



WINGS of EQUITY
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For Francesca and Diana,
who asked for the likes of
Bart and Jazille to be created.

And for Jules,
who helped take them further.

Prologue

FROM the age of six, Ezra Kneebone knew he was meant to live his life in the skies. All it had taken was one visit with his parents to a special skyshow put on by the local council, in which the newest and oldest of all manner of aircraft were on display both on the ground and above the clouds.

He remembered being placed upon his father's shoulders, as if those extra inches of height would enable him to reach up and touch the bellies of the craft as they flew overhead.

"I don't know why anybody would want to go up in one of those things," his mother had said, shivering at just the thought of it.

"I don't know," Ezra's father had said. "It could be fun. What do you think, Ezra?"

And Ezra had looked back up at the vehicles that seemed to promise the same freedom offered to the birds that until this time had been denied to man. What person wouldn't want to be able to take to the skies, with all the promise of that everlasting expanse? Even at his young age, Ezra could understand that feeling, even if he couldn't put it into words with such eloquence.

"If I go up there," he told his parents, "I won't ever come down."

PART ONE

Chapter 1

THE sky was empty.

Ezra Kneebone sighed to himself and tapped his goggles. The sound of gears clicking into place as the goggles refocused bounced off the walls of the canyon, even though you could imagine they would sound insignificant in such a vast landscape.

There wasn't even a cloud to observe. All you could see was the brown of the mountains and the dirt of the desert floor, and the blue of the sky. In this climate, snow didn't even fall on the peaks to break up the monotony of color. Still, Ezra loved it. It was all he had ever known, and all he really wished to know.

But today brought a momentary pique. Frustrated, he pulled his goggles up and against his hair. The sun was bright, and he squinted against its onslaught. Jumping from the rock on which he was perched, he lifted his sleeve and spoke into the leather wrist cuff beneath it. "Jazille, can you hear me?"

"I'm not hard of hearing, Kneebone," came the crisp reply. *"And my, you're being formal. Are you ready?"*

"Can't see a thing. Have you picked up anything on the sensors?"

"A flock of pigeons, and nothing more. I think we're chasing ghosts."

Ezra chuckled. "Wouldn't be any stranger than chasing a man that can fly."

"I can fly," Jazz replied, her voice crackling with static. *"It's just that I need a craft under me."*

"True enough. But our man has wings."

“Just another bit of machinery, if you ask me. He’s not that special.”

Ezra looked around, but couldn’t see any sign of her or their ship. “Are you going to talk my ear off all day, or are you going to come and get me?”

“You always have your knickers in a twist. I’m right here.”

He felt and heard the rush of wind and the roar of the engines before he actually sighted her. Cutting through the air, billowing steam behind it, the dirigible buffeted the airstream as if it were being tossed upon waves. The mechanics that kept it afloat screamed at the strain upon them, but Ezra knew that Jazz had everything in control. He felt safer in her hands in the air than he did on his own two feet on land.

Their dirigible was a lot smaller than the other ones around. Ezra had designed it himself, with Jazz’s mechanical expertise aiding him in being able to downsize the engine and therefore the size of the ship. It allowed them to move faster, and had also paved the way for the idea of airships being adapted for personal rather than commercial use. As Ezra had said, “I have never really wanted to get into the business of shipping and delivering, but get me in the air so I can get where I’m going faster than anybody else. Who won’t want that?”

They had christened her the *Lilliput*. Being a prototype, they still had ongoing problems with her performance, but this proved to be anything but a deterrent for their plans of eventually building a fleet. Jazz, as well as being an exceptional pilot, was one of the best mechanics around.

He could see her now through the cockpit window, the sun bouncing off the material of the balloon and reflecting from her goggles. She was choosing to fly with the windows down today, so her bright red hair was tied back into a utilitarian ponytail, and her face wore its customary frown as she controlled the flight of the dirigible from her console.

“I’m not landing,” she instructed him, still over the comm system. *“You’re coming in the hard way.”*

“Just the way I like it.”

“Grow up, Kneebone.”

He watched her pop the hatch of the cockpit and activate a pulley that released a rope hanging from the top of the balloon. With one hand on the console, she swung the rope over to him and he caught it on their first attempt as the *Lilliput* drew level with the top of the cliff to allow him easier access.

Without even pausing, he launched himself off the cliff top and swung across the impossibly deep chasm below. He misjudged the height and did a full body slam against the window of the cockpit. Jazz shook her head at him as he scrambled to find the footholds punched into the metal frame. He released the rope as he crossed over the curved dome of the roof and jumped into the pit.

“That was all class,” Jazz said dryly.

Ezra slammed the hatch shut and pulled the lever to close the windows; now it was a lot more quiet inside the dirigible than out. “Next time, you land.”

“It wasn’t your best entrance.”

He gave her a cheeky grin. “Now, how would you know what my best entrance is?”

Jazz fixed him with a long-suffering expression. She had heard it all before. “Your crass bravado isn’t necessary with me anymore, Kneebone. Save it for the men you’re trying to bed when you next go to Whiskeytown.”

“It’s not fair that you judge me for my shenanigans in Whiskeytown,” he said, falling into the seat beside her. “We all can’t be as lucky as you in finding true love.”

“You’re not going to find true love in Whiskeytown,” she said coolly. “But you will find something much more permanent and even more painful.”

“They have powders for that now,” Ezra said with a laugh.

Jazz watched the ground drop even further beneath them as they headed for deeper skies. “You should buy a crate then, the amount you’ll need. Plus, it may be cheaper in bulk.”

Ezra tapped his foot against the console. “How do you know so much about Whiskeytown, anyway, Jazz?”

She slapped his knee. “Stop that. And I’ve heard the stories you’ve told me when you’ve had a bit too much to drink.”

“Aah.” He nodded. “A loose tongue that should have been put to much better purpose, I guess.”

She dropped the height of the *Lilliput* suddenly, and Ezra was jerked out of his seat. He was hit by the floor, rather than him hitting the floor, when she made them regain it just as quickly.

“Sorry,” she said with no compassion behind her tone. “Were you not wearing your restraint?”

From his position on the floor, Ezra scowled at her. “Just get us back home.”

“Aye, *Captain*.” She chuckled to herself, and to be kind, made sure the return trip was the smoothest she could offer.

Chapter 2

FLYING back into Shrevesport was always a tricky business. The city skyline lay in a perpetual shadow from the hundreds of airships that populated it. Many of them remained in the skies, and crew and passengers would have to embark and disembark from the roofs of the buildings; others found fields and bought vacant blocks of land upon which they could be tethered down and secured. The *Lilliput* didn't have that problem due to its unique size; Jazz loved to flirt with danger by zipping dangerously close between the larger ships, finding new alleys of sky and air to travel through where no other ship could follow. Returning home was her favorite part of any job, as she got to put her flying skills to a true test of endurance and stamina. As did Ezra's nerves.

He breathed a silent, thankful sigh as Jazz finally guided the *Lilliput* into its usual berth, and he left her to do the usual system checks as he made his way down to their office.

Well, he called it an office, but it was a sorry excuse for one. Especially when it also served as house and home for him. The ramshackle building was in a less salubrious part of Shrevesport, not that far from Whiskeytown. As part of the industrial district, it was always noisy, smelly, and busy. It was also where they hoped to set up a new premises for the launch of their own line of ships, if that part of their business ever got off the ground—no pun intended.

A pole near the office door had a "Wanted" poster thumbtacked to it. Ezra scowled at the crudely drawn likeness of Icarus and tore it down before anybody else got the fool idea to go after him. Icarus was to be his and Jazz's bounty, and the reward money their riches—riches

that would get their patent and the means to further develop their prototypes for a whole slew of *Lilliputs* to take to the air.

“You still haven’t found him yet?”

Ezra closed his eyes briefly and counted to five before turning around.

The sumptuously dressed Thomas Harding stood resting upon his silver-tipped cane, a cheroot smoldering between his lips. His lascivious smirk traveled over every inch of Ezra’s body, and he puffed even harder at his cigarette.

“Neither have you,” Ezra countered, his natural dislike of the other man impossible to hide. “If you had, it would be all over town already.”

“That it would,” Harding replied. “Everybody loves a hero.”

“Our definitions of ‘hero’ differ,” Ezra replied. “As would most peoples’ when it comes to yours.”

“Jealousy’s a curse, Ezra Kneebone.”

Ezra was tired, and this was the last thing he wanted to be dealing with. “Is there a reason you’ve landed on my doorstep?”

“Don’t be like that. We’re old friends.” It went unspoken, but he insinuated with a glint in his eye that once upon a time they were more.

“One drunken night I regret more than anything else in my life does not mean we’re friends,” Ezra replied bluntly.

Harding dropped the innuendo and grinned. “Come, it wasn’t that bad.”

Ezra imagined pushing the dandy into the gutter, where the refuse of the city slid by in a disgusting sludge. Somehow, it wouldn’t be punishment enough. “What is it you want, Harding?”

“You heading into Whiskeytown?”

Ezra stiffened. “And what business is that of yours?”

Harding leaned into him. “I’m telling you not to waste your money when I’m right here.”

“Get knackered, Harding.”

“Just a perfunctory deal.”

“I’m not that desperate.”

“Funny, I thought all regular visitors to Whiskeytown are.”

Ezra snapped, and shoved at him. Harding stumbled, laughing all the way.

He could have done worse to him, but his link to the *Lilliput* squawked on his wrist cuff. “You at the office yet, Boss?”

Still looking at Harding, Ezra raised his wrist to his lips. “Just got here, Jazz.”

“Had a sense you were in trouble.”

Jazz and her *senses*. “Everything is fine.”

He could tell she wasn’t convinced. “Aye, Kneebone. I’ll be there in ten.”

“Saved by the little lady?” Harding grinned.

“That’s to your benefit, not mine,” Ezra spat.

“All that hate, such a waste. It would be better if it was directed elsewhere into other, more pleasurable, energies.” Harding fondled his moustache lasciviously, mockingly.

Ezra’s face darkened. “Never again.”

Harding had the audacity to laugh in his face. He stroked the tip of his cane against Ezra’s cheek. “You’re not going to find Icarus, believe me. You cannot compete against my team and my resources. You and your little lady should just stop trying.”

Ezra wrestled the cane away from him and threw it into the gutter, where it washed amongst the raw human waste and kitchen slops that flowed freely amongst the city streets. “Sorry about that. And word of warning, don’t call Jazz the ‘little lady’ again. Once I’d finished with you, she would start all over again with you. And you’d be worse off in her hands.”

Harding stared down at his half-submerged cane with disgust. “You may be right. Much as I hate to say it, she’s the best mechanic in Shrevesport. If I could convince her to leave your sorry ass and work for me, I would.”

“That’ll never happen.” It made Ezra proud as punch to know that was one thing Harding would never have over him. The man had never understood the concept of loyalty.

Harding pulled a handkerchief out of his vest pocket and gingerly picked the cane up. “This needs a cleaning.”

“The river is not even a click away,” Ezra said helpfully.

Before he could jump away, Harding reached over and wiped the cane against the bottom of Ezra’s duster. “No need.”

Ezra jumped for him, but Harding held out the reeking cane between them.

“Now, now. Your rudeness is appalling, Ezra. I was even going to cut you a deal, against my better judgment, and offer you the opportunity to pool our teams together and split the reward. Other ships have found it most profitable.”

“We have no need for kindnesses such as those,” Ezra said, his fists balling against his thighs. “Good day, Harding.”

“Your loss,” Harding sneered. Still holding the cane before him, he headed back up the docks. Jazz was coming from the opposite direction, and they shared looks of equal loathing with each other. She gave him a quick feint, which made him stumble slightly.

Ezra shook his head and unlocked the door to the office.

Jazz came up behind him as he was pushing open the door. “What did *he* want?”

“He came to offer us a job.”

“And you better have refused. What is that god-almighty smell?”

“Of course I refused!”

She ignored him and began inspecting his clothes. “It’s coming from you! You smell as if you took a dip in a cesspool....”

“Jazz!”

Her face screwed up, she tracked down the source to his coat and began to yank it off him. He protested, but she wouldn’t listen to him. “Disgusting. Clean it immediately!”

He obeyed her, hating to do so but just as aware that his coat needed to be washed free from the foul substances smeared on it by Harding's cane. The coat was thrown into the double tub in one corner, and he yanked the chain that started the large beaters in the center as water poured in from a sluice in the window.

"While you're doing that—"

Jazille threw in a large bag of her own soiled clothing. "And don't even get funny about touching my unmentionables."

He should have known she would find a way to capitalize on his misfortune. "Your unmentionables *are* unmentionable to me."

She waved him off. "Now, tell me, honestly. You *did* refuse, yes?"

"I said so."

"Yes. But you often lie, like every other member of your sex."

"Thank you, Jazz."

She gave him a disconcerting smile. "You lie less often than others. That's why I can stomach you."

That statement was akin to her pledging eternal loyalty, and he was happy to take it.

She frowned. "What are you thinking about?"

Ezra dwelled upon the thought that had been plaguing him since he had seen Harding outside the office. "Why does a man, when he's had a turn at you, think he has something over you for all time?"

"You are *really* asking the wrong woman this."

Perhaps he was. Jazz might have shared his predilection for liking the same sex one was born as, but unlike himself, she was happily shackled up and her days of wandering were long over.

"I suppose so."

"It's too early in the morning for philosophizing," she said, yawning. "But never too early for beer."

"Don't you have to meet Lady Bart?"

"I can make time for a beer."

He appreciated her act of generosity. "No, go to the Lady."

“Are you going to be alright?”

“I will.”

She nodded at him. “Sure. But don’t go to Whiskeytown.”

Ezra didn’t reply; he didn’t want to lie to her.

Jazz stared him down. “Sometimes I don’t know why I bother.”

“Say hello to Lady Bart for me,” Ezra called after her.

He could see her shake her head through the glass of the door as she disappeared into the crowds on the street.

Chapter 3

WHISKEYTOWN was only a small zone in the city of Shrevesport, but it was notorious and its reputation was at least three times its size. Ezra knew he should stay away, but he had a burning need and it wasn't going to be satisfied by his hand alone. Whiskeytown was made for people who had no significant others in their life to take care of such things. It was also made for those whose basest desires did not conform to those of the social majority.

Ezra crossed into the small buffer that divided Whiskeytown from the better parts of town. A few stalls were manned within it, usually offering clean-up services or drinks for the customers before or after their pleasures were sated.

"Latest edition!" called out a printboy. "Icarus sighted in Waulkham Hills!"

This immediately captured Ezra's attention. "Here!"

The boy ran over, carrying a small wooden newslink. It projected a static-filled image of what looked like a strange bird taken from a long-distance lens. Ezra could immediately tell by the quality of the projection that the boy worked a cheap newslink, and he found himself feeling strangely sorry for him. It was probably why he was forced to work so close to Whiskeytown. The printboys within the Whiskeytown zone probably didn't even have the projector, just the news-stick that would feed the download into the customer's lek-book.

"You have your lek-book, sir?" the boy asked.

Ezra nodded, pulling it out from within his coat. It had seen better days. The wooden back was losing its varnish, and the brass buttons on the front needed a clean, for they were dulled by years of use.

The printboy pulled the newslink out of the projector and connected it to the lek-book, which began whirring in protest. "It's a large edition, sir," he explained. "But they're all getting like that. Maybe you should invest in a Lek-book '97."

"And I suppose you know where I could get one for a fair price?" Ezra asked with a grin.

"Just so happens, sir," the boy laughed.

"If you have access, why don't you have a spiffier version of the newslink?"

The boy's face fell slightly. "Got to make do with what one has."

Ezra felt sorry for showing him up, and paid double the price for the edition. This brought a smile back to the plucky printboy.

"Enjoy your time in Whiskeytown!"

Enjoy was a strange word to use. Even though Ezra wanted that human contact, even if he had to pay for it, there wasn't an *enjoyment* to it. It was perfunctory, not like doing the deed with someone you actually....

He shook his head. It was exhausting to be sentimental.

The lek-book chirruped as he searched for the newscast he had just bought. The rest of the news could go to the Dickens for the moment; all he cared about was the latest story on Icarus. He passed through the tube that served as some illusory filter for the rest of the world that didn't want to believe Whiskeytown existed, all the while reading.

Icarus was still on the lam. Womenfolk claimed to be in love with him, and who could blame them? Even though a close-up pictogram had never been taken of him, reports from those who had crossed his path described him as a Greek legend breathed into life. He apparently wore naught but brown, low-riding leather pants and the mechanical wings on his back, hence the not-that-original name coined for him by the press. Ezra reckoned that with such a costume, he must get pretty cold out in the desert at night. Unless he really was a god.

And Ezra knew there was no such thing. He hit the button on the lek-book that would cause it to go directly to that story the next time he

fired it up and then put it away in his coat again. His nostrils flared at the sour smell that indicated he was truly in Whiskeytown again.

Another original name coined by the press, and this one had stuck. Whiskeytown was home to a number of distilleries, and where there was drink, there were lowlifes and the whores to service them. He could already see some, both male and female, lolling around in doorways along the main road. They perked up at his entrance, trying to get his attention.

He knew better than to go for the prettier ones. They were often flirting dangerously close to the age of consent, and in cahoots with older pimps who then stepped in to let the blackmailing process begin. Not that the workers that put their bodies out there ever saw much of it. Whores never became rich, no matter what dreams they first had when they went into the business.

One in particular caught his eye. He had dark tousled hair and equally dark eyes. His lips were full, as if they were used to doing the job Ezra had in mind for him. The young man nodded at him, Ezra nodded back, and their opening conversation was completed.

Ezra followed him into the house, and the whore led him upstairs. In a small room that was surprisingly clean, the transaction began.

“One or two?” he asked.

“One,” Ezra replied.

“Anything else?”

“Are kisses extra?” Ezra asked, knowing they were.

“They’re an extra two coins. Did you want to cuddle after?”

Ezra did, but it wasn’t worth the extra cost. He would just feel emptier going home. “No.”

The whore nodded. “Eight coins, all up.”

“You better be good,” Ezra muttered, digging for his wallet. He handed half the money over, and the boy accepted it. Both knew it was foolish to either give or receive the full amount before the act took place.

The whore shoved the coins in his back pocket, walked over to Ezra, and gave a perfectly adequate performance at desiring his kiss.

Ezra allowed his arms to slip around the other man, holding him closely as their mouths worked together. He suppressed a moan as their tongues met, clashing with a hint of teeth. Maybe the lad *was* worth his price.

The whore pulled away. "What do you look like under that jacket?"

Ezra didn't want the bother of undressing. "Just concentrate on the important stuff."

The lad nodded and fell to his knees. His fingers deftly unbuttoned Ezra's pants and pulled his member out, already hard.

"That's a right pretty cock you have there, sir."

"I didn't pay for sweet talk," Ezra grunted.

The whore looked up at him with scornful, heavy-lidded eyes. "And I may be a whore, but it doesn't mean I have to be treated like one."

Ezra liked him. For a moment he allowed himself to imagine getting the young man off his knees, taking him back to the office and giving him a job aboard the *Lilliput*. And if it developed into something more between them, what of it? There were worse ways to find a partner, that was for sure.

It was a nice imagining, but a foolhardy one. The lad, even if he was getting screwed over by his pimp, could still make more than Ezra could ever offer.

He steeled himself, pulled a cigar out of his pocket, and lit it. "What's your name?"

The lad hesitated, his mouth open.

Ezra puffed impatiently on the cheroot. "Your *real* name."

It could be a lie, but he nodded. "Lee."

"Well, Lee, nice to meet you. But I want my cock sucked. You have nothing to fear from me, I ain't gonna backhand you or make you do something that goes beyond the realm of a normal bit of work for you. Maybe some more kissing afterwards. Is that okay?"

Lee, his lips plump and very kissable, nodded.

“Okay,” Ezra said, satisfied. He leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes again as he felt Lee’s warm mouth envelop his pecker.

Lee was good at his job. He played Ezra like a harmonica, and it wasn’t that long before Ezra was flooding his mouth. Lee continued to pump him, sucking him dry. Ezra felt weak at the knees, but didn’t want to show any frailty. It could just mean trouble later on if he required Lee’s services at another time.

He was softening when he was finally released, and a slight popping sound issued as he fell out of Lee’s lips. Lee deftly wiped his mouth clean with the back of his hand to remove any evidence that might have spilled, and began tucking Ezra back into his pants.

Ezra grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him up. A momentary look of fear crossed Lee’s face, but Ezra made it fade away by claiming his mouth in a kiss. Tasting himself on Lee’s tongue, Ezra felt as if he had regained his own power. He released the other man and reached for his wallet again.

It was only four coins he owed him, but he gave him a five-piece. “Keep the change.”

Lee nodded. “You look me up the next time you’re here. I can do even more.”

Ezra didn’t doubt it, but he nodded. “Good day, Lee.”

“Sir? Will you tell me your name?”

Ezra hesitated, but shook his head and turned to find the door. Once it was closed behind him, he checked his pockets to make sure his wallet, keys and lek-book were all accounted for. When he was satisfied that they were, he made his way back to the buffer zone.

And what he had anticipated was self-fulfilling. He felt miserable.

Chapter 4

JAZILLE opened her eyes to find the full glare of sunlight filling the room. “Dammit, how is a girl meant to get any sleep?”

There was a low chuckle from the other side of the room. “I’m sorry, my dear, but I cannot get dressed in the dark.”

Jazz sat up against the headboard and gathered the blankets around herself. “Why get dressed at all? I haven’t had enough of you yet, and it’s not like you to be satisfied so early.” She squinted to see Bart moving around her dresser, still deliciously naked. Her body was luminous within the sunlight, as if she were Venus emerging from the shell.

“*You* may have the day free to yourself, but unfortunately I do not.”

Jazz sighed. “It is cruelty indeed that our days never seem to coincide.”

“Perhaps you would be bored with me if they did,” Bart said teasingly as she sat before her mirror.

“Bored with you? Never!” Jazz suddenly frowned. “Why? Would you be bored with me if it were so?”

