight of this tall woman with her black hair and green eyes and her scarred face.

He'd probably run a mile.

I thought.

Only it turned out I was wrong.

My mother told him about the invitation later that evening.

'A girl with scars, apparently,' she said.

My father looked up at me from his newspaper, vaguely amused.

'Cloud Hunters?' he said.

I nodded.

'Er – well – yes – I guess so,' I admitted.

He nodded too.

'OK,' he said. 'Ask her round.'

But then I suppose you can't spend your working life around at the Inter-Island Sky Trading Company, supervising the loading and unloading of barges and boats, seeing ships come in from every isle in the system, and not occasionally come across a Cloud Hunter.

Maybe, I thought, I had underestimated him. Maybe my father dealt with people like Kaneesh and Carla on a daily basis, haggling with them over prices and arguing over the quantity of water in a tank or the quality of rice in a hold. The fact that he had not physically travelled so much did not mean that his mind was narrow. He had maybe met more people from more islands than those who had travelled a lifetime. He was fluent in at least five languages, including Common Dialect, and could get by in a handful more.

'Bring her round,' he said. 'Let's see her.'

So I said I would.

But, of course, before I could do that, I had to persuade her to come.

I decided that what it all came down to in the end was being respectable, or at least being seen to be. The appearance of respectability was what my mother cared about. Possibly more than its actuality.

For there was Jenine's mother, with two deep scars on her face and a mass of black ringlets cascading down over her shoulders. And there was her tracker, Kaneesh, who looked as if he would murder you for nothing if you crossed him on a bad day, and murder you for the fun of it on a good one.

And then there was Jenine herself, who not only had facial scars like her mother, but hennaed hands with intricate designs upon them. And though they were doubtlessly three of the kindest and most considerate people, they certainly didn't look it.

They looked like – well, what did they look like? You could have said they looked like killers or renegades or refugees from the law. How were my respectable parents ever going to let me go cloud hunting with a crew who looked like that? Had they looked like vicars or singers in a choir, it might all have been easier.

But appearances, of course, can be deceptive. Once you get to know people a little, your prejudices and misgivings about them tend to drop away. You soon discover that you have more similarities than differences. The fact that they smell of musk oil and carry a sharp knife in a sheath on their belt or are covered in scars and tattoos seems eventually not to matter. I was sure my mother would come to see it that way.

Or so I hoped.

It took me a long time to understand something, though – it took half a long voyage that I had yet to undertake. But the fact is that people never see themselves as you see them. They might hate things in themselves that you admire, or value what you perceive as faults. Jenine's scars, for example. In most people's eyes she was strikingly beautiful, and the scars made her even more so. But inside her, things were more complicated. She didn't feel that way about herself and her scars were things she hated. Impossible as it seemed to me, she believed she was ugly.