

Ice Breaker, by Lian Tanner (The Hidden series #1)

Chapter 1: Nothing girl

Petrel was asleep when they came after her. She'd made a nest of rags in the narrow space around the shaft of the wind turbines, and for once she was warm and almost happy. The familiar sound of the icebreaker's engines rumbled through her dreams like a lullaby, and she smiled, and snuggled deeper into the rags.

The Officer bratlings might've caught her there if they'd had more sense. But they were so sure of themselves – so certain that *this* time they had her trapped – that they didn't even try to be quiet. Petrel woke to the sound of eager voices coming at her from two directions, and the smell of hot tar.

'This way! This way!'

'We've got her!'

There were ten of them, mostly girls, with Dolph grinning in anticipation at the front. Petrel saw them out of the corner of her eye as she sprang from her nest and leaped for the iron ladder above her head.

Dolph screamed, 'There she goes. Quick, grab her!'

But by then Petrel was halfway through the rusty hatch that led to the next deck, and running for her life.

As she tore desperately along the passageways she could hear the bratlings a little way behind her, laughing and shrieking, 'Rat hunt! Rat hunt! Catch the rat!'

'I found her paws,' cried one of girls. 'Look, I've got her nasty little paws.'

Which was when Petrel realised she had left her gloves behind.

Furious with herself, she snarled over her shoulder as if she really *was* one of the ship's rats. Then she ducked into a cabin, scrambled under a hammock full of wailing babies, dived through a rusty hole in the bulkhead and threw herself beneath the first berth she came to, with no idea whether it was occupied or not.

The footsteps pounded past. As soon as they were gone, faded into the distance along with the ugly clank of the tar bucket, Petrel scrambled out from under the berth.

An old man peered up at her from his pillow. She made a clumsy curtsy to him and crawled back the way she had come.

The babies had quietened now, soothed by their mothers, a trio of women with Officer stripes tattooed on their muscular arms. As Petrel tiptoed past, hunching her

shoulders and making her eyes blank and stupid, the Officer women whispered to each other.

‘She’s a strange one.’

‘Not Officer nor Cook nor Engineer. Imagine not having a tribe.’

‘Well, you remember what her parents did.’

‘Disgraceful ...’

Petrel goggled witlessly at them.

‘What are you doing in Braid, Nothing Girl?’ one of the women asked loudly.

Petrel didn’t answer. Silence was one of the few weapons she had against the crew that had rejected her. Silence, stubbornness and the knowledge that she was not who they thought she was.

‘It’s no use talking to her,’ said a second woman. ‘She’s as thick as winter ice. You might as well chat to a toothyfish.’ She made a shooing gesture. ‘Go away, Nothing Girl. We don’t want you here.’

Petrel crept down the passageway and through the hatch, hoping that her pursuers might have dropped her gloves in the excitement of the chase. But there was no sign of them, no sign of anything except for the dollops of tar all over her nest.

She sighed. ‘Can’t stay here now,’ she muttered in her hoarse voice. ‘Dolph’ll be watching for me, sure as blizzards. Better keep away from Braid for a while; find somewhere safer to sleep ...’

The trouble was, nowhere was *really* safe, not for Petrel.

During the *Oyster*’s long voyage, the ship had accumulated centuries of rust, and a hull as battered as an iceberg. But that wasn’t the worst of it. Roughly two hundred years ago, a mid-winter disagreement between crew members had flared up into three months of violent warfare. Nearly half the crew had died in that war, and precious books and papers had been burned, among them the ship’s log, with all its history and instructions.

In the bitter aftermath, with everyone blaming everyone else, the *Oyster* had been divided into three territories, each of them jealously guarded. The bottommost part of the ship, with its engines and batteries, was called Grease Alley – that was where the Engineer tribe lived and worked. The middle decks, which included the kitchens and store rooms, was Dufftown. That was Cook territory. And the upper decks, Braid, belonged to the Officers.

Petrel, who had no tribe, was the only one who could move freely between the three groups. But that freedom came with a high price. None of the tribes turned her away at the border, it was true. But none of them welcomed her, either, or fed her, or protected her against cruelty.

As she stood there, thinking, she thought she heard the clank of a bucket. *Dolph*, she thought, and she rose on tiptoe, as alert as a gull. The clanking sound came again, and Petrel ran.

Braid, where the Officers lived, was a maze of cabins. Most of them were floored with iron, but in others the original deck had rusted away long ago, and been replaced with driftwood or netting, or bones scavenged from ancient whaling stations.

There were folk everywhere on the Braid decks – bratlings hopping from one whale rib to another in a game of chasings, babies tied to their hammocks with seal gut, grown men and women rubbing their eyes as they woke, and calling greetings to their neighbours.

Petrel shuffled between them, eyes lowered. Most folk ignored her; they were too busy with their own lives to bother themselves over a witless girl.

Which suits me, thought Petrel. *Safety lies in being ignored.*

She trotted along the passages until she came to one of the Commons ladderways, where fighting between the ship's three tribes was forbidden. Her nerves were still jangling, and she had a sudden overwhelming desire for sunlight and salty air.

She glanced around to make sure the Braid border guards weren't watching, then fumbled behind the ladderway for her ancient and very ragged sealskin jacket.

'You're getting old, you are,' she muttered to the jacket as she wriggled into it.

As if in answer, there was a dull tearing sound and several grey scraps fluttered to the deck.

Still, the jacket was better than nothing. Petrel fastened the strings, then scurried up the ladderway to the hatch that led to the *Oyster's* foredeck.

There must have been a time, centuries ago, when the hatch had been weather tight. But now the damp and the cold seeped through it like sea fog. Petrel drew the tattered hood of her jacket over her head, then she turned the clamp, pushed the hatch open and stepped out onto the deck.

The cold air hit her like a bucket of water.

'Oof!' she yelped, then she jammed her lips shut and scuttled away from the hatch in case someone had heard her.

The sea was dotted with icebergs. The morning sky was yellow. Petrel ran for'ard across the snowy deck as quickly as she dared to where an ancient crane loomed, and the wind fiddles sang their endless song.

There was a sheltered area there, beneath the body of the crane, and she tucked herself into it, out of the wind. Spring was on its way to the frozen south, and the song of the wind fiddles was luring penguins, seals, whales and every other speck of life back to their summer haunts.

But the air was still cold.

'Ice cold,' mumbled Petrel. 'Bone cold!' And she stuck her hands into her armpits and wondered whether Dolph would think to look for her out here.

Probably not. The fishing shift would start soon, and men and women from the *Oyster*'s three warring tribes would have to work together to feed the ship. Like the Commons ladderways, the open decks were neutral territory where knives, poison and pipe wrenches were forbidden. Even hot tar would be seen as a weapon on the foredeck.

Which meant that the only *real* danger for Petrel – apart from the cold – was that someone might creep up behind her and push her overboard.

'Trouble is,' she muttered, 'if I stay out here for much longer my nose'll fall off. I'll have to take my chances inside.'

With a grumble, she stepped out into the wind. On the horizon, something flashed white ... and was gone. Petrel squinted after it.

'Must've been a berg. Though I've never before seen one so neat and square.'

The next moment she had completely forgotten that odd glimpse. Because the ship was sailing past another berg, and this one had an ice cave near its summit.

Petrel never tired of watching ice caves. Some of them were so blue and so beautiful that they made her heart ache. She leaned on the rail, stamping her feet for warmth. The berg came closer.

That's when she saw him. A boy, laid out on the ice like a dead fish, with a scattering of snow almost covering his face. A boy, where there should have been nothing but the memory of winter.

A frozen boy.