“Of course not,” Bart said, turning to look at her. The dark shadow between her legs was a marked contrast to her pale skin. Jazz longed to be within range of it once more. “Nothing would please me more.”

“Then come back to bed.”

Bart began rummaging among the dresser drawers. "Do not harangue me so, foul temptress!" she declared in her most faux Imperial accent.

"Foul?" Jazz asked. As Bart turned to face her once more, she pushed the blankets away and exposed herself to her lover. Bart stood, open-mouthed, deliciously shocked and pleased as she watched Jazz tease her.

Bart swallowed heavily. "My love, I *have* to go."

Mock pouting, Jazille threw the blankets back over herself. "Fine. Go, then."

"You don't know how much it pains me to leave you in such a state."

"Uh-huh."

Bart pulled her underbust corset down from where it was hanging upon the Oriental screen that was meant to provide a modesty barrier. In front of Jazz, Lady Bart had no need for such modesty.

Jazz watched her pull the corset over her torso until it settled at the cusp of her breasts, and grimaced. "I don't know why you cage your beauties like that. They should be unfettered and wild."

Bart giggled. "My beauties? I suppose they are." She walked over to Jazille. "Unfortunately, they are too wild to be free."

"You mean, unlike mine." Jazz pulled the blankets tighter around herself.

"Yours are perfect," Lady Bart said honestly. "They bring me much pleasure. But you must admit, if you had such as mine, they would make your job a lot harder. Mine are needed for decoration; for distracting and teasing the buffoons I have to mix with in society. Anyway, you need to help me lace these up."

"I will do no such thing. It's barbarous. And anyway, all wild things should be free."

"Then I will have to call in Jessie, and you will have to go."

"Fine," Jazz huffed, not wanting to have the maid disturb their last moments of privacy. She scooted over on her knees to where Bart stood at the foot of the bed, provocatively dressed in nothing more than

the unlaced corset. "I hate this thing you're putting on, but the rest of your clothes are nothing but the best fashion."

Bart braced herself against the post of the canopy bed, hanging on as Jazz showed no mercy pulling on the laces that dragged the metal and whalebone closer together. "You do know that you cage yours as well," she wheezed. "You just cage them in the clothes of a man."

"They don't gasp for breath as yours do. It's dangerous, the fashion of a woman."

Lady Bart laughed becomingly, then winced as Jazz savagely tugged at the stays, giving herself traction by digging one heel into the mattress. "Oh my dear Jazz, you are a card. Do you never want to dress like a lady?"

Jazz snorted and began tying the knots.

"Never to put on an elegant dress, rouge your cheeks, and paint your lips a wild color?"

Jazz released her, and gave her a swat on her lily-white bottom. "On board the *Lilliput*, an elegant dress would soon become a rag. Do you not like me for what I am?"

Bart rubbed at the affected area, a mischievous grin plastered on her face. "Of course I do, darling. *You* are unfettered and wild, and that's why I love you." She cupped Jazz's cheeks and kissed her tenderly. "But it doesn't mean I would not like to see you dressed properly once in a blue moon."

"Well, maybe one day I'll see you in pants and a vest."

"I think your day will come before mine," Lady Bart sighed, and walked back to her dresser.

Jazz began reaching for her own clothes from where she had tossed them on the floor. "I may surprise you one day."

"One can dream." Bart slid into her knickers, and Jazz regretted seeing even more flesh disappear beneath cloth. "Has Ezra gone to Whiskeytown again, do you think?"

"It *is* where he can always be found when there's money in his pocket." Jazz pulled on her pants, making sure her holster was secure, and reached for her shirt.

“Poor man. I think he is lonely.”

“Kneebone?” Jazille snorted, most unladylike.

Bart looked up as she fastened her skirt over the bottom of the corset. “Yes, Jazz, men can get lonely. Even a man like Ezra Kneebone. Why do you think he goes to Whiskeytown so often? It isn’t just to satisfy his carnal urges.”

“No?” Jazille slammed her gun into her holster.

Bart buttoned a fitted jacket over the corset and began liberally powdering the gentle overfill of breast that swelled above the bust. “He craves the touch of another man, and he wants the company of a man. I think he would love *you* if either of you were inclined that way. But alas, you have no manly pipe between your legs.”

Jazille reached behind herself and threw a pillow at her lover. “Stop!”

Bart watched the pillow fly past her. “You’re not normally that bad a shot! My dear, Ezra is just a typical man. He wants to let someone into his heart, but he will not let them. It is harder for a man who loves other men to find a true mate. Any unmarried man is immediately suspect, whereas women just become pitied spinsters.”

“Or widows,” Jazz said without thinking.

A wave of darkness crossed over Lady Bart’s face, but it was gone just as quick as it came. “Do not diminish my memories of Marcus. I loved him. Perhaps not in the full manner of a wife. Not in the way I love you. Even though in moments like this, I think you do not deserve it.”

“Bart, darling...”

Lady Bart turned back to her mirror and began applying rouge to her cheeks. “Did you ask Ezra about the loan?”

“I already know the answer.”

“So, what you mean is no, you didn’t,” Bart admonished her, their eyes meeting in the mirror.

“Why ask when I know I’ll get my fool head bitten off for doing so?” Jazz pulled her hair back and tied it.

“Because you’ll get your fool head bitten off by me for not doing so!” Freshly made-up and ready to face the rest of the day, Bart crossed the room to sit by Jazz. “You should wear your hair down. It becomes you.”

“And I’ll get my head torn from my body if I’m crawling around on the *Lilliput* in mid-flight and my hair gets caught in the engine or propellers, won’t I?”

Bart stroked her hair gently. “I would hate to see that. Although it would make you quiet for a while.”

Jazz harrumphed. “More like forever.”

Bart reached for a black hat with a small white band, practically her only concession to color at the moment. “You don’t really climb about on that blasted airship in flight, do you?”

“I’m the mechanic. Sometimes I have to.”

“I thought you were the pilot?”

Jazz rolled her eyes. “I’m *both*.”

“So, pray tell, what exactly does Ezra do?”

“Everything else,” Jazille informed her, then pursed her lips. “Well, I mean to say, whatever is left over from everything else I do.”

Lady Bart drew out her fan from a side pocket and smiled at Jazz coquettishly before hiding behind it. “Ask him about the loan, I implore you.”

Jazz conceded grumpily, and was rewarded with a kiss before she was sent on her way.

Chapter 5

“SO, WHAT exactly *does* the Lady Bart do all day?”

Jazz stared glumly at Ezra. “She does *lady* things, how should I know?”

“Well, she is *your* lady, shouldn’t you know these things?” Ezra teased.

They were sitting in the office; Ezra was firing up the mini-console to start going through the books and feed in the new information supplied by Jazz’s latest repairs and checks.

“I’ve never asked her job description. I know she has some philanthropic endeavors. Which apparently means she has to mingle with *society* and *government*.” Her emphasis on both words told Ezra exactly what she thought of both; she knew his opinion wasn’t that different.

But he whistled in response. “That’s fancy. Anything else?”

It was almost too easy; the opportunity had just thrown itself into her lap. “I know she’s seeking to start up her own businesses, or get involved in helping other people start up businesses she is interested in.”

If she had been hoping to lead him into this gently, she had shown her hand far too early. “Really?” he asked suspiciously.

“Really.” She nodded, oh-so-casually and just as transparently.

“And what kind of businesses?” Ezra pushed.

“Oh, she never really said.”

“Uh huh.”

“Don’t give me that tone,” Jazz said irritably.

“I have no tone,” Ezra said. With a tone.

It was moments like these that Jazz really wanted to pop one loose and smack him across what she often called his “gormless” face. “She just wants to help us.”

“I don’t need her help.”

“Are you suddenly sitting on a vault of coins I don’t know about?” Jazz sneered. “Did some kindly bachelor uncle die and bequeath you his millions? Where are we going to get the dosh to start reproducing the *Lilliput* on a mass scale?”

Ezra reached into his coat, and pulled out his lek-book. “This!”

She rolled her eyes. “Sorry, I think that’s already on the market.”

Ezra ignored her, and turned back to the mini-cons. He attached the lek-book to the mainframe and pulled out the choke that started the projector.

Jazz winced at the amount of static in the picture that made the text almost illegible. “Maybe you should upgrade to the Lek-book ’97.”

Ezra grunted. “And then they’ll probably bring out the Lek-book ’00. Why bother?”

“Because I like to *see* what I’m meant to be looking at.”

“It’s the latest newslink. Icarus is the main story again. Apparently he’s been sighted in the Waulkham Hills.”

“Have you been to the Waulkham Hills? They’re *mesas*, Kneebone. It would be like looking for a virgin in Whiskeytown.”

He stiffened slightly at the mention of Whiskeytown, but then shook it off. “This is our chance at starting the business—”

“We already have an offer—”

“I’m not going to be Lady Bart’s charity case!”

Jazz couldn’t contain herself any longer. In a fury, she stood up and kicked over the chair she had been sitting in. “Dammit, Kneebone! Do you know how many people are going to be flooding those hills now, looking for Icarus? In larger, more advanced, machines that will

hold teams of people they can use to find him? Do you really think that the two of us, in the *Lilliput*, can beat them to him?"

"We have something they don't have," Ezra said infuriatingly.

"What?"

Ezra pulled a cigar out of his pocket, took his time lighting it, and then grinned at her through a haze of smoke. "Size and speed. And chutzpah."

She almost laughed, but stopped herself. How easily he could make her hate him and be charmed by him in the space of a minute! "That's three things. And chutzpah isn't paying my bills."

"Well, lucky you're not as proud with Lady Bart as I am."

She could feel her face burn.

Luckily, even Ezra was smart enough to tell he had crossed a line. "I'm sorry," he stammered. "That was cruel of me."

"Then make it up to me. Take her offer. We need this!"

"I can't. I won't be beholden to any other person."

"You can take your *beholden* and put it where the sun refuses to shine."

"We can do this, Jazz," Ezra implored. "Trust me."

"Trust you?" she spat. "That's a fairytale that shouldn't be told to any fool."

"I have a good feeling about this."

Good feeling. The man was a lunatic! Jazz turned to storm off, then remembered the chair she had displaced, righted it, shot Ezra one last scornful look, and went to work upon the *Lilliput*, knowing that at least it wouldn't talk back to her. Sure, it might stall occasionally or cause her grief, but it was still easier to deal with than a man.

EZRA watched her go, and let his cocky grin fall.

Part of him wanted to tell her that, yes, he would love to fall upon Lady Bart's good graces and allow her to bear the financial brunt of their set-up. But he had never been wired that way. Everything he stood

to profit from had to come to him on his own merits. And sweat, and tears. Not because someone had taken pity on him. It didn't matter if Lady Bart saw it simply as another business transaction—when you were the man in debt to someone else, it was never that simple. How could you look at yourself in the mirror each morning if you weren't pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps?

He puffed on his cigar for comfort, but even it tasted bitter.

The static of the projector hissed, and in frustration, he punched the surface of the mini-cons. The pictogram of the bird-like Icarus winked out.

Perfect.

Ezra called it back up, hoping it would work and he hadn't destroyed something else in a fit of temper. Luckily, it did. He pushed the image to one side, to allow the cons to pull up the terrain of the Waulkham Hills. He studied the topography and realized just how correct Jazz had been. The land was tough, and expansive.

He hit the speaker button on his wrist strap. "Jazz?"

"What?" She didn't sound very happy to hear from him so soon.

"Prepare the *Lilliput* for a long haul. We're going to the hills."

He signed off before he could hear her vehement, and probably cuss-filled, response. And then he smiled his first real smile for the day. "You're mine, Icarus."

Chapter 6

“I AM sorry, my love. He didn’t go for it.”

“That ignorant little cow-herder,” Lady Bart hissed over the speaker on Jazille’s wrist. *“I have a good mind to come down there myself and slap him silly.”*

Jazille grinned. “You have no idea how much I’d like to see that.”

“I’m on my way.”

Jazille looked up at the belly of the *Lilliput*, which was hanging above her, close enough to touch its skin. “Then I’m sorry again. Because we’re shipping out.”

“Again?”

“Icarus has been spotted in the Waulkham Hills. Kneebone’s insisting we go there straightaway.”

“That man,” Bart said furiously. *“When will I see you next?”*

“When the fates allow.”

“Damn the fates. And damn Ezra Kneebone and his pride. Travel safely.”

“I will.”

They exchanged endearments and signed off. Jazz kicked at the primary rope holding the *Lilliput* down and wished, just for a moment, that it would float away so she could find herself back in Bart’s arms once more.

EZRA entered the hangar that housed the *Lilliput* and smiled to himself. He couldn't help but grin every time he beheld the strange beauty that was his ship. It was a mixture of old and new technologies with a balloon that helped keep the ship aloft with a steady pumping of steam and helium, and maneuverability was aided by propellers that sat toward the back of the craft. The engine Jazz had built was half the size of those used by larger dirigibles, and this greatly reduced the size of the body and the hull. As he ran his hand over the bronzed surface on his way to the cockpit, Ezra mused to himself that soon they would probably find ways to build smaller engines, and therefore increase cargo space.

He jogged up the ramp and entered the pit. The controls gleamed, as if Jazz had just cleaned them. She probably had; her own rooms were a mess, but she was houseproud on the *Lilliput*. "You ready, Jazz?"

She pulled her goggles over her eyes. When they were covered, she looked even more furious with him. Her lips were so thin with displeasure she almost looked mouthless. "Yeah, ready."

Wishing he could soothe her mood, but doubting he could do anything, Ezra decided to act blithely unaware. He began to punch the coordinates into the comms system. "Systems check?"

"Done and dusted."

"The scent for adventure?"

Once again, the black goggles viewed him dispassionately. "My sinuses are clogged."

"That's the spirit!" Ezra said blithely, ignoring her.

Jazille activated the hangar roof to open, and the cockpit was bathed in fresh sunlight. She pulled on the throttle, and the *Lilliput* launched itself into the sky.

NOW that they were far away from Shrevesport, and clear blue skies were ahead, Jazz turned to face him, having fed in a flight chart to the comms. "So, what's the plan?"

“Plan?” Ezra asked innocently.

“Yes. Are we just going to fly around haphazardly, hoping that Icarus will see fit to bump into us and fall unconscious into our cockpit? Or do you actually have some method devised for ferreting him out and taking him captive?”

“Oh, ye of little faith. Of course I have a plan.” And with that, Ezra fell silent.

Jazille waited a few impatient seconds, and asked, “Well?”

“Oh, you want to know?” Ezra asked maddeningly. He paled when Jazz looked like she was about to pull out her pistol and cold-cock him with it. “Let’s just say I have a contact in the hills.”

She shook her head. “Do I even want to know?”

CORNELIUS MACE flew across the room and crashed onto a table, which broke beneath him. He lay in the dust and laughed maniacally as Ezra straddled him, his fist at the ready. The other patrons of the bar stood immediately, itching for a fight, but Ezra waved them back with a menacing look in his eye.

Unperturbed, Cornelius grinned from beneath him. “You remember I like it rough, Ezra.”

“I’m not here to play,” Ezra threatened.

“That’s a shame,” Cornelius murmured. “I also remember how you liked to play.”

Jazz stood beside Ezra and rolled her eyes. “Just pop him another one, Kneebone.”

Cornelius’s eyes widened. “You haven’t gotten yourself a girlfriend, have you?”

Both Jazz and Ezra snorted in unison.

Cornelius blew a strand of hair out of his face. “At least things haven’t changed *that* much. Time was, we used to be friends, Ezra.”

“That was before you stabbed me in the back in Littlepond,” Ezra retorted. “Literally.”

"I made sure not to aim for any major veins."

Ezra's fist punched down, crunching into the bone of Cornelius's nose. Cornelius howled in pain, and blood arced out. Jazz jumped back as blood splattered at her feet.

"What do you want?" Cornelius screamed.

"What do you know about Icarus?"

Cornelius's brow furrowed in confusion. "That namby-pamby? What do you want with him?"

Ezra didn't want to put him on the scent of a possible reward if he hadn't already heard of it. The last thing they needed was yet another man seeking quick riches trying to steal their quarry. "He owes us money."

Cornelius hocked up some of the blood pooling in his throat and spat it out with disgust. "He's naught between hay and grass, and his views on money show that. He has no money to give you and what he does get, when he steals it, he gives it away."

Ezra and Jazz exchanged looks.

"Gives it away?" Jazz asked of Mace.

Cornelius raised his hands in defeat. "As much as I'm used to being on my back around you, Ezra, will you let me sit up like a civilized man?"

"Oh for heaven's sake," Jazz said.

Ezra gave Cornelius a wink. "Not around the womenfolk."

"Sorry, ma'am," Cornelius said.

Jazz looked as if she wanted to throttle them both. "Gives it away?" she repeated, all business.

Cornelius led them to another table, this one unbroken. "Sit, sit." They did so, Ezra making sure he seated himself between Jazz and Cornelius as he called for a round of drinks; everybody else in the bar who had been watching them returned to their own, most likely disappointed that a murder wasn't about to take place in their company.

"He hasn't been here long," he continued, taking a long draft of his ale. "He basically flew out of the sky one day and started giving out cash by the handful. Said to take it while we could, because he would

be gone soon enough. And people took him at his word. When they got too eager, he just opened those giant wings of his and flew away again.”

“You’re telling me he actually has wings?” Ezra asked in disbelief.

Cornelius waved away his skepticism lazily. “They’re not *growing* out of his back, if that’s what you’re getting at. He obviously built them.”

“But they support him?”

“As if his mother was a bird. You’ve seen the pictures of him flying, ain’t you?”

“Where’s he getting the money from?” Jazz asked.

“Not entirely sure, but some folk have their suspicions.”

Ezra waited for him to speak, but Cornelius only took a healthy swig of his ale, unselfconsciously smacked his lips, and licked them free of froth. “Well?”

Cornelius shrugged. “You always got to follow the money. Who is putting up the reward?”

Cornelius was all business now, and Ezra could have kicked himself for falling for his act of pleading ignorance before.

“The government,” Jazz said.

Cornelius tapped the side of his nose. “And why would they care?”

“Because it’s their money.”

“Exactly. They’re not going to care if old Cornelius Mace is getting robbed by some half-bird, half-man... but when it’s their own coffers that’s being raided, they pull out all the stops.”

“He must have a reason for doing so,” Jazz muttered, and Ezra turned to glare at her. “What?”

Ezra ignored her. “How is he getting the money?”

Cornelius shrugged. “I don’t know. Why you so interested, anyway?”

“Because,” Ezra said, with a tip of his hat, “I always follow the money.”

Jazz snorted derisively and stood. “I’m going to get another drink.”

“Make that two,” Ezra told her.

“Get your own!” she fired back as she headed to the bar.

Cornelius watched her. More like ogled her.

“Hey!” Ezra reprimanded him.

Cornelius flashed him a seductive grin. “Jealous?”

“Water under the bridge.”

“You know the thing about water under the bridge?” Cornelius asked. “It keeps going on.”

Ezra downed the last of his ale. “Yeah, out to sea. You and me, *we’re* out to sea, Cornelius.”

“Come on. You’ve been giving me the eye since you threw me down on that table.”

Damn, Ezra thought he had hidden that. Seeing Cornelius again was easy on the eyes, but Ezra was still burning from the betrayal that had happened between them last time they’d seen each other. A rough tumble in the sack wouldn’t help with that. “You should get your eyes checked, then.”

Cornelius leaned in closely, his breath surprisingly sweet. “It’s not nice to get a man all standing up at attention and not relieve him. Come back to my room, Ezra.”

“Maybe some other time,” Ezra said, not wanting to get the other man’s hopes up, but also leaving himself an option in case he didn’t want to make a liar out of himself.

“You’re a cruel man.”

“Just being sensible—”

He didn’t get any further. Rough, once-familiar lips worked against his furiously, and against his better senses, Ezra parted his lips to allow Cornelius’s tongue to roughhouse with his. He was now standing at attention as well, his pecker painfully brushing against his

zipper. He felt Cornelius's hand upon his thigh, and, daringly, the other man slid it further. Ezra's body reacted of its own free will, and he thrust himself into the other man's palm, letting it rest against his fully clothed member.

Cornelius chuckled warmly into his mouth before pulling away. He stood and looked at Ezra with affection, winked at him, and became a shadow as he walked into the bright sunshine beyond the saloon's doors, singing to himself a snatch of the song now becoming popular amongst the residents of Waulkham Hills:

"Icarus!

Man of the people!

Watch him soar in the sky!

Icarus!

Laden with money!

Soon he'll be here by and by!"

Jazz frowned. "Even I could write something better than that."

Ezra wanted to run after Cornelius and take him up on his offer, but he remained frozen until a smirking Jazz sat back down beside him.

"That was quite a show. You're lucky nobody else saw."

"Keep your big bazoo shut," he warned her, and for once, she didn't say a word.

Chapter 7

JAZZ smirked as Ezra entered the cockpit and threw himself into his chair. “So, is that the way you treat all your exes?”

They were in the docks at Waulkham Hills Station, preparing for flight. Jazille’s fingers danced over the keys on the console as she checked all systems and alerted the station’s flight control of their departure. Ezra ignored her and checked that the pulley that controlled the ropes anchoring them to the station was ready to drop.

“How long ago were you involved, anyway?”

“Long enough ago.”

She grimaced at a blinking light on the panel and punched it. It disappeared. “Just asking a question.”

“Why are you so interested?”

“Just something Bart said.”

“And what exactly did Lady Bart say?”

“Nothing.”

“You can’t say something like that and then just drop it.”

Jazz smirked. “Does it annoy you when the shoe’s on the other foot?”

The console speaker squawked into life. “*Lilliput, we’re ready for launch.*”

“Finally,” Jazz said, and hit the speaker control. “Thanks, readying release now.” She nodded at Ezra. “Your turn.”

He glared at her, but cranked open his window, reached up, and released the pulley. The ropes dropped to the floor outside, and the *Lilliput* jerked free of its restraints and headed to the sky.

Above the panting and groaning of the engine, Jazz yelled, "Where to now, Boss?"

Ezra shrugged laconically. "Cornelius said to follow the money."

"So, what, the local bank?"

"It's a start."

"It's also probably where everybody else is looking."

Ezra glared at her. "Maybe everybody else didn't have a Cornelius to point them in the right direction."

"And maybe that's working to their advantage."

Ezra wanted to throttle her. "You have a better idea, then?"

She flashed him a victorious smile. "Of course I do."

"Okay, genius, what is it?"

"Follow the money. The money has to get to the bank somehow."

It was as if a whistle went off in his head. "The railroad."

Jazz winked at him. "I'll lay in the course now, should I?"

"Fine. Set a course."

Even the banging of her fingers on the keys sounded like a mocking anthem of triumph over him. Ezra didn't know where his sudden fits of melancholy were springing from, but it seemed like he was just drifting at the moment, and everybody had something over him. If Jazz wasn't his best friend, and equal business partner in every sense, he would almost take pleasure in firing her. At least if it was just him alone in the sky....

But he knew that was the last thing he wanted. He had to shake this feeling, and it was just that tantalizing thought of the reward that would come with the capture of Icarus, allowing them to start a new phase of their lives, that kept him going.

"Set a course," he repeated to himself.

THE railway that ran between Shrewesport and Waulkham Hills was the latest in high-end technology. The carriages ran above the line, held by magnetic propulsion, something that had recently been developed by Thomas Harding. Word was that he had actually “adapted” the idea from those of the poor underlings that worked for him, and now he was all the richer for it and they were all out of work. It only made Ezra more determined to find the funding for his dirigible prototypes before Harding managed to figure out their secrets.

“A flying train,” Jazz mused as they walked to the edge of the platform and peered at the line. “What next? A flying house?”

“Airships are already big enough. You could turn them into homes,” Ezra reminded her.

She shrugged. “I love the skies. I don’t know if I would want to live in them all the time.”

Ezra could say unequivocally that he could. Without even pausing to think about it.

“I did see a story pictogram about a flying house, though. It was funny.”

He looked at her with surprise. “You’ve seen a story pictogram?”

“Bart got us tickets.”

“They’re impossible to get!”

She grinned. “Not for Bart.”

“Nice for some,” Ezra grumbled.

“I promise you next time we go, you can come.”

Ezra ignored her, even though he secretly hoped that they would. Story pictograms were the latest thing, but also so pricy that only the rich could see them. Or those who managed to tag along with the rich, such as Jazz. The word had spread, however, and the public thrilled hearing about stories that were so realistically displayed that you felt they were real.

“One man in front of us ducked when they showed a dirigible flying toward us.” Jazz chuckled at the memory.

“They’re that good?”

Jazz shrugged. “Bart says I’m too picky.”

“You do always go for the best,” Ezra admitted. “Look at Lady Bart.”

“I’ll tell her you said that.”

“I’m sure Lady Bart already knows.”

Jazz peered down the tracks, straining to see any sign of the impending arrival. “She always said you were a charmer.”

Ezra’s chest puffed a little. “Really?”

“Don’t get full of yourself, Kneebone.”

Before he could reply, the air was cut by the scream of a whistle. Speeding above the track, its engines straining as it held the carriages in the air, the *Metal Bird* pulled beside the platform. Steam hissed out along the ports at the bottom of the carriages as they settled down onto the tracks themselves so the passengers could disembark.

“Nice,” Ezra remarked.

They were swamped by passengers on either side as they congregated around the cargo carriage. Ezra pulled Jazz aside and held onto her sleeve so he wouldn’t lose her in the crowd.

“Let’s at least get a look at the hold,” he said closely in her ear. “See how things are stored.”

As they moved closer, however, screams broke out from the people in front of them. The crowd turned and began to run back, and Jazz and Ezra were knocked down to the ground. Through the stampeding feet surrounding him, Ezra tried to see if she was okay, but had to cover his head with his hands to try and protect himself from injury. He could hear from some cries of pain around him that other people weren’t as lucky.

When the stampede abated, Ezra looked up again to see Jazz sitting up only a few feet away from him. Her temple was bleeding, but she didn’t look groggy.

“What the blazes was that?” she demanded.

Ezra stumbled onto his feet. “No idea.”

He offered her a hand up but as he expected she refused, choosing to get up of her own accord. The door to the cargo carriage stood open, but as Ezra approached it, there was a hubbub from some of the people remaining on the platform.

“There he is again!”

There was the sound of a small engine—a mere mosquito compared even to the *Lilliput*, let alone any larger dirigibles. The glare of the sun made him shield his eyes, but he managed to pinpoint the source of the noise. Peering out from under his hand he finally captured his first sight of Icarus.

A trail of smoke followed the outlaw as he flew above the passengers on the platform, who ducked as one entity in fear he would hit them. He pulled on a strap at his hips, and the wings folded behind his shoulder blades so that he could land in one easy motion. With the engine still running, he turned to look at the people behind him.

Ezra’s breath caught in his throat. Even if you took away the high style of his entrance, the man was a stunner no matter which way you looked at him. His torso was bare and smooth, except for a fine vein of hair that ran from his navel to the waist of his miner’s jeans. There was a golden burnish to it as if he had been kissed by the sun, which stood to reason seeing he flew so close to it, like his namesake. Leather straps crossed over his chest, running around to the wings on his back. Folded the way they were at the moment, they did not look as magnificent, but Ezra could already tell they were a beauty of engineering.

Jazz’s hand went to the gun on her hip, and Ezra shot out his own to stop her.

“What are you doing?” she protested.

“Just wait.”

She fumed, and he could tell she was trying to figure out what the hell he was up to now. And truth be told, Ezra had no idea.

Icarus disappeared into the cargo hold and just as quickly returned with bags that he was already fastening to the belt of his jeans. Ezra could tell that they were government issued, and the way they bulged, there must be thousands of dollars in notes in each one.

“Halt!” cried out a guard as he ran out onto the platform.

Now, where was he earlier? Ezra thought.

Icarus grinned, and Ezra was struck dumb again. This was the grin of an extremely confident man who knew what he was doing and had no intention of getting caught.

With one quick flick of his wrist, Icarus's wings unfolded as he ran along the platform. With a leap, he was in the air and rapidly becoming a mere speck in the sky above. One woman waved her fan vigorously and then fainted dead away on the platform.

"We could've had him, Kneebone!" Jazz hissed.

"Let's get going," Ezra said.

While the passengers were still collecting themselves, Ezra and Jazz melted away in search of their airship.

"SERIOUSLY, what was going on there?" Jazz asked as they launched, having been unable to get any word out of him while they prepared for flight.

"You saw what I did. Icarus appeared, took money, and flew off again."

"I don't mean that. I mean what was going on with *you*."

"Nothing."

"Do I have to remind you this was all your idea?"

"Why do you have to remind me?"

Jazz pumped the throttle, keeping her eyes on the sky ahead of them for any sign of their quarry. "Because you were the one who set us on this goose chase for the sake of not having to take a loan from Bart. You're the reason we're doing this! And then when he was right in front of us, you did nothing about it!"

"I wanted to see what he was doing."

"We know what he's doing!"

"Just fly the damn ship, Jazz."

"*You* fly it," she said threateningly.

He shot her a look, and paled as she let go of the controls.

The *Lilliput* plunged immediately, the air screaming against them in full voice. Ezra was pretty sure his stomach was still hundreds of clicks in the sky above them, but he fought his way over to the controls and yanked on them to try and bring the ship back up. Jazz sat back, her arms folded. Even in chaos, she looked calm and unrepentant.

His hands slipped on the yoke as he fought to bring them back to gravity; he was pretty sure his sweat was defying all laws as it flew up from him instead of down. Gradually he felt the pressure around them lessen, and the yoke became easier to manipulate as the *Lilliput* righted itself and resumed its normal flight pattern.

Instantly he turned on Jazz. “What the hell were you thinking?”

Her eyes were fierce, although her stance remained relaxed. “Just trying to scare some sense back into you, is all.”

“Of all the wrong-headed—”

“Boss—”

“—imbecilic—”

“Boss—”

“—borderline retarded—”

“Seriously, Kneebone—”

“—no, not even *borderline*, I’m talking fully crossed-the-line—”

“*Boss!*”

He finally stopped his offensive rant, and glared at her. “*What?*”

Lost for words at his inability to see the forest for the trees, she leaned in, grabbed his face by the cheeks and savagely twisted his head around so he was looking out through the cockpit window. “See?”

Icarus was flying ahead of them, little more than a dust speck on the window. It was his flying that gave him away—too controlled and less organic than a real bird.

“Oh,” Ezra said softly.

Jazz flipped her goggles back over her eyes and grimly took control of the ship again. “This time we’re catching him, right?”

Ezra shook his head to clear the cobwebs. “Right.”

Jazz threw them into another gear and the distance between them and their prey began to decrease.

“Can you smell that money, Jazz?” Ezra crowed. “It smells good, doesn’t it?”

Jazz sniffed. “All I can smell is your body odor, Kneebone.”

“That hurts, Jazz, that really does. After all, I did bathe this morning.”

“Not enough, apparently.”

“Just because you have access to all the Lady Bart’s fancy powders and tonics—”

“Wouldn’t hurt you to buy some. You know, the ones made for menfolk. Maybe that’s why you’re single.”

“You are really trying to wound me, ain’t you?”

“It keeps you focused,” Jazille said through gritted teeth as the figure of Icarus became more discernible. “Have you given any thought to how we are going to catch him? Did you make a net?”

He knew she was teasing him. “We’re going to follow him home, Jazz. And take him out quiet-like. I have some tranqs.”

She shook her head slightly. “Remind me to stay away from you with that thing. Your aim will probably get me, and I’m not trusting you to fly us home with me out of commission.”

Ezra opened his mouth to argue with her, but at that moment, the *Lilliput* was rammed from behind, and he almost spilled out of his seat. An alarm began ringing from the comms system, and Ezra quickly began checking the sensors on the control panel.

“There’s another ship behind us,” he reported.

“Really? Is that what it was?” Jazz asked sardonically. “I thought it was a flock of geese.”

Ezra ignored her. “It’s at least four times our size. Egret class.”

“They’re not mucking around.”

“I have a fair idea who it could be too,” Ezra said grimly. He’d know the *Bubulcus* anywhere.

Jazille answered for him. “Harding.”

“You got it—” Ezra managed to say before they were rammed again.

This time the alarm took its shrieking a higher decibel, and both of them frowned as a trail of black smoke appeared at the driver’s window.

“Engine four is gone,” Jazz said.

“Keep flying. We can’t lose Icarus.”

“We’re not going to last for long if they take out another one of our engines!”

Ezra reached behind him and activated a smaller console. “Opening gun ports.”

Jazz looked behind them wildly. “Are you sure you want to do that, Kneebone?”

“We’re being attacked!”

“I know we are! But who’s going to believe us if we take out Harding? He owns half the city!”

“We just can’t let him take us out of the sky!”

Jazz bit her lip, and conceded. “You’re the captain, Boss.”

Ezra nodded grimly. “Firing.”

He hit the button, watching the console carefully. The graphic showed the bullets raking off the side of the enemy dirigible.

“Dammit!”

“Evasive maneuvering,” Jazz said, and Ezra felt the *Lilliput* lurch to the left.

“They’re coming around us!”

“They’re faster than us too.”

“Obviously we have to work that into the next prototype,” Ezra said through gritted teeth.

“I’ll remember that. In fact, wasn’t it you who said *we* were faster?”

“I said our next prototype would be faster,” he argued, although he now couldn’t even remember what he said.

There was the grinding of metal on metal as Harding's craft appeared on the port side. Ezra could see Harding in the captain's seat—even though his face was almost fully covered by his cap and goggles, Ezra was sure he could see a deranged grin at the damage he was causing to the smaller *Lilliput*.

And then abruptly, with the throwing of sparks, Harding's ship disappeared from his sight. Ezra poured over the graphics console, and realized that Harding was now *above* them.

"What the hell is he doing?"

It was a rhetorical question that Jazz didn't need to reply to. Because they both knew Harding was aiming to put them out of the sky and have Icarus all for himself.

His eyes glued to the screen, Ezra yelled out, "Here he comes again!"

Jazz's grip tightened on the controls. "Trying to get the hell out of his way."

"Hold on!"

The *Lilliput* was forcibly shoved aside, as if the Hand of God itself had come down to do so. However, as Harding's ship tried to move away to ram them again, it became apparent that they had somehow gotten caught together. Both ships' engines screamed as they were taken to the limit with the extra weight.

"It's gonna blow if we go on for this much longer!" Jazz yelled.

"I know!"

The *Lilliput* lurched as Jazz tried to shake them free, and Ezra could see out the window that Harding was pulling away in the opposite direction to try and do the same.

"Once we reach ground again, I'm going to kill him!" Jazz declared.

"Get in line," Ezra growled.

Harding's ship finally wrenched away, but with it came the door from the port side of the *Lilliput*. Air rushed into the cockpit, and before he even knew what was happening, Ezra was sucked out of his seat and fell into the empty sky below them.

Chapter 8

EZRA was dimly aware that the relative stability of his seat was no longer under him, and the rapidly receding cry of his name from Jazz made him realize that he was no longer in the same space as her.

Freefalling was relatively peaceful, it seemed. A mental haze had settled around him like a comfortable blanket, and the ground seemed so far away that it was as if he would never reach it and would keep falling forever. Maybe it would be better that way; it was certainly more preferable to thinking about what his body would look like once he slammed into the earth below.

He closed his eyes and wondered if it would hurt. Or would death claim him so quickly the pain wouldn't even register before all sense was snuffed out of him?

So this is what it all comes down to, he thought. *Just make it quick.*

He opened his eyes again. If he was going to die, he was going to face death head-on and look him in the eye as he was taken.

The beauty of the desert landscape welcomed him as he continued falling toward it.

And then, a little distance below him, something flew into his vision. Except instead of continuing on its course, it seemed to hover, as if waiting for him.

It's Death himself, a giddy part of his brain thought. *This is it!*

And Death began flying toward him for its claim.

But as the angel of mercy got closer, Ezra thought his heart was going to hammer out of his chest.

It was Icarus.

With a dull thud, they collided, and then Ezra was in Icarus's arms. His body was aching from the impact, and he fought to catch his breath back as it seemed to have been knocked out of him. He lifted his head, his vision blurry, and looked into the dark blue eyes of Icarus himself.

Icarus said nothing, but even if he had Ezra doubted he would have been able to hear him in the rush of wind. Even in this surreal predicament, he became aware of the other man's body pressed against his, the bare skin of his torso giving off a heady aroma of sweat and gasoline from the machinery of his wings.

Ezra looked above them to see if he could make out the *Lilliput* and Harding's ship, but his falling must have made him drift away from them, and Icarus seemed to be taking them even further away. And no wonder, seeing both were out to capture him.

Which made his reasoning behind saving Ezra's life unfathomable. Did the man have a death wish?

Icarus shifted against him, and Ezra slipped a little as one hand that was supporting him moved to one of the straps hanging by Icarus's side.

Ezra cried out, but the other arm tightened its grip on him, and he watched as Icarus's wings began folding within the structure created for them.

Ezra's legs buckled against them as they hit the ground, and he fell backward onto his ass. Icarus stood over him.

"Are you injured?" the outlaw asked with a voice like steel oiled with honey.

Ezra hacked up a lung, trying to clear the dust, and nodded.

"Are you in the habit of skysailing without a chute?" There was a twinkle in Icarus's eye as he asked it.

It rankled Ezra, as if he were being made out a fool. "No. We were attacked, and my ship was damaged. I fell out."

"I see," said Icarus. "So you, who were out to capture me, were attacked by others, who were also out to capture me? Not really feeling that sorry for you."

"Then why did you save me?" Ezra asked irritably, getting back to his feet.

Icarus regarded him for a moment. "Because I couldn't have a death on my conscience when there was an opportunity to stop it."

Ezra stared at him. "That's mighty charitable of you."

"I don't suppose that will stop you from chasing me?"

Ezra couldn't answer him. It didn't seem very charitable of *him* to say no, especially in light of his being rescued by the very man he was trying to turn in to the authorities, but could he say no?

"I didn't think so," Icarus said. He looked up at the sky. "It looks like your ship is coming for you. I best be off before you get it into your head to tackle me and take me prisoner."

He moved to open his wings again, but Ezra cried out. "Wait!"

Icarus paused. "Why?"

"Thank you... for, you know...."

"Saving your life?"

"Yeah."

"That makes you owe me one, Mr....?"

"Kneebone," Ezra said. "Ezra Kneebone."

"Ezra." Icarus nodded. "Anyway, you can't give me the one thing I really want as payment; the promise of my freedom. And anything else I might want from you, I doubt you would be willing to give."

And Ezra saw a gleam in his eye, something he didn't expect, the gleam of a "fellow traveler" as they were sometimes called. Someone like himself, who preferred his own sex. And before he could think twice about it, he found himself crossing over to the other man and grabbing him for a rough and passionate kiss. As he suspected, Icarus didn't pull away. In fact, he opened his mouth to the invasion of Ezra's tongue, and he cupped Ezra's face in his hands to bring him in for a deeper kiss, almost lifting him off his feet.

Ezra ran his hand down Icarus's back, marveling at the strong muscles that were obviously developed through carrying the weight of his wings. And even as his body responded to the kiss, an evil thought took shape in his mind.

I could just rip out the wires to his wings right now, and he wouldn't be able to fly away....

As if sensing his thoughts, or realizing the treacherous predicament he could be in, Icarus pulled away suddenly. He sized Ezra up, obviously trying to ascertain his motives. "Your debt isn't settled, just so as you know."

"I thought a kiss for payment may have been too old-fashioned," Ezra heard himself quipping, although it was as if he were a click away and straining to hear himself.

"I'm an old-fashioned guy," Icarus admitted. "But that's a cheap rate. It was a fine kiss, but not *that* fine. You still owe me."

"As long as you know I ain't no damsel needing to be rescued."

"You don't look like a damsel, but that's fine with me," Icarus noted. He looked up again and said, "I must be going."

"I'll be watching the skies for you," Ezra warned him.

Icarus grinned. "Please do."

He ran to the precipice of the cliff and launched himself off it. For a moment he was out of Ezra's sight, and he thought that maybe the wings had failed Icarus and he had fallen to his death. But just as quickly, Icarus flew out from under the outcropping and circled around the rapidly approaching *Lilliput*, as if taunting Jazz, before heading off into safer air.

Ezra's wrist crackled as the comms button sparked into life.

"Kneebone, are you all right?"

Ezra raised his cuff to his mouth. "I'm fine, Jazz."

"You fool! How many times do I have to tell you to wear your belt?"

Apparently, she would have to keep telling him. "Where's Harding gone to?" he asked wearily.

"Chasing after your little friend."

Ezra doubted Harding would catch Icarus today, if ever. The man just seemed too wily to trap. In fact, Ezra found himself hoping Icarus would fly forever free.

It was probably just because he now felt he owed the outlaw something. He would have to put an end to that kind of thinking soon enough.

The *Lilliput* began to line up with the edge of the cliff, the ruined port side facing Ezra. He could now see Jazz inside, waving wildly for him to get back on board.

It only took a few steps for him to walk across and find himself back on his ship. Jazz waited as he belted himself into his chair with over-exaggerated motions for her benefit, and then the *Lilliput* launched itself back into the sky.

Chapter 9

THEIR misadventure at the hands of Harding meant they had to return to Shrevesport and attempt some repairs. They couldn't go hunting Icarus with half of the portside missing, even if Ezra was starting to wear his seatbelt now.

"I sometimes like having the windows open," Jazz said. "But it's a bit different when half of the ship is missing."

"It wasn't *half* the ship," Ezra grumped. "It was a door."

"And it's a pretty big door!" Jazz was incensed at the extent of the damage. "We're going to have to make Harding pay!"

"Good luck trying to get even one penny out of him," Ezra mused.

Jazz began to assemble the welder, and smiled disconcertingly as she adjusted the flame and was enveloped by its ethereal blue glow. "You have no balls, Kneebone. Maybe you could rip off Harding's and wear them."

It was an accusation that had been—unfairly—leveled at him by her before. But Jazz knew as well as he that with Harding's money and power—oh, and his influence, both politically and socially—Harding had them over a barrel. They were screwed no matter which way you looked at it.

Harding didn't need the money that came with the reward for catching Icarus. He just wanted the reputation and renown that would come with capturing the region's most wanted man.

"Just tell me how long until we're flying again," Ezra sighed.

Jazz began shearing off some of the damaged metal of the doorframe in order to make it smoother. “Luckily all he really did was catch onto the doorframe and rip it off. And we still have some leftover metal from the parts we made when we built the *Lilliput* originally. I should be able to do a really good scratch job.”

“That’s great, but when can we fly again?”

“I need two days. At least. And that’s with you helping me, of course.”

Icarus seemed to be slipping out of their fingers, but all Ezra could do was nod. “Okay. Let’s get started.”

THEY worked well into the night, and were exhausted by the time they decided to call it a day and meet up in the morning again. Jazille headed off to the refuge of Lady Bart’s, while Ezra poked around his living area at the back of their office. He was pent-up, and he needed release.

He needed Whiskeytown.

At this time of night, the newsboys weren’t working. One of the stands still had that day’s news stories listed. Ezra grimaced at the headline: *HERO HARDING ON THE TRAIL OF VILLAIN ICARUS*.

He needed a drink as well as a fuck. He stopped in quickly at one of the rundown bars and bought a quart of whiskey, taking a healthy swig as he surveyed the streets for someone to spend some time with.

That was when he saw Lee again. His previous choice emerged from the doorway of the hotel where Ezra had accompanied him last time he was here. Lee was not alone, but his customer seemed to be farewelling him. He must be free, then.

Ezra approached him. “Lee!”

The young man turned, a surprised look on his face. It settled when he recognized Ezra. “Evening, sir. Or morning, as the case may be.”

“I believe it’s morning. You’re not knocking off, are you?”

Lee grinned, and it was disarmingly pretty. "I suppose I could fit you in, sir."

Ezra chuckled at the salacious bon mot and decided to play along. "And I would love to fit in you, Lee."

"So it's a two, then?"

"The whole package."

"Seeing it's you, I'll give you a discount. Fourteen all up for an all-nighter."

Ezra didn't really think it was an extravagance he could afford, but he didn't care. "Fair enough."

"Come on, then."

He followed Lee inside and up the stairs to his small room.

"Sit down, sir."

Ezra did so, on the end of the bed. "Don't call me 'sir', Lee. Not tonight."

"But you never gave me your name, did you?"

Ezra hesitated, then said, "It's Ezra."

"That's a good, strong name. I look forward to calling it out."

Ezra was already getting hard. Lee was good at his job, it seemed. Normally the thought of paying for sex could make a man need a hand, so to speak, before he was ready and up for the task. He reached for his wallet, but Lee pushed his hand away.

"I trust you, Ezra."

"That's not necessarily wise."

"You have a sense about you. You treated me well last time. You can tell a lot about a man when you've fucked him."

"Really?" Ezra asked. He would have assumed that most men closed off during sex with a hooker. "We didn't really *fuck*, though."

Lee shrugged. "We did enough. And if you've done it long enough like I have, you get to know. You're kind, but honest."

Maybe that was true. But it wasn't really something a man wanted to hear about himself. Especially if he worked in a business where you

couldn't allow yourself to get that kind of reputation. It wasn't as if somebody like Harding was known for his kindness and honesty, was it?

As if reading his mind, Lee murmured, "Relax, and stop thinking, Ezra." He rubbed gently at Ezra's temples, and Ezra closed his eyes. Now that he wasn't thinking so much, he became aware of his cock, full of hot blood, trapped within his trousers and wanting to be released. Goddamn if he wouldn't come in his pants if Lee didn't start undressing him.

And there—sweet relief—Lee's hands were in his pants, bringing him out and tugging at him with a sure hand.

"Don't get too excited, sir," Lee teased. "This is just an appetizer to the main course."

"Get your clothes off," Ezra instructed.

He began undressing himself while keeping an eye on the other man. Lee made a show of it, taking far longer than it would have normally. Maddening thing. Ezra was pleased when the pants were dropped and Lee was already hard as well, his cock bobbing up happily out of a thick bush. Ezra reached for it, and was pleased at how smoothly the silken shaft moved within his cupped palm. Lee closed his eyes and moaned.

But Ezra found his eyes drifting away from Lee's face, and concentrating on his body instead. Despite his sort-of-fondness for the whore, as much fondness as one could have for somebody he had only met twice in his life, it wasn't his body that he wanted to be touching, to claim and allow to claim his own. And true, Lee's body was too scrawny compared to the toned but lean body he actually wanted, but it could make do aided by his strong imagination.

"What are you thinking of?" Lee asked.

"You," Ezra lied.

Lee smirked, and Ezra knew that he was caught out in the lie. "Get on the bed."

Lee complied, and crawled onto it, his ass in the air. On all fours, he waited patiently for his client.

Knowing that in this position, it was so easy for him to turn Lee into an object—a body that from behind could almost be anybody’s—Ezra swallowed down the discomfort and guilt he was feeling, but stepped out of his pants and walked over to the bed. Lee arched beneath his touch as Ezra ran his hand down his smooth back and cupped his ass cheek, then reached up to his bedside drawer and fumbled around within it for a small tin. He passed it to Ezra, who opened it up to find a pleasantly scented tallow.

“Makes it all the easier for me,” Lee said.

Ezra rubbed the smooth, cool lubricant onto his pecker; Lee held onto the bedhead and wiggled his ass seductively. He had to give the man points for having a fine rump—and judging from the way Icarus had filled out his pants, he had to have one as well. Ready to go, Ezra gave Lee an appreciative slap on his left cheek.

“What are you waiting for?” Lee asked. “Take me.”

“Shh,” Ezra cajoled him. If he spoke, he would only ruin the illusion.

Sliding into the hilt, he heard Lee gasp. Slowly, he pulled out again, and Lee moaned in pleasure. *No, not Lee*. Just saying that to himself made him slide out of reality a little more, and this time as he slid in, adjusting his angle slightly, he was able to believe it was Icarus moaning beneath him, that it was Icarus he was seeking to pleasure, that it was Icarus straining to pleasure him back.

Icarus.

Now all sense of reality abandoned him, and he began pumping away, one hand roughly holding onto the hips that writhed below him, and his free hand tracing the shoulder blades, which would be crossed by leather, holding the small engine pack that the wings rested upon. The moans he could hear had taken on a slightly deeper bass, more like that of Icarus himself, and coupled with his own raspy breaths, they were a music he would gladly listen to. It seemed that the room was now melting away from them—the physics of his body contorting to make him feel as if he was joined again with Icarus and falling through the sky. As he felt his release near, he ran his hands over Icarus’s back again—and the wings opened under his touch.

Ezra's eyes flew open as he came—the light, the sky, the wind... all disappeared straight away and he was back in Lee's small room, hunched over the man's back and gasping for breath as he felt his release drain away. Wiping the sweat off his face, he pulled out of Lee and stepped away. Lee slumped onto his sheets and rolled over, his hand working furiously as he brought himself off. He cried out, and lay there basking in the glow as Ezra began to wipe himself off and pull his pants back on.

"Why are you dressing?" Lee asked, lighting a cigarette from a pack he produced from the bedside table. "Thought you were staying the night?"

The fantasy destroyed, Ezra wasn't sure if he could lie naked with this stranger all night when he wasn't the one he wanted. "Got another?" he asked, deflecting the question.

Lee nodded and tossed him the packet. He scooted up to rest his back against the bedhead he had practically clawed apart earlier, his now flaccid pecker lying against his thigh. Ezra calmly took in his beauty, and lit a cigarette. He rarely smoked, but the acrid taste seemed to wake him up even more. There was only so much fantasy you could take. He moved over to stand beside Lee.

With his cigarette in his mouth, Lee puffed away as he reached over and unfastened Ezra's pants. "You look good in these," he said, slightly muffled as his lips remained pursed to keep the cigarette in place. "But you look good out of them."

Naked again, Ezra crawled to lie beside him on the bed.

Lee grinned. "It's nothing to be afeared of, you know."

"What?" Ezra asked gruffly.

"You were thinking of somebody else when you were fucking me."

Ezra began to protest, but Lee shrugged him off. Ezra shrugged—it wasn't like he was paying to protect his feelings.

"Whoever he is," Lee grinned. "You're going to make him feel lucky, all things going."

Ezra grunted and dragged on his cigarette. "You going to keep talking all night?"

“Do you mind?”

Strangely enough, Ezra didn't. Especially when Lee's hand traveled south and began to perk him up again, and he was able to imagine once more that it was he and Icarus again—free in the skies.

Nevertheless, he managed to grunt out, “Don't know when I'll get to see you again. Business is taking me out of town in the next couple of days.”

As if from far away, he could hear Lee respond, “I'll just have to make this do for now, then.”

Turned out he could make do very well indeed.

Chapter 10

GETTING the *Lilliput* back in the air was a little more difficult than originally thought. The door they fashioned out of scraps was too big according to the original specifications, and they had to shore it down a little more again. But once that was done, they found themselves in Waulkham Hills again, and having to stay in their own ship as every spare room in the town was taken up by amateur bounty hunters wanting to claim the reward for capturing Icarus.

Jazz grumbled at the thought of another series of nights sleeping in the *Lilliput*. Normally she wasn't so fastidious; Ezra believed she was just trying to get his goat. But after their arrival, he made her stomach full with a good hearty dinner and a few good ales, and she became more amenable to the situation and followed him back to the ship without protest.

"Those ales were good, Kneebone," she said with an enthusiastic burp as she burrowed beneath her blanket and put her feet upon the console.

"Glad you enjoyed them," he replied.

"You know what?" she asked suddenly.

"What?"

"I still don't understand why you let him go when he was on the platform. You're the one who was pushing to capture him. I never did. I think it's a bad way to make money."

He let her talk to herself. He couldn't really understand why he let him go, either. It wasn't even like the kiss had happened. And it made everything more confusing now that Icarus had saved his life. Could

you really coldheartedly go after someone, when they were the reason you were still breathing?

“We could have been rich,” Jazz continued.

He felt like she was goading him into some corner where he wouldn’t be able to escape. “We could have,” he agreed.

“But then we would have lost our souls.”

Ah, there was the trap. “There’s always that,” he said, trying to sound nonchalant about it all.

“We won’t lose our souls to Bart if we take *her* money.”

Her eyes were closed, but Ezra still felt like he was being watched intently.

“I think I’m safe, but you lost your soul to Bart a long time ago.”

He watched Jazz grin and turn her head slightly to attempt to hide it. “That may be. Now let me sleep.”

He did so, glad the interrogation was over for the night.

THE skies above Waulkham Hills were more crowded than the streets below. Jazz kept her cool as she guided the *Lilliput* between dirigibles of various sizes, some faster and others infinitely slower than their own. Ezra had to grit his teeth a couple of times when they came dangerously close to collision, although he knew better. That was one thing Harding had been right about—Jazz’s engineering skills were renowned, but her piloting skills surpassed even those.

The engines strained as Jazz pushed them to the brink, seeking less populated air. At last they seemed alone on the waves of wind that buffeted them mercilessly. It wasn’t the best day for flying, but Ezra didn’t want to lose any more time in the hunt for Icarus. An old man in the town had been happy to talk about Icarus, and give his theories about where he thought he was hiding and what he got up to in his spare time. Jazz had rolled her eyes the whole time, but Ezra took the information seriously. He could tell it was still weighing upon Jazz’s mind, and true to form, she brought it up again.

“Do you think that information that crazy old coot gave you was legit?”

“The money talked, didn’t it?” Ezra asked.

“I hate it when you answer a question with a question.”

“At least you won’t be disappointed by my answer.”

Jazz rolled her eyes, a familiar motion. “That guy probably rolled you. Took your money and fed you a story.”

“It was more of a lead than any other we’ve had.”

“Isn’t it our only lead?”

“Don’t distract me with the cold hard truth. Just keep flying.”

“Sure thing, Boss. I’ll do my job, and you do... whatever it is you do.”

Ezra bellowed with laughter, and Jazz finally let herself go as well. The merriment seemed to have a boosting effect upon their engines, and the *Lilliput* sailed into the great blue yonder with what seemed like an added zest.

“I THINK we’re lost.”

Jazz tapped the console, which was casting a static-filled map above their heads. The map shimmered and then wiped out.

“Now you’ve done it.”

“Just needs a little love.” Jazz stroked the console gently, and the map came back online. She frowned at the topography rendered in green light. “I don’t like it. I get the feeling we’re heading off into the middle of nowhere.”

“What exactly gets your gander up about it?”

“Icarus is only ever seen with his wings. And you got a closer look at them than most, Kneebone. Do you really think they could carry him such a long distance? The fuel alone wouldn’t fit in that rig-up he has.”

In all the moments that he had spent recently consumed by thoughts of Icarus, Ezra hadn't really thought about the logistics of his mechanized wings. And now that his attention had been drawn to it, he felt dim-witted for not having thought of it before. "Maybe he has a ship."

"What, and then switches to his wings?" Jazz asked. "Why bother?"

"Think about it," Ezra said, more to cover up the fact that he was only beginning to himself. "Waulkham Hills is full of ships. What better than to hide amongst them, and only emerge with his wings when he is ready to strike?"

"But all of those ships are only there because they're looking for him!" Jazz protested. "What about before the bounty, when he didn't have an audience? Back when nobody knew a thing about him? He would have been easy to spot then if he was flying off to a ship."

Ezra shrugged. "I don't know. And we probably won't know, either. All we can do is go on this information and hope we haven't been stung."

"Maybe he has a gang," Jazz mused, but that train of thought was lost by both of them as a strange alarm sounded from the console.

"What's that?" Ezra asked. He had never heard a warning with that exact sound before. He didn't like it when his own ship surprised him.

Jazz's hand flew over the interface as she kept the other on the control. "I programmed the news nets to crawl for any word on Icarus and tell me when something new popped up."

Ezra wished he had thought of that. With her mechanical and piloting skills, plus her damn street smarts, he often felt superfluous to his own operation. "Good thinking."

"I know. I'm brilliant."

"And so modest."

"That too." She grinned as the air above them flickered and a new headline appeared.

ICARUS STRIKES WAULKHAM TRAIN AGAIN.

Ezra cursed, and was quickly echoed by Jazz.

“We’re in the wrong fucking place!”

“Turn us around!” he ordered.

“Aye, Captain.”

Ezra’s fingers clenched the arms of his chair as the *Lilliput* banked to the left, with Jazz executing a hard turn. He caught a stomach-churning glimpse of the ground as their tail dipped downwards, but Jazz quickly had them righted again and heading back in the direction they had come from.

“Push her as fast as she can go,” he said through gritted teeth.

Jazz nodded, as mad as he was that they were once again behind everybody else when they thought for once they were ahead.

Ezra skimmed over the brief text provided with the headline. That Icarus sure had some balls on him, to attempt another raid on the same train in the same town, especially when that town had recently increased its ranks with a population specifically out to target his ass.

Even though he knew Jazz had already set the search in place, he kept refreshing for any additions to the story on Icarus. Would Harding even be in the air by now? It would burn his goat if that shit of a man outplayed him again, especially after Ezra’s pleasure at turning down his offer and briefly holding that position of superiority. Well, at least until Harding had injured the *Lilliput* and made them lose valuable days of searching.

“Can’t we go any faster?” he demanded.

“Do you want to sit on top and flap your arms?” Jazz asked.

“Would it help?”

“Try it and find out.”

If he thought it would have gotten them back to Waulkham Hills any quicker, he would have done so and quacked like a duck all the way. Luckily he was saved from this by Jazz hissing between her teeth.

“We have company!”

He couldn't see anything ahead of them, but their sensors were picking up something a little more long-range. "Two—no, three—three ships heading our way."

"I see them," Jazz said.

He knew she meant that figuratively—her eyesight wasn't *that* good.

"It's almost like they're on a collision course. Take us lower."

Jazz throttled the control, and the *Lilliput* began to slowly drop altitude.

"Not fast enough," Ezra warned.

"There's not much I can do about that at the moment," she fired back.

He put up his hands in surrender. "Just saying."

She was worried. He could tell by the pinpricks of sweat that beaded her temples. And when Jazz worried, you truly knew you were in the shit.

Ezra ran the two steps to the back of the cockpit. He fumbled against the wall, from which the sound of the engine growled. "Releasing sandbags," he yelled back.

"Good."

It wouldn't do much, but it could be enough. Dropping the sandbags but leaving them attached to their ropes could jolt them down far enough to accelerate their descent.

"I can see the other ships now!" Jazz yelled. "Outsized class. This could be bad."

"How can they not see us?" Ezra fumed. His hand whacked against the lever that controlled the sandbags, and he yelped in pain. He yanked on it, and felt the *Lilliput* jerk at the redistribution of weight.

"Because all they're concentrating on is Icarus!"

Ezra shot up immediately at the sound of the outlaw's name, and hit his head against the slanted roof. He shook himself to gain some clarity again, and emerged behind Jazz's chair to peer around her.

“Icarus?”

“Our little friend is being pursued by our would-be rammers.”

Looking out their cockpit window, all he could see were three far-off specks that looked like dust against the glass. He consulted the sensors, and the specks became more defined. One speck was being engulfed by the size of the others. He adjusted the reader and brought the sensors into sharper focus.

And he could then see Icarus.

The fugitive folk hero was desperately trying to outrun the ships, but he was fighting a losing battle. As Ezra had concluded, the wings were not designed for long-term travel. Perhaps Icarus had been caught out and never made it to his ship, so had decided to try and find somewhere to hunker down. But the bounty hunters desperate to catch him were too quick this time.

It was madness, sheer madness, to attempt to strike the same train so soon. Perhaps Icarus had become too influenced by the stories and songs that were now being created about him; did he foolishly believe that he truly was infallible? If so, he was going to learn the hard way.

“There goes your money,” Jazz said.

Ezra felt fire in his belly. It irked him that Jazz was putting it in such a light, even though he had done his best to convince her all along that it was how he felt about the whole situation. All he knew for sure was that he didn’t like seeing Icarus in danger. One ship going after the man for his bounty was fair game; this was a gang-up that could result in his death.

“Just get around the other side of him,” he instructed.

Jazz shrugged, obviously wanting to say more but declining to do so.

The vague shapes on the horizon became more defined as the distance between them and the *Lilliput* decreased. The atmosphere in their cockpit was growing tense; Jazille had no idea what they were going to do, and Ezra wasn’t being very accommodating.

“Did you bring a butterfly net?” Jazz quipped.

Ezra glared at her. “Very funny.”

“Well, we need a plan.”

“We have a plan. Get Icarus.”

“We haven’t planned for all contingencies.”

“You want contingencies? Dammit, this was pretty unforeseen!”

“Everything you’re involved in is unforeseen! Because you never plan!” Jazz whacked the throttle, and managed to coax a little more speed out of the *Lilliput*’s engines.

“Why plan, when nothing *goes* to plan?”

They were yelling at each other now, and it wasn’t helping.

“Because things would go easier if we had plans! Because then when something happens, we can say, oh, Plan D allowed for that! So let’s go for Plan D!”

Ezra briefly imagined pushing her out the door and watching her fall a long way to her death. “Would Plan D involve a butterfly net?”

“Screw you, Kneebone!”

“Aah, screw yourself.”

There was no heat in either of their epithets to one another. Ezra’s murderous vision was forgotten as soon as quickly as it had come; they were both now intent on catching up to the winged man before anybody else did.

Ezra fell to the floor as the *Lilliput* was hit by something, and shuddered under the impact.

“All plans, however, involve you wearing your seatbelt!” Jazz admonished him as if she were his mother.

He ignored her, and picked himself up. “What was that?”

“We’re being fired at,” Jazz said calmly, as if she were announcing that it was a sudden rain shower.

“They mean business.”

“Don’t we all?” Jazz asked, flicking a switch above her head. “Preparing guns.”

She coolly consulted the readouts from the console and aligned the turrets so they would be able to find their prey easily.

“Try not to hit Icarus,” Ezra warned her.

“Taking him out might be the best option.”

“Don’t even joke about it.”

“Doesn’t the reward cover dead or alive?”

Her gallows humor did not amuse him. “Just get us to him.”

“Then you make sure you hit those other bastards before they take *us* out.”

Ezra activated the gun controls from his console, and began zeroing in on the closest dirigible. He targeted their gun ports and fired.

They were rewarded with the sight of a small blaze of fire licking along the side of the airship, and a thick plume of smoke that followed. The ship began to lose speed, and in doing so managed to work on their behalf as it collided with the ship behind it. As the sky filled with even more smoke from the damage sustained by both ships, they dropped back, thereby leaving only one to continue chasing Icarus.

“Good shot,” Jazz said approvingly.

“Glad you think so.” His fingers danced over the sensors. “But they’re firing up.”

“Beginning evasive maneuvers.”

“Might be too late for that.”

Jazz hissed between her teeth. “Just watch me.”

The *Lilliput* banked sharply to the left, just as a spray of bullet fire passed them—so close, Ezra could see them fly past his window.

“That’s some impressive weaponry they have,” he said with all admiration. They had been little more than streaks of light, but he could tell that the bullets were professionally produced, unlike the ones he and Jazz had to make by hand.

“Yeah?” Jazz asked. “Well, they must have money.”

“They’re preparing to fire again.”

“Goddammit, Kneebone, we have to get out of here!”

“Get me Icarus first!”

Jazz cursed him, and the *Lilliput* banked to the right this time.

Ezra quickly looked out the window, but couldn’t see the bullets again. “I think they missed us.”

He was almost felled to the floor as the *Lilliput* was struck from behind.

Jazz didn’t even have time for a retort as she checked the console for damage readouts. “Two strikes to the aft. We’re losing fuel, Kneebone.”

But Ezra’s attention was on the sensors, where they were showing him that Icarus was also in trouble.

“He’s losing altitude.”

“So will we, soon enough!”

“Just get us under him!”

The ground lurched below them sickeningly as Jazz forced the *Lilliput* to begin a nosedive. Ezra could see the underbelly of the other dirigible above them, and watched as they fell away and it began to disappear from view. He forced himself to look away and find Icarus on the sensors. He was now flying erratically, but it seemed to be from trouble with his wings rather than evasion of capture.

“Almost there,” Jazz said. “But you’re getting us almost killed if we can’t pull up on time.”

“I have faith in you.”

She snorted by way of reply.

He found it strangely comforting. But he was distracted by the fact that he could now see Icarus above them; Jazz knew how to do her job well. Rather than relying upon the sensors, Ezra could recognize for himself that Icarus had lost control of his wings. He was plummeting now; the only thing between him and the ground, and his death, was the *Lilliput*.

But even if Icarus crashed into the *Lilliput*, it could still kill him at that speed.

"I'm releasing the emergency chute," he told Jazz.

She threw him a look. "What? We don't need it! I can land us!"

"I'm doing it to catch Icarus."

"He needs a pillow to land on?" Jazz asked.

"Something not to kill him, yeah."

"You're sure being considerate of our prisoner."

He ignored her; time was running out. He ran to the back of the cockpit, while Jazz made sure they stayed beneath Icarus.

Ezra yanked the lever that led to a small crawlspace into the engines. He scooted on his butt to face the small ceiling within. There was a system of four pulleys that would activate the chute. He could accommodate two in each hand, and in doing so could pull all four of them at the same time.

When he did so, there was a rush of air within the small space, and part of the roof rolled away. Ezra could see a small package attached to ropes disappear out the hole into the screaming wind. The package began to unfurl, and a massive parachute opened up above the *Lilliput*.

It was a strangely beautiful thing, but Ezra had forgotten that it packed quite a punch when it was launched. As soon as the wind caught the underside of the material in order to billow it out and the chute became active, the *Lilliput* shot further back into the sky. Ezra's body lurched toward the ceiling, and he hit his head against the metal. Blood flowed freely from the wound created by the impact, and as Ezra fell onto his back again, it ran into his eyes. He tried to blink the thick fluid away.

He shuffled back into the cockpit, wiping at his eyes. He scrubbed at his face with his sleeve, and pulled the door to the crawlspace closed again.

The ship was now floating on the wind; the engines had cut out automatically when the chute was released. Jazz turned to look at him, and winced. "Forgot about the physics again, huh?"

"Just tell me we got him."

She looked up, and pointed at the human-shaped obstruction in the chute above them. “We got him. But we still have company.”

“Get us out of here.”

“You’ve got to get the chute down again, first.” Jazz started the engines again, but let them idle, just to keep them airborne once the chute folded again. The drag of the material would cause them no end of trouble if they tried to fly with it still unfurled.

Ezra looked back up at where he could see the shape of Icarus lying on the cushion of material and wind. He hoped the man had enough sense to stay there until they evaded the other ship and managed to land their own.

But they *were* dealing with a fugitive—if Icarus became desperate enough, there was no accounting what he could do in the name of self-preservation.

“Hurry up! I need you on the guns!” Jazz yelled.

Ezra turned back to his console, and made sure that he did not meet Jazz’s eyes. She was furious once more with their situation, and Ezra wondered just how far he was pushing her this time. But they had Icarus now, and if they managed to evade the other ship, the reward was all theirs. Their dream of financial emancipation had never been closer....

Even if they were dealing in blood money.

Ezra recalled the words of an old man in the bar he and Jazz had eaten in the night before. He was talking with his cronies, but Ezra had been able to eavesdrop quite easily. *“That Icarus is a hero. There ain’t nobody who cares about the likes of us, who are worked to the bone in order to make life in the cities easier for you folks. He wants to make our lives better, and because of that he is enemy number one. Anybody going after him should be ashamed of themselves if they are willing to make us go on suffering in order to make a buck.”*

In that man’s eyes, if they were to turn Icarus in, Ezra would be contributing to their hardships. He might not be stealing food out of the mouths of babes directly, but was he signing the paper to do so instead?

I feel sorry for them, Ezra thought. But Icarus is breaking the law, and somebody will make money out of it. It might as well be us.

“Do I have to do everything?” Jazz demanded. “Snap to it, Kneebone!”

He blinked at the console and realized that they were dangerously close in range to the other ship. If they fired, the *Lilliput* could be hit.

“Starboard!” he instructed Jazz.

She didn’t question him; she turned the *Lilliput* starboard, but still keeping it in the same position, and Ezra suddenly had the other ship’s weaponry in target. Before they could target the *Lilliput*, Ezra fired upon the enemy ship. He could see them trying to turn wildly, but fire erupted upon the surface of the dirigible’s balloon.

The other ship began to careen, and Jazz shook her head grimly.

“Flying will be smoother now,” she said. “They have no chance of catching up to us for now, once we get out of here. If I were you, I’d get up to the chute and bring Icarus in before he manages to fly away again, and so I can start relying upon our engines.”

He nodded at her. He knew she was right. But hearing his own justifications and thoughts coming out of her mouth were painful, as if she was twisting them back upon him so he could hear just how mercenary he was becoming.

But what else could he do at this point of time?

EZRA slammed the small hatch door at the top of the cockpit back down behind him as he braced himself against the ropes attached to the chute. The wind was strong up here, but Jazz hadn’t lied when she said that the ride would be smoother from here out. But he still played it safe, having clipped a rope onto his belt and attached it to a secured ring on the roof just in case he fell. He also carried a second rope to secure Icarus. It seemed funny to need a rope for a man who could fly, but last time Ezra had seen him in the skies, his wings had been giving him trouble.

“Hello!” he called out, feeling foolish.

He heard a groan from above him, and then a reply. “Do you require a salutation?”

Ezra couldn’t help himself; he grinned at the laconic greeting. “Are manners necessary in this situation?”

“I don’t know. Am I meant to be polite, if I’m your captive?”

“That’s up to you. But you’re lucky that we got you, rather than the others.” Ezra didn’t mean to sound like such an addle-headed coot, but he felt it was true nonetheless. He wasn’t going to do anything to hurt Icarus, whereas the other bounty hunters might have had a little fun tenderizing him before turning him in to the law.

“Oh, is that *luck* I’m feeling right now?”

Well, there was no need for him to be so persnickety.

“Does the truth hurt?” Ezra asked, activating the retraction lever. The chute began to lower, and Icarus moaned. Ezra could see him holding on tight, not wanting to fall off.

“A little, but the bullet wound hurts worse.”

Ezra, alarmed, grabbed onto the ropes to steady them. “You were shot?”

“Happens sometimes when people are shooting at you,” Icarus said dryly.

Ezra could now reach for his captive’s feet. He pulled on him gently, and Icarus fell into his arms. He was grimy with smoke from the downed dirigibles, and sticky with sweat. But it wasn’t only the sweat that soaked Ezra’s shirt as he held the other man. Blood was seeping from a small wound in Icarus’s stomach.

“Sorry about your duds,” Icarus breathed.

“They’ll be fine,” Ezra said grimly. “Let me get you into the cockpit.”

“Do you not get all your money if I die?” Icarus smirked.

“Don’t talk like that,” Ezra retorted. “You ain’t gonna die.”

“You a doctor?”

“No.”

“Then I want a second opinion.”

Ezra’s fingers strayed across the other man’s stomach. The bullet, luckily, had passed through his body and hadn’t hit any bone. “My pilot will give you a second opinion.”

“Is he a doctor?”

“No. *She*’s the best damn mechanic in Shrevesport.”

“So she can patch up my hull, and replenish my fluids?” Icarus smiled, and his eyes closed.

Desperately, Ezra slapped him. “Wake up! Don’t you go to sleep!”

“Thought you said I wasn’t dying?” Icarus opened his eyes again, and looked at Ezra clearly for the first time since landing in his arms. “Hey, it’s you. The good kisser.”

“You were pretty good yourself,” Ezra said, before he could stop the words.

Icarus grinned and closed his eyes again. “I knew you were one of us.”

Ezra slapped him again.

“Ow!”

“What did I say about not sleeping?”

“What did you say about getting me into the cockpit?”

“Oh,” Ezra said. “Right.”

“I’ll try not to bleed over the furniture.”

Ezra worried as Icarus closed his eyes again, but he could tell he wasn’t asleep or unconscious.

“Just resting my eyes,” Icarus drawled, as if reading his mind.

Ezra struggled to throw Icarus over his shoulders; it was cumbersome, to say the least, especially with the wings attached. Ezra pulled on the strap that hung by Icarus’s side, and the wings retracted into their harness. That made him a bit more manageable. Kicking open

the hatch to the cockpit, Ezra lowered them in, wishing that he had planned for a rope ladder or some steps that could be folded away against the roof. Maybe that was something to consider for the next prototype.

After all, it looked like they were going to have the money to build them now.

For some reason, that thought didn't cheer him like it used to.

As he hit the floor of the cockpit, he stumbled, and weighed down by Icarus they both fell against Jazz's chair. Jazz regarded them with a sly amusement, although there was an edge to it that Ezra didn't like.

"I see you got your quarry, then."

"*Our* quarry," Ezra reminded her.

"*Your* decision," she reminded him.

Icarus groaned against Ezra's shoulder.

"The one thing we never built for the ship was a sickbay," Jazz mused.

"Come and have a look at him," Ezra pleaded. "You're better at this stuff."

"You're going to have to take the controls," Jazz said, not sounding happy about it. "Get the kit while you're up."

Ezra gently laid Icarus against the wall and headed to the back, where a small trunk was bolted next to the crawlspace that led to the engines. Within it he found a medical kit; it was limited, and Ezra felt that perhaps in their line of business they should stock supplies more suitable for heavier injuries.

He set the kit next to Icarus, and stood behind Jazz to take the controls from her. She moved deftly, and he took over her seat. Watching out of the corner of his eye, he observed Jazz crouching next to Icarus and inspecting his wound.

"Hold still," she told him.

Icarus winced as she uncorked a whiskey bottle.

"Take a swig first," she instructed him.

He did so, and cried out as she then poured a healthy amount over his wound.

She turned back to Ezra. "The bullet went straight through."

"I saw that. Best bullet wound to get, though. Clean."

Jazz seemed appalled at his lack of compassion. "I'm not a doctor. He needs one."

"We take him to a doctor, we risk losing him."

She glared at him. "Have a heart, Kneebone."

"Yeah, Kneebone," Icarus murmured. "Have a heart."

Jazz snorted. "Don't get your hopes up, mister."

Icarus shrugged. "I trust you'll look after me."

Jazz got to her feet, and strode back over to Ezra. "Did you hear that? *He* trusts me."

"He probably just thinks you being a woman and all, you have more care about his welfare."

"I think *you* care more than you think."

"Explain," Ezra asked.

Jazz sighed. "I don't need to explain."

"I hate it when you get like this."

"Listen, Kneebone, if you're not going to get him proper medical treatment, one of us is going to have to stitch him up."

"You'd be better at it."

"And I think a doctor should do it. Do you think the govs are going to give a damn about his health once you turn him over to them?"

Ezra rolled his eyes, knowing when he was licked. "What do you suggest, then?"

"There's a smaller settlement, two hundred clicks out of Waulkham Hills. Town called Settler's Pass. There's a doctor there, and people won't be so quick to suspect him of being Icarus if we take him for treatment."

Ezra weighed up their options, and decided that it wasn't worth fighting Jazz any more on this. "Fine. Settler's Pass it is, then."

Jazz made her way back to Icarus. "Did you hear that?" Ezra heard her ask their prisoner. "He's getting you a doctor."

Icarus grunted. "He is, indeed, full of the milk of human kindness."

Sometimes, Ezra thought to himself, *you just can't win with anybody.*

And yet, who would have thought that he would start to feel the rats of guilt slowly begin gnawing at his belly?

Chapter 11

JAZZ gladly took control of the *Lilliput* again and plotted a course for Settler's Pass. Ezra moodily sat in his chair for a short time, staring out at the brilliantly blue sky.

"Kneebone."

It wasn't Jazz who spoke; it was Icarus, from the corner in which he was slumped against the wall. It was the only name he had heard Ezra called by.

Ezra ignored him and continued to search for shapes in the clouds.

"Kneebone, I know you're hearing me."

Ezra called back to him without turning around. "What do you want?" He could see Jazz glance at him, but he didn't acknowledge her interest, either.

"Come back here and talk to me."

"Why?"

"I could use the company, and it doesn't look like you're doing anything."

Ezra finally swiveled around on his chair and stared at his prisoner. "You don't know when to quit, do you?"

"Come here," Icarus said. He was now looking paler than he had before, and Ezra was now glad that Jazz was forcing him to take Icarus to the doctor, even though he would never admit it to her.

What have I got to lose?

Ezra took the four steps toward the back of the cockpit and crouched besides Icarus. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Maybe I don't want to talk," Icarus said; his eyes, heavy lidded from the stress of his injury, giving him an alluring look. "Maybe I want to kiss you again."

Ezra looked around quickly to see if Jazz had caught that. "Hush!" he hissed.

Jazz was concentrating on her console, but she was concentrating a *little* bit too much, if you asked him. She was undoubtedly listening to every word and drawing her own conclusions from whatever would be said between them.

"I told you, you were a good kisser," Icarus said with a grin.

"And I think you're becoming delusional," Ezra retorted.

"Maybe I'm just looking for a way to distract you and then make my escape," Icarus said. "I'm sure that's what you're thinking, anyway."

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"I bet quite a few do."

"Not really."

Icarus sized him up. "You do that to put others off balance? Make them underestimate you? You're not as stupid as you like to make yourself out to be."

Ezra's face burned, and he said steadily, "I don't think of myself as stupid. But you're doing a pretty good job at trying to distract me again."

Icarus shook his head. "Not in this case, I wasn't."

"What's your name, anyway?" Ezra asked. He couldn't keep thinking of him as Icarus; it seemed foolish.

"You think that I, as your captive, should be forced to give you my real name?"

"It's just a question."

"You can call me Icarus. It's what everybody else does."

"Obviously it's not your real name, though."

Icarus winced as he repositioned himself against the wall. A new blossom of blood appeared on the bandage Jazz had wrapped around his wound. "Would you swear to that? Maybe I had parents who appreciated the Greek classics, and when I decided to take on persona for my life of crime, I used my real name as inspiration."

"No parent would saddle their kid with a name like Icarus."

"So says the man called Kneebone."

Ezra gave him a dry smile. "Ezra Kneebone."

Icarus laughed hoarsely. "Ezra? Ezra Kneebone? And you poke fun at Icarus?"

"Not poking fun," Ezra told him. "Just interested."

"Well, my name is my own. There's power in a name. So I'll just keep it to myself while I can," Icarus said gravely.

Ezra wondered how long he would be able to maintain that, especially once he was in proper captivity with jailers who would care less about his welfare than he and Jazz did.

"Anyway," Icarus continued. "I asked you over here for a reason. If you're serious about taking me to a doctor—"

"I told you I was."

"—then you have to help me get these wings off. I'm going to be the most recognizable person in town if you take me in still wearing them. And then if the rest of your friends turn up, you'll have one hell of a battle trying to keep me."

He had a point, but Ezra had to make one thing clear. "Those other people aren't our friends."

"You have the same goal. So you're comrades in arms, at least."

Ezra didn't like the comparison. But he knew that if he were to examine the whole situation from Icarus's point of view, he probably didn't seem much different than the rest of the money-hungry bounty hunters that were out to bring him to... well, if not justice, then to cash him in to line their pockets.

"You can think what you like," he replied gruffly.

Icarus shrugged, and it was obvious that he had forgotten it would cause him pain. He didn't cry out, but a hot and heavy breath puffed out between his lips even though he tried to hold it in.

"How do we get this thing off you?" Ezra asked.

"There are metal clasps on the side," Icarus told him.

It was like Icarus was bolted into a cage. The clasps on his left side acted as if they were a hinge on a door. Ezra tried to be as gentle as he could, but it didn't help that the metal harness partly rested on the area of the bullet wound. Once he had undone the clasps, Ezra propped Icarus up into a fully seated position, and leaned the other man against his chest. He had to try and discount the pleasant feeling that resulted from having Icarus in his arms, even though the man was bloody and grimy and had the sharp tang of sweat emanating from his pores.

It seemed as if his body *remembered* Icarus, and the brief contact they had had before. He had to stop himself from taking advantage of his prisoner and running his hand further down his back to cup the lovely swelling of his ass.

"Having trouble?" Icarus asked, as if he were fully aware of what was going on in Ezra's head.

Ezra wasn't sure if he was flushed, but he was glad Icarus couldn't see his face at the present time. "Just trying to figure out a way to get this off with as little pain as possible to you."

"Just do it," Icarus instructed him. "It may be more painful, but at least it won't last as long."

It was probably what Ezra would have wished for, had their positions been reversed. "At least it might make you more comfortable, once these are off."

Icarus chuckled, with a slight taste of bitterness. "Yeah, extremely comfortable."

The time for mollycoddling was over. Ezra knew it was childish, but he jerked the harness free from Icarus's body. This time Icarus cried out, and Ezra felt guilty as he watched the man grow paler before him.

"Sorry," he mumbled, even though he knew in the wake of his actions, it would ring false.

“Just let me lay down,” hissed Icarus.

Ezra did as he asked, and more gently than he had when manipulating Icarus free of his wings. As he hovered over Icarus just after releasing him, he was overcome with the mad desire to kiss him on the forehead. Surprised even at himself, he got back to his feet and turned to find Jazz staring at him.

“Are you not even going to offer our prisoner some water?”

“Don’t need your charity,” Icarus said from the floor.

“Water isn’t charity,” Jazz said. “And even though I’m flying this ship, don’t lump me in with Kneebone here.”

“You just taking orders, then?”

Jazz scowled, and turned back to the console. “He’s an ornery one,” she said to Ezra.

I’m surrounded by ornery ones, Kneebone thought. Funny thing was, if it wasn’t for the fact that Icarus was their prisoner, Ezra was sure that Jazz and their new prisoner would get along just fine.

And he didn’t even want to think about how much he would have liked to get along with Icarus himself.

He took his seat by Jazz and went back to staring out the window and ignoring the ill will that was coming at him from all sides.

“We’re just about to enter Settler’s Pass,” Jazz announced.

Ezra sneaked a glance back at Icarus. His eyes were closed, and he appeared asleep. Perhaps that was for the best, to sleep off the pain he was undoubtedly feeling from his bullet wound. It seemed almost a shame to have to wake him up for the doctor. He glanced down at the wings that he had stashed under the console, by his feet. They were a true engineering marvel, and he would bet money that Jazz would have a good look over them while he took Icarus in for medical treatment.

Obviously bored and needing some attention, Jazz sang out, “Hey, Kneebone, do you know why they call this place Settler’s Pass?”

“I can’t say I ever bothered to find out, no.”

Just as she was about to reply, they heard Icarus speak up from behind them. “Because all the settlers pass by it.”

It was an old joke, and an obvious one. But judging by the dilapidated look of the town as they flew over it, Ezra thought it was true. The town had seen better days, and those days obviously hadn't been all that good when they *were* better.

"You been here before?" Ezra asked, if only to stop the silence from falling again.

"Been here quite a bit," Icarus said. "The people need all the help they can get."

"I grew up in a town like this," Jazz said.

Ezra looked at her, surprised. Jazz was never all that forthcoming with information about her past, so for her to say something now spoke volumes. He just wished he knew of what, and he was reminded of his earlier observation that Icarus and Jazz probably would have been kindred spirits in a different time and place from this one.

"Then you know what it's like," Icarus said.

"Believe me, I do." There was an edge to her voice, but she passed it off as concentration as she looked for a place to land them.

Ezra waited for her to say more, but it seemed that, for the moment, that was all they were going to get out of her. He wondered whether Lady Bart was as in the dark as he was when it came to Jazz's past. Or did Jazz open up in the dark and allow her lover to become closer, let her see a side she would hesitate to show her best friend?

He bit down on the feeling of jealousy and busied himself by readying Icarus for landing. "How are you feeling?" he asked as he checked the bandages again, wincing at the amount of blood soaking the material.

"Probably be better once I see the doc," Icarus admitted.

"I think I will be as well." Ezra nodded.

"Careful there, skyboy," Icarus winked. "I might start thinking you actually care."

Ezra surprised himself by how easily his next words slipped out. "And what if I do?"

“Then you’re going to have a crisis of faith when you turn me in for money.” Icarus turned away, and Ezra could tell that the dismissal was meant to be a punch to his gut.

And damn if he didn’t feel it. But he shook it off and helped Icarus into a dark shirt that would hopefully hide any fresh blood that appeared until they got to the doctor. It wouldn’t help them if an overanxious townie decided to take an interest in them and their story.

“Come on,” he said gruffly. “You’ve spilled enough blood on my floor.”

Icarus only grunted as Ezra slipped an arm around his waist and lifted him to his feet.

“I’m getting us parked pretty close to the local doctor’s,” Jazz told him. “His name is Lester Caves. Make sure you stay on comm in case there’s trouble.”

Ezra nodded. “Keep an eye out.”

“Don’t touch my wings,” Icarus said as Ezra maneuvered him toward the cockpit door.

“You’re in no position to tell us what to do,” Ezra said curtly, still burning from the other man’s earlier statement to him.

Jazz, however, took it in stride. “Can I at least look?”

“It’s not a toy.”

“I know. It’s a miracle.”

Perhaps Icarus was touched by the reverence in her tone. “Okay, you can look.”

“Thank you,” Jazz said, smiling at him. “I promise to be careful.”

She was like a totally different person, the way she responded to Icarus. Polite, soft-spoken—not at all the roughhousing spitfire Ezra dealt with on a daily basis. What he wouldn’t give to have her treat him like that for a week... but then she wouldn’t be the Jazz he had grown to love throughout the years.

“Just remember to keep a lookout, and don’t get too distracted by the pretty,” he told her.

Jazz’s eyes narrowed. “I could say the same about you, Boss.”

Ezra sniffed contemptuously, knowing exactly what she was getting at. Icarus's glazed expression implied that it was probably going over *his* head, though, so that was a relief.

"Be back soon," he said weakly, and kicked open the cockpit door.

The fresh air, even with all the sand roiling around within it, was a relief as he and Icarus stepped out into the dustbowl that was Settler's Pass. Ezra coughed immediately, and pulled the kerchief around his neck up and over his mouth. He sneaked a look at Icarus, and although Icarus also coughed, he seemed to be dealing with the air much more easily than Ezra.

Ezra was reminded of what Icarus and Jazz had said about the towns they had grown up in.

"Remind you of home?" he asked, possibly more snippily than he intended.

"Close enough," Icarus said. "Gets to be they all look the same after a while. Usually when the money leaves the town. Could be either the mine shuts down, or a new road takes all traffic in a different direction. Something happens, and the town dies. People get hungry."

Ezra could feel that lack of spirit emanating even from the faded weatherboard of the buildings. He could imagine the people sitting within, staring glumly at blank walls and waiting for time to end. "Is that why you do what you do?"

Icarus snorted. "Look around you. The government isn't helping these people, and they should."

"These people could move on."

"Why should places die? Why can't people stay in their homes?"

Ezra frowned. "I couldn't wait to leave mine."

He regretted saying it—it would give Icarus an opening to pry into his life. No more vague statements that invite further clarification.

"And your parents? Do they still live there?"

"Yes, they do."

"Because it's *their* home. Maybe one day you'll gain a sense of what a home is like."

"You presume too much," Ezra growled.

"Stop for a minute," Icarus said. "I need to catch my breath."

Ezra pulled him into a small alleyway between buildings and propped him up against the wall. "We can't stop for long."

"I know." Icarus stared out at the town beyond the alley. "Your partner knows what it's like to live in a place like this."

"And that makes her more sensitive than me?"

"Maybe. Or maybe she just understands me more. I get the feeling she's not as eager to sell me."

A flush of anger rolled over Ezra again. "It's business."

"And that's the exact same thing the government says when they exploit the people they are elected to protect."

"Maybe they're doing it for reasons we don't understand."

Icarus pulled himself upright again. "I don't think you believe what you say half the time."

"Like I said earlier, you presume a lot," Ezra spat. "And you have a hero complex."

Icarus laughed. "The people choose to call me a hero. *I* don't think what I do is heroic. It's just doing what's right for those who are worse off than you."

"That's a nice way to look at it," Ezra said dismissively.

Icarus stared at him for a moment, and then said steadily, "One day you are going to have to make a decision based on whether you want to let bad things to continue to happen, or whether you're going to make a difference. I just hope it's not today."

"Why?"

"Because you'd make the wrong decision."

Ezra spat by Icarus's feet. "It's time to get you to the doctor."

"You don't like hearing the truth."

Ezra grabbed Icarus by the arm and slung it over his shoulder. If the man wasn't going to move by his own volition, Ezra would have to help him along. "You want to hear a truth? The truth is that those who make a difference usually get martyred. What good are you dead?"

“I ain’t dead yet,” Icarus wheezed as Ezra moved them along at a pace he was having trouble with.

“It’s a fool’s errand.”

Icarus smiled weakly. “It’s not a fool’s errand if you’re fighting the fool.”

Ezra had opened his mouth to fire off another retort when he saw Icarus’s eyes roll back in his head and felt the full weight of his body fall against his own. There was no time to waste; he slung Icarus over his shoulder and began to run toward the doctor’s home.

Chapter 12

JAZZ gave a deep breath as she pulled the wings out from under Ezra's seat and into her lap. The metal pieces clanged together, but gave no sign of pulling apart. The way Icarus had pieced them collectively gave the harness overall a uniform appearance.

"I know I promised not to touch," she whispered. "But can you blame me?"

Icarus was lucky she wasn't strapping his wings to her back and giving them a test run. She was sorely tempted to, and it was really only the fact that they were in town and she would be spotted by the inhabitants that stopped her from doing so. Hard to keep a low profile when you were scaring the birds out of their rightful domain.

What really interested her was the engine. It was so small, yet it managed to keep Icarus in the air and fly him over long distances. What combustion system was involved? How had he developed it? She would love to pick his brain about his invention; imagine what she and Ezra could do with their subsequent *Lilliput* prototypes if they incorporated similar engines? The dirigibles could become smaller and more streamlined—which would also mean they would become much faster. And everybody was relying upon speed these days, no matter what line of business they were in. Cargo could get to ports quicker, passengers would get to their destination much sooner than they were used to—and they all would probably pay much more money for the privilege.

Damn Ezra and his shortsightedness! If he would only stop focusing upon the reward for Icarus, and think of how using Bart's money and Icarus's expertise could do so much more for them....

But of course, that was dependant on so many variables. Firstly, Ezra would have to be less stubborn and pigheaded. Then Icarus, who seemed to care so much more about helping people for their own benefit, would have to develop a skin more suited to business.

When it all came down to it, it was impossible.

She stroked the tips of the wings lovingly. Ezra, and even Harding, might have been singing her praises in her skills with machinery... but it seemed Icarus was an unknown talent indeed.

And one who would be languishing in a prison cell soon enough. Unless she managed to talk Ezra out of his plans.

She would have more luck growing her own pair of wings.

EZRA stared out of the grimy window of the front room in the doctor's house. There didn't seem to be any suspicious activity out on the street and he hadn't heard as much as a squeak out of Jazz, so maybe he could rest easy that they were safe for now.

There was still the doctor to contend with, however. He was not a stupid man. As Caves had given Icarus a cursory look-over, Ezra could have sworn that there was a glimmer of recognition on the old man's face. He knew who his patient was. Ezra could only hope that he was one of the ones affected by Icarus's reputation among the common people, and was more likely to be singing songs about Icarus, the Man of the People, down at the saloon on a Saturday night rather than alerting the authorities as soon as the two strange men had left his house.

In fact, he had been suspicious from the moment they had entered his house. Ezra was practically dragging Icarus by then, and Icarus had fallen into the doctor's arms before the man could even examine his wound.

"Wait there," Caves had ordered Ezra, perhaps suspecting that he would disappear as soon as the door was closed between them.

So Ezra waited obediently, even though he was going to do so anyway.

After some time the door had opened again, and the doctor invited him in to his office with a crooked finger. Ezra took off his hat and held it at his side, a customary sign of politeness to try and butter the old man up.

“What the hell happened?” Caves demanded.

So much for that, then.

Ezra tipped his head toward Icarus. “He didn’t say anything?”

Caves huffed to himself. “Didn’t get the opportunity. He’s dead to the world.”

Ezra was immediately at Icarus’s side. “He’s unconscious?”

Caves sat down at his desk. “You obviously weren’t the shooter.”

Ezra kept his back to the doctor, still anxiously looking down at Icarus. The closed eyes and pale appearance were too similar to that of a corpse for his liking. “Of course I wasn’t!”

“You wouldn’t care that much if you were,” Caves observed.

Care that much? Ezra thought. The doctor obviously didn’t know what he was talking about.

“How bad is he?”

“Bad. But he could have been worse. You got him here in time.”

“That’s a relief.” And it was. Ezra stared down at Icarus’s taut stomach. Even though he flew with the aid of machinery, it must do something to his muscles. Ezra’s own stomach didn’t look like that, that was for sure. He knew Icarus’s belly would be hard to the touch, and resilient. If he lay against it, he would be supported by its strength....

He had to concentrate. On other things.

The wound on Icarus’s side was now closed. The thread looked more akin to barbed wire; it pulled the skin together cruelly and the stress upon them made the surrounding area scarlet and angry-looking. That was no judgment on the doctor’s skills; it was probably what was needed. And Icarus was in far better shape now than he would have been had they flown directly on to Shrevesport.

“How much do I owe you?” Ezra asked Caves.

The doctor waved his question away. “We’ll discuss that tomorrow.”

Ezra stiffened. “Tomorrow?”

“He’s in no state to travel,” Caves told him.

I’m being delayed, Ezra thought. Delayed and distracted. Company’s coming.

“It could make his injuries worse,” Caves continued.

“He’ll live,” Ezra said gruffly. *Bet you don’t think I care so much now, right, Doc?*

“Who shot him?”

“Didn’t see their faces,” Ezra said truthfully.

Caves stared at him for a long moment. “It wasn’t a shotgun pellet. Looked more like ship-fire.”

Ezra remained silent.

“Which means he was fired on from something that was in the sky.”

Ezra shrugged.

“Was he in the sky as well?”

“He was in my cockpit,” Ezra said, neglecting to add, *after the fact.*

“Did your ship sustain much damage?”

“What’s it to you?” Ezra asked.

Caves lit a cigar and stared out at him from a cloud of smoke.

“You got one to offer?” Ezra asked.

Caves pushed the tin toward him, and Ezra pulled one out. He clipped off the end and struck a match. The first intake of smoke was rich and indolent. He found himself gaining confidence. Funny how the distraction of a prop gave you that much-needed moment to compose yourself.

“You got something to say, Doc?”

“You’re a bounty hunter,” Caves said.

Ezra bristled. “Not usually.”

"But in this circumstance, you are."

"I have my reasons."

"I'm sure you think you do."

"Oh, I do." Ezra's fingers twitched at his belt. Was he going to have to resort to shooting his way out of here?

"Do you know just how important that man is that you dragged in here?" Caves asked. He stood up and moved back over to Icarus. "Oh sure, he's some worth to you as you brought him here in the first place. But he's worth a hell of a lot more as a free man."

"You know him personally?" Ezra asked, interested in spite of himself.

The doctor shook his head. "Oh, I met him. Just the once. He appeared on my doorstep with a load of medical supplies. We were in the middle of a flu epidemic. The larger towns were giving us the run-around in getting us the medicine we needed."

"Let me guess," Ezra said. "They thought it was more important to keep the meds in case the flu spread to the larger towns?"

Caves nodded. "The provinces aren't worth much to them."

"I don't agree with any of what they're doing—" Ezra began to say.

"You are if you take Icarus in," Caves said, purely and simply. "You're just aiding and abetting."

"I sympathize, Doc." Ezra wanted the old man to believe him. He wasn't used to being seen as a villain. "But like I said, I have my reasons."

Caves rinsed a cloth and delicately sponged at Icarus's wound again. "If your reason is money, it's no reason at all."

Ezra was about to tell him to mind his own damn business when Icarus stirred awake.

"Just let him take me, Doctor."

"No," Cave said firmly.

"Don't get yourself hurt on account of me," Icarus said hoarsely.

“What?” Ezra exploded. “You really think I’d injure an old man?”

“I don’t know what you’d do,” Icarus said, trying to sit up.

“He won’t hurt me,” Caves said, pushing him back down.

“How do you know?” Ezra demanded, really wanting to know how Caves could believe that when he didn’t know him from a bar of soap.

“You haven’t the face for it, son.” Caves reached for a blanket to cover his patient. “Get some rest, Icarus. It’s the best thing for you at the moment.”

“He’s coming with me,” Ezra reminded him.

“No, he’s not.”

Anger roared through Ezra, and he drew out his firearm. It was almost like he was separated from himself, and watching a stranger who looked like him embark on this desperate action. “Don’t make me shoot you.”

“You won’t,” Caves repeated, as though he was used to have a gun pulled on him every day.

“Kneebone,” Icarus said. “I’ll come with you.”

He slowly slid himself off the bed, and stood on unsteady feet. Caves went to help him, but Icarus pulled away. “Thank you, Doctor, for all your help, but it’s best you stay out of this.”

Caves glowered and looked back at Ezra. “What kind of man are you?”

Still keeping his gun trained on the doctor, Ezra reached into his pocket and threw a handful of bills onto the bed Icarus had just vacated. “One who pays his debts.”

Icarus made his way to Ezra’s side and stumbled. Ezra reached out to catch him, and Caves’s left hand quickly darted into the pocket of his trousers. Before the old man could even aim his gun properly, Ezra fired off a shot. Caves watched in terror as the bullet struck his gun and sent it flying from his hand.

“I could have killed you,” Ezra told him matter-of-factly. “But I didn’t. That’s the kind of man I am.”

"You're still choosing money over justice." Caves moved back to his desk, and practically fell back into his chair. His knees, weak from the surprise of Ezra's quick shooting, couldn't have supported him for much longer.

"Maybe that's the kind of man I am too," Ezra said. He shot Icarus a brief glance to check he was all right, and then moved behind Caves's desk. "Hate to do this to you, Doc. But I can't risk you setting someone after us."

"What are you doing?" Caves demanded.

His eyes widened as Ezra unrolled a set of bandages and began using them as ropes to tie the man's wrists and ankles to the arms and legs of his chair.

"Is that necessary?" Icarus asked.

"Wouldn't do it if I didn't think so," Ezra said, knotting the bandages in place.

"He's an old man."

"An old man who tried to shoot me!"

"You pulled the gun on him first!"

"I'm not arguing with you about this," Ezra said coolly.

"Oh? Because I'm your prisoner?" Icarus said mockingly.

"Damn straight."

Icarus turned on his heel and walked out of the doctor's office.

Ezra watched him wide-eyed, and then looked back at Caves—the man wasn't fully secured, but he couldn't risk losing Icarus.

Caves looked like he was enjoying himself now.

"He's going to make your job tougher for you."

You have no idea, Ezra thought, but said nothing. He almost admired the gumption of Icarus—but what else could he expect from a man who took on the government single-handedly, and took to the skies without the safety of a ship as well?

He stuck a rolled bandage into the doctor's mouth to act as a gag. "Sorry," he said, and he meant it. It was never a good thing to take

another man's dignity away from him. Especially when that man dedicated his life to helping others.

The doctor spluttered in a mixture of embarrassment and rage. Looking into his eyes, Ezra could hear the man's voice speaking within his mind: *That's what you're doing to Icarus, though, isn't it, Bounty Hunter?*

"Good day, sir," Ezra said, and then ran out the door after Icarus, pretending that he didn't hear the doctor's muffled cries behind him.

"YOU should see them, Bart," Jazz said. Her feet were propped up on the console, and Icarus's wings were still on her lap. She had now extended the wings out, and they almost took up the whole width of the cockpit. "I could never have made them."

"Because you think larger than life," came Lady Bart's cool, collected voice through the speakers. *"Your visions are grand, my darling. Icarus's wings are their own beauty, but your ships will surpass all others in the sky."*

Jazz grinned. "Stop talking me up. And besides, it isn't just me. They're as much Ezra's ships, if not more."

"Someone has to talk you up. Ezra surely isn't at the moment."

"He has his moments," Jazz told her.

"I know he does," Bart replied. *"But there aren't many at the moment."*

"He defended me to Harding."

"He would also tell Harding the sky was green if it would piss him off."

"That's no way for a lady to talk," Jazz mockingly reprimanded her.

Bart's laugh echoed tinnily throughout the cockpit. *"I'm on my own time now, my dear. Fuck all the social graces."*

The cockpit began to shake, and it was in no way due to Bart's mirth. Jazz clutched onto the wings so they wouldn't fall onto the floor,

and slammed her feet back on the ground so she could give herself leverage to peer out of the window as far as she could.

Three other airships were directly flanking the *Lilliput* as they came in to land. Even worse, one of them was Harding's dirigible—the *Bubulcus*.

"The bastard got it fixed," Jazz breathed unhappily.

"*What's happening there?*" Bart asked, sounding slightly panicked.

"Can't talk right now, my love. I'll call you later." Without waiting for a response, Jazz disconnected their signal. She quickly drew the wings back into their resting position and stashed the harness under Ezra's side of the console before hitting the console again.

"Kneebone, you hear me? We have trouble!"

THE front door to the doctor's house was already lying open by the time Ezra reached the living room. He cursed vehemently and hoped that Icarus wasn't drawing attention to himself outside. One elderly doctor with a shine to the idea of the winged hero was easy to take care of, but a whole town, even one as small as Settler's Pass? Ezra would have no chance.

He couldn't even yell out his name. "*Icarus*" would immediately turn heads, and Icarus had made it more than clear that Ezra had no right to be acquainted with his real name.

Out on the street, Ezra looked around wildly. The streets were pretty much deserted, bar one woman taking a pile of washing back inside her house. He wondered if the dusty wind made them grimy again as soon as they were hung out.

There was the sound of a sharp whistle, and Ezra turned in its direction to see Icarus sitting back off the road, under the shade of a large oak tree. Ezra got to his side in record time, his breath sounding as strained as he felt.

"I told you I'd come with you," Icarus said unhappily.

Ezra nodded.

“You didn’t have to go and tie the doctor up. He’s eighty if he’s a day.”

“If it makes you feel any better,” Ezra said, “I didn’t tie him up too tightly.”

Icarus shook his head. “What you did in there was abominable.”

“That’s a tad much, don’t you think?”

“Do you even know *what* you’re doing?” Icarus demanded.

Ezra thought for a long, hard, moment, and admitted, “No. I haven’t thought this through much at all.”

Icarus seemed to soften against him. “Look, I—”

Ezra’s wrist gear squawked into life. “*Kneebone, you hear me? We have trouble!*”

Icarus and Ezra stared at each other, both reflecting a *here-we-go-again* look of shared misery.

“Talk to me, Jazz,” Ezra said into his wrist.

“*You can’t hear it?*” Jazz came back incredulously.

He had been distracted by Icarus, but now that she said it, he recognized that the atmosphere in the small town had changed. There was also an undercurrent of noise that hadn’t been there before—a steady hum of engines kept in neutral—

—and now a steady procession of men, fully armed, spreading their way throughout the streets of Settler’s Pass. Looking for one thing, Ezra was sure.

“Jazz,” Ezra said softly. “Now *I* have trouble.”

He could hear her sigh even above the static of their comm signal. “*I have the coordinates from your wrist gear. You stay there; I’m coming to you.*”

Ezra didn’t bother with responding; it came from years of working with Jazz. They knew what had to be said and when it could be said. Further chatter on the waves would only serve to give away his position if somebody was listening in.

“I don’t suppose you have a spare gun?” Icarus asked.

Ezra shook his head.

“You probably wouldn’t give me one anyway.”

Ezra leaned down and helped Icarus to his feet. “You’d be surprised.”

“You thought I had run for my life from Caves’s office.”

“But you hadn’t.”

“Maybe it’s all part of my master plan,” Icarus said.

Ezra began herding them into the leeway of a storage barn, hoping that would give them enough cover before Jazz showed up to save them. “I don’t think so.”

“Why?”

Ezra peered around to see where their would-be captors were in relation to them. “Because I think you know you’re better off with me than taking your chances with them.”

Icarus didn’t reply; maybe Ezra had a point in that after all.

“Don’t get all emotional on me,” Ezra dismissed him. “I’m not that sensitive.”

“I don’t know,” Icarus said ponderingly. “Maybe Dr. Caves was right. There’s something different about you.”

“Save it for the testimonial,” Ezra replied. “We have to get out of here first.”

Icarus inched around him to peer out into the street. “There’s six of them.”

“Nine,” Ezra corrected him. “The others must have moved down another alleyway.”

“You think Jazz will get to us in time?”

“If anybody could, it will be Jazz,” Ezra said confidently.

He didn’t voice the opinion that it might be too close, even for Jazz.

“Maybe we should make for that other alley,” Icarus told him. “There’s more places to hide.”

Ezra shook his head. “They would shoot us down as soon as they saw us. Best to wait for Jazz.”

Icarus shrugged. "You're the man with the gun."

That rankled Ezra. "I'm trying to save your life!"

Icarus laughed. "Considering what you have in store for me afterwards, I can't help but wonder if I'd be better off dead."

The scrape of an approaching footfall made them both fall silent and watch from their vantage point as one of their possible captors crossed by the mouth of the alley. He peered in; Ezra and Icarus pressed back against the doorframe they were hiding in. A few interminable seconds passed, and so did the man after his most cursory of look-overs.

"It's lucky they're not as thorough as you," Icarus observed.

"Don't count them out yet," Ezra warned him.

The ground beneath them rumbled, and Ezra closed his eyes briefly in thanks as Jazz expertly flew the *Lilliput* down the main street of Settler's Pass and straight to their hideyhole. The engines kicked up a dust cloud that blew directly into their faces, and Ezra found himself spitting out sand in a vain attempt to clear his throat.

"Go on!" he waved to Icarus with the gun. "You first!"

Icarus looked as if he was going to object, but then he nodded and turned his back on Ezra.

The *Lilliput* appeared above his head, and he had to brace himself against the onslaught of kickback from the engines. The cockpit door opened, and Jazz maneuvered the ship as close to the ground as she could without actually landing. Icarus grabbed the side of the door to help himself up, his other hand holding his side. The stitches must have been pulling, and Ezra hoped they wouldn't break. Dr. Caves might not be so accommodating with the hospitality if they had to return to him.

Just as Icarus was about to jump up into the *Lilliput*, three of the men appeared, having been alerted by the appearance of the ship. There were no yells to stop nor any warnings. They fired immediately, and one aimed for the window near the pilot's seat. Jazz must have instinctively jerked, for the *Lilliput* reared back, which caused Icarus to lose his grip, and he fell into the dirt. He struggled to get back up, his hand still on his side, and Ezra stepped out from behind the shelter of his barrel and began firing madly at their attackers.

He was gratified that one of them fell to the ground in a spray of blood; he never liked killing, or even wounding, but when it came down to choosing between your life or theirs, what else could you do? And seeing Icarus sprawled in the dust, directly in the firing line... it brought out a protective streak in him that he felt might have nothing to do with money.

Exactly what, he didn't have time to consider.

The steady barrage of fire from his pistol made the other two men draw back. Ezra knew the gunfire would bring the others soon enough, and skidded on his knees to Icarus's side and began helping him up.

"You okay?" he yelled over the noise.

Icarus nodded.

They both looked up to see the *Lilliput*'s underbelly coming back toward the ground.

"Last call for boarding," Ezra said.

"You're not getting any argument from me," Icarus wheezed. "I want to get the hell out of Settler's Pass."

"You and me both," Ezra said, before pain lanced through his leg. He looked down to see blood blossoming through the material on his thigh. He staggered and fell to the ground. The noise around him faded out, and he felt as if he were disconnected from his own body. He was aware that he had to get back to his feet, and get him and Icarus back on the *Lilliput*, but he couldn't get back up. He saw Icarus looking over him worriedly. He was saying something, but Ezra couldn't hear him.

All he knew was that he had failed. He had told Icarus that despite everything, he wouldn't let him fall into the hands of less savory bounty hunters, but it wasn't likely that they would get out of this together. If Icarus had any sense, he would be jumping on the *Lilliput* right now and flying away with Jazz. But he knew enough of the man to know that he wouldn't leave Ezra bleeding and wounded on the ground even if it cost him his own freedom.

Even though he couldn't hear himself, he told Icarus, "I'm sorry."

He didn't know if Icarus replied. The blessed blackness claimed him.

WHEN the bullet had cracked the window, Jazz had ducked and accidentally pulled back on the ship's controls. With the sensors, she had seen that Icarus had lost his grip and therefore the possibility of getting onboard. She cursed and swung the ship around to try a second boarding. She could see the men closing in on her friend and his would-be prisoner through the sensors, which were also picking up the other six closing in on their location. Sweat ran into her eye, but she couldn't even risk wiping it away, as it would interrupt the savage dance her hands were doing over the console, trying to save all of their lives.

She cried out when Ezra went down. She knew he had been shot. She readjusted the sensors, trying to find out if she could put down the *Lilliput* right there and then. She was prepared to pull out her rifle, jump out of the ship, and start firing herself if she had to. She couldn't risk using the *Lilliput*'s own rifles; they were so strong they would rip the buildings of the town apart, and she couldn't have any innocent civilians' deaths on her conscience. Better to try and take out their attackers one on one.

Bullets raked across the window again. One actually penetrated the glass this time and disappeared with a metallic thud into the bulkhead. Emergency warnings began blaring out of the sensors.

"No!" Jazz screamed. "Not now!"

The tail of the ship was beginning to drag. The power to the controls was only at sixty percent, and the *Lilliput* began turning in slow, lazy circles. She was going to ditch right in the town center if she didn't get away from it.

"Kneebone," she whispered. "I'm so sorry."

Smoke pouring out of the controls, Jazz had to leave Ezra behind. She could see Icarus kneeling over him in the dust and fury of the ship's wake, and saw Icarus slump over the prone body as one of the bounty hunters fired upon him.

The *Lilliput* cleared the buildings of the town and headed out into the desert so it could go down with the least amount of damage to others.

Jazz braced herself for impact, and it came far quicker than she expected.

PART TWO

Chapter 13

JAZZ groaned within the wreckage of the *Lilliput*.

Smoke and the stench of leaking gas seemed to strip the lining of her lungs. She was finding it difficult to breathe.

It didn't help that her chair had overturned and was crushing itself against her chest. She pulled it off herself, and breathing became slightly easier. She coughed and vomited a thin stream of liquid.

"Disgusting," she croaked. But it couldn't be helped. She staggered to her feet, checking herself for broken bones in the process. All seemed fine.

How long had she been unconscious? She limped to the console, but it remained dark under her touch. It had obviously been a rough landing, and she would probably have a lot of work ahead of her just to restore communications—

Ezra!

Funny how when she was worried about him, he was always *Ezra* to her. Any other time he was *Kneebone*.

Jazz thought back hazily to that last moment she had seen him—going down with a bullet wound. Tears pricked her eyes, and she pushed them back angrily. She would *not* cry; she had too much work to do.

Damn, she wanted to speak to Lady Bart. Her whole body hurt, she didn't know where her friend was, and she needed her lover to tell her everything would be fine. But she couldn't even contact her at the moment.

Jazz determined to stop feeling sorry for herself and set about opening all the doors and trapdoors to the cockpit to allow the smoke to clear and escape. She pulled herself onto the roof and grimaced at the damage that was immediately discernible even with a cursory glance. It could be days before the *Lilliput* was in the air again, and that was even if she got quick access to materials to fix it.

She could see Settler's Pass in the distance; she had actually managed to clear it by a few clicks. She couldn't help but be surprised the crash hadn't brought out anyone to investigate, even if only to do so with the hopes of scavenging from the expected corpse of the downed dirigible.

Her wrist comm looked undamaged. She hit the button that acted as a two-way between her and Kneebone. "Ezra?" she asked hopefully.

She wanted his voice to come through, mocking her for calling him by his first name. But there was nothing, not even static.

Her first priority was getting communications back up. Then she could scan for Kneebone, and if the comms on his end weren't damaged, maybe, just maybe, things would start to look up.

OUCH.

That was Ezra's first conscious thought.

And that was followed by: *I'm still alive.*

It stood to reason, really. If he could feel pain, he must be alive. Unless he was in Hell, which preachers liked to tell you was full of unnecessary and eternal pain. But Hell wasn't an idea Ezra chose to subscribe to; Hell, as a concept, didn't sound that different to life as they knew it on Earth.

But he was hurting too much to debate religious discourse with himself at the moment.

He slowly opened his eyes—even that was an effort—and was momentarily panicked by the fact that he couldn't see anything. But a little light faded in, and he noticed different shades of darkness. He was

probably in a hull, or an underground prison cell; neither of these options were particularly pleasing.

“You’re awake,” said a voice, one that was slowly becoming recognizable, and even pleasing to him. It automatically put him a little more at ease with its natural soothing tone.

“You’re alive,” Ezra croaked.

There was humor in the reply. “I was starting to worry you weren’t.”

“How long was I out?”

“Days? Hours?” Icarus replied quizzically. “I can’t tell. I was out for a while myself.”

Ezra moved to sit up, cried out, and was gently pushed back down again.

“It’s probably best if you don’t move.”

As his memory returned, Ezra became belligerent. “I got shot!”

“Yes. While you were unconscious, I dug the pellet out. So at least it’s still not in you.”

“I suppose I should thank you.” It came out less grateful than Ezra really intended it to.

“I can live without it,” Icarus shrugged.

Ezra sighed. “No. Thank you. Really.” His eyes were beginning to adjust more in the darkness. He could see Icarus sitting only a little way over from him, and as he looked around him, he realized they were in the hull of an airship—what seemed to be a cargo area.

And the cool wind on his legs made him aware he wasn’t wearing his pants. He sat up and tried to cover himself. It would have been comical, if he wasn’t so embarrassed and hadn’t felt so exposed. And if there hadn’t been that lancing pain which accompanied his sudden movement.

“I had to take them off to get to your wound.” Icarus’s eyes glinted in the dark, and Ezra would have sworn they danced with merriment.

“Where are they?”

"I have them."

"Then help me on with them."

"I don't know, I kind of like you out of them."

"That's not funny."

"It's not meant to be," said Icarus.

The muffled droning of the engines was only adding to Ezra's headache. "Are you flirting with me?"

"We've done more than flirt before, so why not?"

There it was, finally out between them again. That all-too-brief, passionate kiss on top of the mesa.

"Why *did* you kiss me that day?" Ezra asked, the dark making him more brazen and able to confront all that he so desperately tried to avoid on any other normal day.

Icarus got to his feet and walked over to him. "Because I could tell we both wanted to."

"It's not that simple."

"I know," Icarus agreed. "Nothing ever is. Like now. I was your prisoner, and now we're in the same predicament."

"What happened out there?" Ezra asked. "After I got shot, I mean?"

"I thought you wanted me to help you get back in your pants?"

"I want both." Ezra was sure he was flushing at how his statement could be taken, and he was pretty sure he wanted it to be taken in the way of innuendo as well.

"Okay," Icarus said. "Pants first."

He braced himself against the crate Ezra had been lying on, and gently positioned Ezra's thighs around his hips. To Ezra it seemed overtly sexual, but he didn't object. He could feel himself getting aroused, and he tried to will his wayward pecker to behave itself. In the end, he hoped the dark would hide his shame. But as Icarus began pulling the denim over one of his boots, his elbow brushed against Ezra's groin. In fact, Ezra couldn't even tell if Icarus had done it deliberately or not. The brief touch, however, burned directly from the

tip of his cock, raced through his bloodstream, forced his heart to pump further and caused sweat to break out on his brow.

Icarus, however, moved on to the other foot. He began to pull the pants up Ezra's calves, and hesitated. "Stand up, it'll be easier."

Ezra obeyed him, and the weight on his leg made him stagger. Icarus steadied him.

"This may hurt a little bit, but remember that you wanted these back on."

"Just do it," Ezra told him.

As the material passed over his wound, Ezra grunted but it eventually turned into a groan. Icarus didn't hesitate; he knew the quicker they did this, the quicker the pain would subside. Ezra could hear the clink of metal as the tip of his belt passed through the buckle and feel the denim around his waist draw together. And then Icarus's hands ghosted over his groin, doing the buttons of his fly, encasing him. He couldn't be unaware of the state of Ezra's arousal now, but he remained silent.

Ezra was thankful.

"There," Icarus said. "You can sit down again."

"Thank—" Ezra began to say, but Icarus's mouth was pressed against his.

Ezra's reaction was instantaneous. His hands pressed against Icarus's cheeks, bringing him in closer to deepen the kiss. Icarus's lips were rough, probably from being out in the sun so much and the constant exposure to wind chapping them, but his breath was sweet and hot. Ezra felt the pain in his thigh building to a crescendo again, but Icarus's tongue in his mouth was like a shot of morphine for the good it did to him.

It was Icarus who pulled away first, and he looked at Ezra with something like regret. "I don't know why I'm doing this."

"Doing what?" Ezra asked foolishly, thinking it was pretty much clear what they had been doing.

"Ever since I met you, you've caused me nothing but trouble," Icarus said. "The first time, you impeded my escape by falling out of

your damn ship. And then you kidnap me the second time so you can get bounty on me. Plus, I got shot.”

“To be fair, it wasn’t me who shot you,” Ezra reminded him.

“No, but pretty much everything that came after is your fault.”

“Well, if it makes you happy, I got shot too!”

“What goes around comes around,” Icarus shrugged.

“You’re saying an eye for an eye, then?”

“Maybe,” Icarus said with a tone of steel.

Ezra grinned, but it was a hard grin. Little mirth lay behind it. “Then why can’t you keep your damn hands off me?”

“You seem to have the same problem,” Icarus countered.

“I can’t help admitting you get my juices flowing,” Ezra said. “But there must be something else behind it as well.”

“Insanity,” Icarus mumbled.

Ezra laughed. “Maybe. All I know is when they were trying to take you away from me, money wasn’t exactly the first thing on my mind.”

Icarus let go of his grip on him and walked away to sit in his corner again. “That doesn’t reassure me none.”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, actually, I don’t,” Icarus said with surety. “I have no idea who you are, or whether I can trust a damn thing that comes out of your mouth.”

“Maybe you can’t,” Ezra fired back. “But I can tell you one thing: what I just told you was absolutely true. I have no idea what’s going on anymore, or what to think about it. All I know is that we’re in a right pickle and we have to find a way to get out of it.”

“Besides the kissing thing,” Icarus said, still in his corner, “*that* is the one thing we can still agree on. And my luck must be improving, because at least the second time I got shot, it was with a tranq.”

Looking down at his leg, Ezra wished he had been so lucky.

JAZZ felt as if she were bathing in her own sweat. She had been steadily working in the bowels of the dirigible for over three hours now and had moved outside to work on the external sensors while she still had daylight left. The sun, however, was starting to disappear behind the mesas that surrounded Settler's Pass, and with that would come the colder temperatures of night. She had to get the main power to the ship at full level, even if she couldn't fly just yet, so she wouldn't freeze.

Bullet holes dented the hull in a sweeping arc, and some of them had taken out vital wiring. Jazz began to strip them back so she could remove the affected areas and replace them. If she had had Ezra with her, they would have sped through this part, but Ezra wasn't here.

She had to stop thinking about that for the moment. But her affection for the man who had become her most constant companion—imagine that, a man!—made it difficult. He had taken her on when most other ship owners had scoffed at the idea of a female pilot. Ezra had simply asked her if she believed she was the best. And she had known that she was, and he had seen the truth in her. She hadn't let him down, and, although they had had their barneys over the years, neither had he with her.

But he had certainly never gone missing on her before.

Scratch that—he had been taken from her. Guilt threatened to consume her; she hadn't managed to get to him in time, and had been forced to fly away as he lay wounded in the dirt. What kind of friend, what kind of partner, did that make her? He surely would have fought more had their positions been reversed. He probably would have crashed the *Lilliput* upon their attackers.

It did her no good to be imagining *what ifs*. That would get her nowhere.

She yelped when she lost her grip on the pliers and they hit her on the head on their way down. She scrabbled in the dirt to grab them again, and savagely twisted the wires together. The hull of the dirigible suddenly began making a humming sound, and Jazz could have almost cried with relief.

"Thank you, baby," she crooned to her ship. "I know you've been through the wars, but I really needed you to do this for me."

She wondered if the *Lilliput* missed Ezra as much as she did. She believed it felt his absence, otherwise why had it taken so long just to get base power back to the ship?

The last rays of the sun sank below the horizon, and Jazz shivered. Almost immediately a wolf howled in the distance, and she knew she'd better be getting herself inside and locked up safe. From both animal and any human that might come along and try to take advantage of a downed ship.

She ran up the steps, and knew Ezra would have laughed had he seen her. She pulled the door down and bolted it into place. Nothing would be coming in, but she would have the gun by her side just in case.

The console was now giving off a comforting glow as its lights awaited her input. She sat down with a heavy sigh and activated the heating. She was rewarded with the sound of the generator kicking in, and she allowed herself a brief smile.

But now came the big test.

She activated the comm and searched for Kneebone on the frequency she had his cuff tuned to.

"Kneebone?" she asked quietly. Who knew what his situation was? Maybe he was in hiding, and her trying to contact him would give him away. But she would have to risk it. "Answer me, Kneebone."

The replying static only made her feel exposed and vulnerable. She was alone. She didn't like the shadowy landscape outside the window, with the imposing mesas a darker mass outlined against a blackened sky. Jazz much preferred the emptiness of the skies—she felt in her element there, as if nothing could intimidate her. Its vastness was inspiring; the mesas only served to hem her in.

"Kneebone," she said again.

Nothing.

She might as well go all out. "Just on the off chance you can hear me, and I'm just not hearing you... here's an update. I crashed into the outskirts of Settler's Pass, and I'm trying to get the *Lilliput* back in the air. And then I'll come and find you, Kneebone. I promise you."

She knew in all likelihood she was speaking to static, and static alone. But with the long night ahead of her, it gave her comfort anyway.

THE two men had sat in silence for quite some time, and it was driving Ezra crazy. Icarus, however, was sitting calmly in his corner with his knees drawn up to his chest and his eyes closed. In fact, Ezra could have sworn he was sleeping.

He gingerly swung himself down from the crates and bit his lip to stop crying out when landing on his feet caused a jolt of pain that made the throbbing of his bullet wound become an explosion of agony.

Look on the bright side, he thought. Maybe I'll die of gangrene before we get to where we're going.

Which undoubtedly would be Shrevesport. He had no idea why he had been taken along when their captors had stolen Icarus from him. Maybe they thought he was in cahoots with the wanted man, and there might be more money in it for them if they turned both of them in? Ezra had no idea, and he hadn't exactly gotten the full story from Icarus, either.

His lips tingled with the ghost memory of Icarus's mouth working against them in some kind of passionate lock. He looked back at Icarus, who rested against the cool metal of the hull, and wondered if he was cold. He was still shirtless and barefoot, after all. Should he drape his coat over him, or would Icarus resent him for it?

Who knew what was going through that man's head? Kissing Ezra one minute, then abusing him the next... although when Ezra looked at from his vantage point, he could see why Icarus was running hot and cold.

He hobbled over to the door of their cargo hold. He didn't expect it to open under his touch, and it didn't disappoint him. He ran his hands over the edges, hoping to find some structural weakness he could exploit.

Icarus piped up from his corner. "I've already gone over that thing. There's no way out."

Ezra turned around. Icarus was still sitting in the same position, with his eyes yet closed. "There's a self-defeating attitude."

"There's the truth."

"To which? The attitude, or the door?"

"Both," Icarus said maddeningly.

"You're not being that helpful."

"I thought I was when I told you I've already been over the door?"

"Just go back to sleep!" Ezra said dismissively, and returned his attention back to the door.

"Sure."

Ezra reached inside the lining of his coat and felt in the dark for the hidden pocket that he kept his wallet and other necessary goods in. He breathed a sigh of relief, giving silent thanks for the fact that it hadn't been discovered. He unbuttoned the flap and brought out a small leather pouch that was tied up with a small thin strap, releasing the knot as he laid it upon the top of a crate. It rolled out, and revealed a small array of tools.

He heard Icarus coming up behind him.

"Thought you were sleeping."

"You sounded like you were doing something interesting."

"I am."

"Okay, so tell me."

"I'm going to get us out of here," Ezra said, a tad confidently.

Icarus peered around him. "What, with your little tool... kit?"

Ezra hid his grin at the deliberate entendre. "Well, your wings are pretty small, but they're still powerful."

"You've got that right," Icarus conceded.

For a brief moment, the spirit of bonhomie and camaraderie sparked between them again. Their smiles bounced off each other and reflected back.

Ezra reached for a small tube and whacked it against his palm. The chemicals and filaments within the lumistick made a snapping sound, and the liquid within the tube began to glow.

Their eyes met over the icy blue luminescence the tube was giving out. It was Ezra who looked away first, affixing the stick to the side of the door so he could see what he was doing.

“These are the exact same doors we have on the *Lilliput*,” he explained. “In fact, they probably had to buy them from the very same place we did back in Shrevesport. There’s a trick mechanism in them that will release the locks, just in case you’re in an accident or something happens on board to make the primary handle unable to open.”

“Whoever has us was probably hoping we wouldn’t know this,” Icarus said.

“It’s not exactly common knowledge,” Ezra agreed. “Unless you’re a builder or a con artist.”

Icarus regarded this statement. “I have the feeling you’re a little of both.”

Strangely enough, Ezra didn’t take offense. “You have to be to survive in this life, don’t you?”

“Sounds a bit mercenary,” Icarus retorted.

“Is it?” Ezra started to concentrate on selecting various drivers and wrenches. “You have to be mercenary in the way you deal with the government in order to achieve your goals, don’t you?”

“But I’m helping the victims, not aiding the injustices against them.”

“But that’s not what I’m saying,” Ezra argued, pulling the lumistick off the door and in closer to where the bolts were in the door. “I’m saying you use mercenary tactics in your line of work, just like I do. You have to be a con, stealing the goods. And you have to be smart, so you can actually survive to do it another day.”

“Not *that* smart,” Icarus grunted. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“You were obviously doing something right. I’m surprised you lasted this long, especially when you had so many people against you.” Ezra ran a flat-plated driver beneath the swing plate of one of the bolts.

With it in place, he activated a small, mechanized screw to burrow beneath it, finding the original screw and pushing it out.

“Until I met you,” Icarus pointed out. “I guess you’re saying that you were too good for me?”

Ezra turned to face him. “Truth be told, I was just in the right place at the right time. You fell onto our ship, remember?”

“Or maybe you caught me,” Icarus said softly. “Just like I caught you before.”

Ezra was struck by his words. “Like fate?”

“I don’t know if I set anything by fate,” Icarus said. “But it’s surprising.”

Ezra retrieved the screw, and set it to work on the second plate. He found himself wanting to open up to Icarus. He had told him before that being a bounty hunter wasn’t his usual job, and it wasn’t, but it seemed like a lie when Icarus was his prisoner. However, the tables had changed now, and they were both captives of somebody else. The balance of power had shifted and become more equal between them. Maybe Icarus would believe him now that his fate didn’t lie in Ezra’s hand.

“Jazz and I don’t normally deal in the trafficking of men,” he murmured. “And Jazz never wanted in on it from the start. But I had a plan, and I needed money.”

“It always comes down to money,” Icarus said derisively. “But when it comes down to it, those that have none usually don’t care. All they want in the end is food and something to keep their head dry.”

“Once they have that, though,” Ezra reminded him, “money will be their next concern. It’s only human. We all can’t be as altruistic as you.”

“It’s a dire view of humanity.”

“Didn’t you want the truth?” Ezra retrieved the mechanized screw again and put it back in the leather pouch. “Man will always want to secure himself, and in our world money does that.”

“And what will your money get *you*, Kneebone?” Icarus asked.

Ezra reached for the flat-plated driver again. “Security.”

“Money doesn’t guarantee security.”

“And nothing is guaranteed in this world, except death,” Ezra grunted as he used the driver to lever the faceplates away from the door frame. “So, unless you want death to come sooner than you hoped, let me get this stinking door off its bolts.”

“And what do we do then?” Icarus asked. “Do you have a plan?”

“Why don’t you come up with one while I do the door?”

“Great,” Icarus fumed. “No plan.”

“Would you rather just stay stuck in here?”

“I’d rather not die, if we have to rush out there and fight our way off without any weapons.”

“There might be a way off,” Ezra said wildly. “There could be parachutes—”

Icarus paled considerably.

Ezra had to laugh. “You’re kidding me?”

Icarus licked his suddenly dry lips. “I don’t like parachutes.”

“You fly around all the time on man-made wings!”

“There’s security in them.”

“Not if they stop working,” Ezra pointed out.

“They haven’t yet,” Icarus replied proudly.

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t like to be using them the day they do.”

“You could say the same thing about your damn ship!”

“You could,” Ezra agreed. “But I’m not the one too scared to strap on a chute.”

Icarus pushed past him and faced the door. “Fine. Is this damn thing ready to go down?”

Ezra pushed him back, so he could take up position near the frame’s edges. “Yes. Just watch the master do his thing.”

He used the tips of his fingers to act as a lever in the frame. With a little bit of pressure, the now-unbolted flaps fell to the floor in the small space between the door and the frame. Ezra risked a quick, smug glance back at Icarus.

But a new sound cut through the air. The door handle was turning, and the door itself began to open. Now off its hinges, it began to fall onto Ezra. He braced himself for a world of pain, but felt Icarus's hand grasp onto his shoulder and pull him out to safety.

The door fell to the metal floor with a clanging that Ezra was sure would be heard in the cockpit, even in a ship this size.

Three of the men who had cornered them in Settler's Pass stood in the doorway, evidently shocked by the condition of the door. But they were mercenaries, and surprises never shook them for long. Instantly their guns came out as one, aimed at the captives in the cargo hold.

Chapter 14

“DARLING, what’s wrong?”

Jazz could have cried with relief at the first familiar, friendly voice she had heard in hours. Of course, she would have liked it much better if that voice had come attached with the face associated with it, but a disembodied tone through the hiss of a speaker was just as good right at this moment.

“Bart,” she said, and struggled to say anything else.

The cockpit seemed filled with the white noise of the speaker, and then Bart’s voice came through again.

“You’re scaring me, Jazille.”

The use of her full name made Jazz pull together. And there would be no pretenses.

“Bart, I need your help.”

Immediately, the response came back. *“Tell me what you need.”*

Jazz wished more than anything that Bart were with her right now. Part of her hated this feeling of dependence she had upon her, but as she knew that Bart truly reciprocated her feelings and equally and willingly shared them, she knew she had to disregard that one major quibble within herself and accept what she truly wanted and needed.

“We managed to get Icarus,” she said finally. “He was injured, so we took him to Settler’s Pass to see a doctor. But when we were there, both Ezra and Icarus were taken by bounty hunters.”

“Ezra was kidnapped?” Bart asked in disbelief.

“Yes.”

"I suppose I am meant to be surprised, but I can't say that I am," Bart said, although there was concern in her tone rather than censure. *"I think on the day that man was born there must have been some eclipse that shadowed his life in misfortune from thereon."*

Jazz smiled, although it was a weak one. "I don't think Kneebone would disagree with you."

"How did you manage to elude the captors, dear? I'm sure there's a story there, although I'm also sure I don't want to hear it."

Jazz shivered and pulled her blanket tighter around herself. "I flew in to try and pick them up, but the men started firing at me. The *Lilliput* got damaged, and I had to fly off just in case I ended up crashing on top of the town itself. I'm about three clicks out of the city, and the ship is damaged. I only just managed to get the comms back up and running."

There was silence, and for a moment Jazz thought she had lost all communication, but Bart's voice finally came through again.

This time it was as if it was possessed, full of vengeance and fury. *"They shot at you?"*

"Yes, but—"

"They dared fire upon you?"

"I don't think it was personal, Bart. I was just in the way of their quarry."

The steel in Bart's voice could not be softened with such explanations. *"Do you think I care about their rationale for doing so, Jazille? The end result is that they tried to kill you, and if you will not take it seriously, then I shall do so on your behalf!"*

"Bart, please calm down. I didn't call you to get you upset."

Bart sighed, a passionate sigh full of displeasure and worry. *"I'm coming to you, my love. Three clicks out of Settler's Pass, correct?"*

"You will?" Jazz asked. "That was what I was going to ask you—"

"I cannot believe you thought you had to ask. I will just have to get Albert to pack, and find us transportation. But I will be there as soon as the sun next sets, I promise you."

“Make it sooner, if you can,” Jazz whispered.

“*If you insist,*” Bart said with a dramatic flourish. “*That man! I always knew that one day I would have to ride into some podunk town and save his sorry ass. I just didn’t think it would be so soon.*”

“Hurry,” Jazz said.

“*I will, darling. But I will leave my comm on, so hopefully if you need me I can still be contacted.*”

Jazz signed off and looked out the window into the darkness. Now that she knew Bart was on her way, and she would have a copilot to help her track down Ezra and Icarus... well, suddenly it didn’t seem so dark out there anymore.

EZRA could feel Icarus’s chest against his back as they retreated further into the cargo hold. They inched back as the three men made their way in.

“What the hell happened to the door?” one of them asked.

The man in the front, obviously the self-styled leader, grunted. “Were you trying to escape, boys?”

Another laughed. “The captain ain’t going to like that.”

“We caught them in time,” the third said. “He’ll have to be happy about that.”

“Captain’ll just think we’re doing our job,” the leader said.

“Rafe—”

“Shut it,” the leader, his name now revealed, said; menacingly he advanced on Ezra.

Strangely enough, Ezra had calmed down quite a bit since the door had crashed down. He now knew the leader’s name, and a name was a powerful thing, especially when it could be used against the wearer.

“Rafe, is it?” he asked pleasantly. “I’m Ezra Kneebone, and this is, well... I guess you know already.”

“What are you doing?” Icarus hissed.

Ezra ignored him, but his hand fell back and grazed over the flat planes of Icarus's stomach to silence him. He could feel Icarus freeze, almost as if insulted, but this wasn't the time or place to worry about hurt feelings.

"The mighty Icarus," Rafe sneered. "But I have no buggery idea who *you* are."

"Sorry, didn't you hear me? Ezra Kneebone."

Rafe backhanded him with his pistol. Ezra was yanked around so that he was face to face with Icarus. He could see concern in the other man's eyes, although his face remained passive. Good, he knew not to show any emotion.

Ezra spat out a small stream of blood and turned back to Rafe. "Did I offend you?"

Rafe and his cohorts laughed. "Offend me?" Rafe jeered. "Like I said, I have *no* idea who you are. We only care about the *people's* hero."

Ezra shrugged and said to Icarus, "I think he's talking to you."

"I'm sure if you straightened up and flew right, you could be the peoples' hero as well," Icarus said lightly.

"We've got some funny boys here, Rafe," said the third man.

Rafe nodded and glared at the two prisoners.

Ezra wondered in what context they meant *funny* to be. He hoped that it didn't mean *funny* in regards to sexually funny, because then he and Icarus were likely to be in even more of a world of hurt. Big tough guys like this, who *obviously* had no sexual hang-ups of their own, liked doling out their issues with suspected nancy-boys.

The three of them began to move forward as one. Ezra positioned himself between them and Icarus, and held up his hands in surrender.

"Come on, now," he said in a voice that sounded calmer than he actually felt. "I don't think you want to rough up the merchandise."

"If I remember," one of Rafe's minions said, "The poster said '*Dead or Alive*'."

"Yeah," sniggered Rafe. "And it said nothing about you."

They shifted again, and this time Ezra felt himself being pushed behind as Icarus stepped in front of him. He scowled and tried to push back, but Icarus jostled with him and managed to keep him back.

"I'm sure your boss would have something to say about that," he threatened.

Rafe looked as if he would love to do nothing more than plant his fist in Icarus's face. "What makes you so sure, angel boy?"

The other two laughed in unison even though the insult was weak.

"Because they never would have taken him in the first place," Icarus argued. "They would have left him in the dirt otherwise."

Rafe moved forward again, but a whistle sounded, and they all froze in place.

As a voice started speaking immediately after the alarm, Ezra realized that it was the signal for an announcement from the captain, obviously needed because the ship was so large.

"Rafe, what the hell is taking so long down there?" a deep voice demanded.

Rafe looked chastened, but tried to butch it up as he turned to a panel by the side of the door and activated the comm. "Nothing, sir, we'll be up presently."

"Are the prisoners alive and well?" the captain asked dryly.

"Present and accounted for, sir."

"Is Kneebone conscious?"

"Yes, sir," Rafe turned back to glare at Ezra. "He is."

"Get back up here, I need you."

"Immediately, sir." Rafe released the comm button and leered at Ezra and Icarus. "I guess it's your lucky day, boys. We have to be elsewhere."

"We were worried," Ezra said. "Really."

He heard Icarus growl a warning, but they were safe for the moment. Rafe snarled, and nodded at his minions. They pushed through the door, and Rafe suddenly remembered the condition it was

in. "You," he said to the closest minion. "Keep an eye on them until I come back down and we seal this up again."

Ezra and Icarus retreated to the back of the cargo hold while their lone captor took position by their only exit.

"That was stupid," Icarus hissed. "You get him angry, and he'll definitely take pleasure in pounding your face once his boss gives him the okay."

"We'll be gone by then," Ezra shrugged.

"Well, aren't you confident!"

"I like to be a 'glass is half full' kinda guy."

"How does the captain know you, anyway?"

Ezra sat back down on one of the cargo crates. His leg was stinging again, and he was beginning to feel tired. That wasn't good, especially as they still had to get out of here somehow. "I don't know," he admitted. "I didn't recognize his voice, either."

"So now you're pissing off people you haven't even met?"

"It's a gift," Ezra muttered.

Icarus folded his arms and drummed his fingers against his skin. "We have to get out of here."

"Yes. That's what I've been saying ever since I woke up."

"But what's-his-name has a gun."

"The two of us could take him," Ezra said confidently.

Icarus gave him a pitying look. "Maybe if we both weren't wearing a bullet wound apiece."

"Come on, we're tough. We can do it."

"We'll be dead before we get to the door. Dead or alive, remember?"

Ezra grinned. "If *I* remember rightly, Rafe said that was just for you."

"Thanks."

"Glass half full, see?"

"It's funny," Icarus mused. "But I have no difficulty in believing there are many people out there who would want you dead."

"And you said you didn't know me."

That strange feeling was building up in the air between them again—

—but perhaps it was just sensing the laser bolt before it tore through the hull and bounced off the bulkhead above them. Icarus pushed Ezra to the floor as the laser continued to strike off any surface it hit before the energy finally dissipated.

The whistle sounded throughout the ship again.

"*All hands brace for impact!*" came the voice of the captain.

"Nice of him to warn us," Icarus said.

The ship shuddered as it was struck again. Their captor lost his footing and fell into the cargo hold as the ship tilted slightly downward. Ezra scrambled over the floor to him, ignoring the pain in his leg, and managed to straddle the man before he could get back up. The man was strong, and bucked wildly beneath him as if he were a bull at a rodeo, but Ezra hung on grimly, striking him repeatedly. As the man reached for his pistol, Ezra grabbed it with his free hand and smashed it into the man's nose. With a gurgle, he lost consciousness.

He looked up to find Icarus watching him with a look of distaste. "No time to get all moral," he explained. "He would have shot us if he got the chance. I didn't shoot him."

Although the look on his face didn't entirely disappear, Icarus nodded. "Give me the gun."

"You don't trust me?"

"Let's just say *I'm* not going to shoot to kill."

"I hope you won't live to regret that," Ezra told him.

"The gun," Icarus said firmly. "Now."

Ezra handed it over without a word, although he wasn't happy about it.

"Thank you."

The ship lurched again, and Ezra fell against Icarus. Both men tumbled to the ground and rolled the length of the rapidly tilting floor. As Ezra hit the wall, he could hear the engines straining trying to keep the ship upright. Then Icarus crashed into him, losing the grip on the gun. A bullet fired, and both men automatically covered themselves so they wouldn't get shot.

"This ship is going down!" Ezra yelled. "We've got to make a move!"

Icarus nodded and scrabbled for the gun again. "Let's go."

Unsteadily, they got to their feet and headed for the door. The once-flat floor was now acting as a hill that led up to the exit. They eventually made it, having to use the heavy and immovable cargo grates as foot and hand holds to help themselves along.

They paused at the door to catch their breath, and Ezra panted, "Most ships will have an emergency exit, and if we're lucky and they've prepared, we should find some chutes there."

Icarus was no longer arguing about the safety of parachutes; he merely looked like he would rather be anywhere than a ship that was likely going down in flames.

"Truth be told," Ezra continued, "they usually aren't that far from the cargo hold."

"Isn't the cargo hold usually a giant exit?" Icarus asked.

Ezra nodded. "But there were no chutes in there. We have to find the buggers first."

They were wasting time. He moved out cautiously into the corridor. So far, so good. The corridor was empty, but that didn't mean they were alone. In a ship in crisis, people would soon be leaving their posts to let the inevitable happen, although they would try to fight it to the very last minute.

There was only one way to go: the left. They moved quickly but silently up the passageway, coming to a junction breaking off into two corridors that looked indistinguishable from the other.

"Which way?" Icarus asked.

"Left would take us further up the ship, probably to the cockpit. I say we avoid that."

Icarus nodded and started down the right corridor.

“Hey, wait!”

But Icarus plunged on, and Ezra followed. Smoke was starting to fill the passages, and Ezra knew it wouldn’t be that much longer before the call to abandon ship would be made. His heart was racing in his chest, and he was relieved when he saw a large door with a porthole up ahead.

“That’s it!” he cried.

Icarus coughed as he skidded to a stop, and his breathing was labored as he opened up the storage cabinet near the door.

“Chutes?” Ezra asked.

Icarus nodded, unable to speak.

Ezra pushed him aside gently and grabbed the first available parachute. “Let me help you with this one.”

Icarus made to push him away, obviously to say he was no invalid in need of help, but he doubled over coughing again.

“Stop fighting me,” Ezra said, and surprisingly, it worked. He fitted the straps over Icarus’s bare back and across his chest, fingers dancing nimbly over the skin. With the harness in place, he tugged at it to make sure it was secure. Satisfied, he stood back. “Not as elegant as your wings, but they’ll do for now, right?”

Icarus nodded and croaked out, “Thanks.”

A laser bolt hit the bulkhead above them. They reacted instinctively, flattening themselves against the wall. Crew from the ship were on their way to their own escape, and had been surprised by the presence of the prisoners.

“Get your chute on!” Icarus yelled, firing his own pistol in retaliation.

“Not enough time!” Ezra barked. He reached across and grabbed the handle of the emergency door.

Icarus’s eyes widened. “I’m not leaving you here!”

Ezra grinned. “Who said I’m not coming with you?”

Icarus fired off another shot, and looked back wildly at Ezra.

Ezra snaked his hands between the chute straps and Icarus's skin.
“Hope this holds the two of us!”

“You’re crazy!” was all Icarus managed to yell as the emergency door fell away, and the two men were sucked out into the maelstrom of wind beyond.

Chapter 15

GETTING out of the smoke had rapidly improved the state of Icarus's lungs, because the man yelled throughout the entire free-falling process. Ezra would have been amused had he not been hanging on for dear life. He managed to stabilize his balance a little more by wrapping his legs around Icarus's waist, even though this sent them careening even faster.

Of course, this made it harder to pull the release string on the chute. His hands were wrapped around the harness, and there was no way he was releasing one to do it unless he wanted to end up an unrecognizable mess on the desert floor. Icarus was too distracted having his own private meltdown, so Ezra had one option left. He nuzzled against Icarus's side, his cheek resting against the comfortable warmth of skin and the blood that moved beneath it, and found the tab with his teeth.

He pulled it, and his neck jerked uncomfortably as they stopped falling and shot upwards instead. As the chute unfolded above them, Icarus finally felt safe enough to look down at Ezra and yell, "Are you okay?"

Ezra nodded exhaustedly. As they floated downward, he looked up to see the great dirigible above them listing and beginning to fall. Other chutes were now blossoming in the air around them as the crew sought their own safety. They were too concerned with themselves now to give even a second thought to Ezra and Icarus, but Ezra knew that they should hit the ground running regardless in case they decided to change their minds.

Now he would probably never know who the captain was, and how he knew him. And Ezra didn't like mysteries.

"It's not so bad," Icarus said, interrupting his thoughts. "I mean, it's nothing on my wings, but still...."

"Release that second string," Ezra instructed him. "You need to steer us some distance away before that ship falls on us."

Icarus looked up and saw the distressed ship, uncomfortably close. He released the second string and found he could now direct the chute against the wind, as if it were a tiller on a small boat.

"Try and get us as far away from the rest of them as you can," Ezra said. He closed his eyes, his head resting against Icarus's chest—or, more like the harness against his chest—and let himself enjoy the sensation of the other man against him and the wind keeping them afloat.

"Don't fall asleep on me," Icarus chastised him. "I'm not hauling your heavy ass across the desert."

"Hey," Ezra said, sounding muffled against the harness. "Don't you be dishonoring the state of my ass."

"I was dishonoring the size of it, not the look of it."

"Nothing wrong with a big ass."

"Didn't say there was. Just said that as there was so much of it, it would be hard to carry."

Ezra looked up at him. "It's a pretty ass, I'd bet you'd like it."

Icarus laughed. "You need to get some new lines."

Maybe he did. But there was that change in the air between them again; the antagonism and suspicion were becoming less guarded.

"There she goes," Icarus said softly.

As best as he could, Ezra twisted his neck so he could look back. The ship that had temporarily been their prison was now plummeting back to earth, so fast it almost seemed slow in its tragic last seconds in the sky. Already on fire, it retained its shape until the moment the nose caused a crater in its first contact with the ground. The nose crumpled, and fresh explosions burst along its side as the whole ship flattened out

upon the dirt, all its beauty and majesty now nothing more than molten steel and crumpled framework.

“That’s a sight I never like to see,” Icarus murmured.

Ezra, who also felt a pang in his heart at the senseless destruction, swallowed around the dryness in his mouth. “It never gets easy.”

They were losing altitude, but steering away from the field of debris.

What I wouldn’t give for the Lilliput right now, Ezra thought. But that only made him think of Jazz, and knowing that the last time he had seen her she was flying off in their own damaged ship, her fate unknown. He felt sick at the thought of the *Lilliput* lying on the ground like the ship below, and Jazz possibly being a part of the wreckage.

But he couldn’t think that way. He knew Jazz and how resourceful she was. She would have dumped the *Lilliput*, had it come to that. They might have joked together in the past about going down with the ship, but they knew it wasn’t worth the risk. And Jazz had so much to live for, even if you just took the *Lady Bart* into account.

No. Jazz was alive, and probably busting a gut to try and figure out where he was.

“Get ready,” Icarus said, interrupting his stream of consciousness again.

Ezra looked down; the ground was rushing up to meet them.

“Lift your legs!” he yelled to Icarus, even though he was sure the other man probably knew to do that already. Luckily his own legs were still wrapped around Icarus, and if they had minds of their own, they would probably be reluctant to give up such a position.

Both men yelled as their bodies hit the hot desert floor with a bone-crunching thud. They rolled together, getting twisted up in the ropes and the chute itself as momentum carried them along.

In a tight ball of fresh pain, they eventually came to a stop. Moonlight filtered through the chute wrapped around them, giving an ethereal effect, as if the rest of the world had faded to white around them and left them alone and safe against everything that plagued them.

“Are you okay?” Ezra asked.

Icarus coughed up some dust. “Yes, I think so. You?”

“As far as I can tell.”

“No broken bones?”

“Won’t know until we move, I guess.” Ezra had landed on top, his hands still buried beneath the harness. He pulled them out and braced himself with one on either side of Icarus so his weight was no longer crushing him.

They stared at each other for a long moment, bruised, bloody, and covered in dirt.

Strangely, Ezra thought Icarus had never looked better. They had survived, yet again. Maybe that had something to do with it. The threat of death always made you appreciate the little things more. He leaned in and claimed the mouth he was beginning to know very well. Icarus didn’t resist; in fact, he pulled himself up and snaked his arm around Ezra’s waist to drag him in closer.

There was a moment when they could have started going further; the parachute was damn good at making them forget where they were; everything seemed unreal and isolated beneath it. But they eventually pulled away from each other, and Icarus hurriedly began pulling at the straps of the harness to get himself free.

“We better get going,” he said, fumbling with one of the buckles.

Ezra’s hand closed over his and helped him release it. “I know.”

There was regret in his tone, but there was nothing else they could do.

Crawling out from under the chute, they looked up to see the others from the ship silhouetted against the dark sky, but not that far from landing. Without a word, they ran further into the desert, hopefully to freedom.

LADY BARTHOLOMEW ran down the stairs, most unbecomingly for a woman of her status, pulling on her gloves. At the bottom of the staircase, she paused for breath, and it was at that moment that Albert realized she was most scandalously wearing men’s breeches.

“Lady Bartholomew!” he cried.

She looked up from her gloves, frazzled, and adjusted the small travel hat upon her head. “Yes, Albert?”

“What *are* you wearing?”

Bart looked down at herself. “What does it look like?”

“Breeches!” Albert could hardly get the word out.

“Why, yes, they are. If I have to travel, Albert, I wish to be comfortable.”

“Travel, Madam?”

“Yes, Albert. And you’re coming with me.”

He couldn’t have looked more horrified, even if she had told him that as well as wearing breeches she would be forcing him to change into a hoop skirt. “Where are we going?”

“Jazille and Ezra are in trouble. We must go to them.”

“Those ruffians!” he spluttered.

She glared at him. “My *friends*.”

“Pardon me, Lady Bart—”

“I certainly *don’t* pardon you, Albert,” she said, as haughtily and as freely as her social status expected of her. It helped in situations such as this when she had to buck convention. “And I don’t mind you speaking out of turn, especially as I know you actually quite like Jazille and Ezra.”

“Be that as it may, exactly where are we going?”

Bart checked her reflection in the mirror. “Settler’s Pass.”

“That’s an outlaw town!”

“Then pack accordingly for danger and adventure!” She turned and gave him her most beguiling smile. “I know I have.”

Albert almost fainted as she drew up the side of her jacket and revealed a holster containing a laser pistol. “Madam!”

“And look at this!” she instructed, bending down to unzip her boot and display a long hunting knife. Her hat slipped on her head, and as she came back up, she frowned. “Perhaps when you go to change,

Albert, because you should be comfortable for the journey, you can fetch me my flying cap and goggles. I believe this hat will prove to be most unsuitable.” She unpinned the headwear in question and handed it to him.

He took it from her with a slight bow. “Yes, Lady Bartholomew.”

“Oh, Albert?”

“Yes, Madam?”

There was a mischievous glint in her eye. “We may be on a rescue mission, but that’s not to say we can’t have some fun!”

“As you wish, Madam. I’ll bring my Winchester Sure-Laser.”

Bart clapped her hands with unrestrained glee and went to see about getting her trunks loaded.

TWO injured men made their way as fast as they could across the rapidly heating desert floor. The morning sun was just beginning to rise above the canyon walls, and those walls were starting to offer little relief from the glare.

Icarus skidded to a stop and leaned against the rock wall. “I just need to rest a moment,” he wheezed.

Ezra turned and came back alongside him. “I thought you wanted to get as far away as possible from the ship?”

“I do,” Icarus panted angrily. “I also have a hole in my belly that’s telling me to stop.”

Ezra nodded. His own leg was hurting; he could only imagine a bullet in the stomach would be worse.

“Are you thirsty?” Icarus asked.

Ezra nodded. “No use thinking about it, though. We have no water.”

“We’re standing on a riverbed, Kneebone.”

Ezra looked down at the dry dirt by his feet. “I don’t think there’s been a river here for a long time.”

“I know this desert like the back of my hand,” Icarus said. “I spend most of my time here hiding out between raids.”

That answers the question about whether he has ships, Ezra thought to himself, a flicker of hope awakening in him. “You know where there’s water?”

“I believe so.”

Believe so? That didn’t sound too confident. But, as Ezra realized, it was the best option they had at the moment. They wouldn’t be able to survive too long out here without water.

“When you get your breath back,” he said, “lead the way.”

“EZRA! Ezra Kneebone, come in, goddammit!”

Jazz slapped the console in frustration, as if that would magically restore her contact with Kneebone. All she received in reply, however, was the sound of static, which only served to infuriate her further.

At least Bart was on her way. *She* had already been in contact, at least, checking in with Jazz as she waited at the station for Albert to buy their tickets to Waulkham Hills. Jazz allowed herself one small smile at the thought that this would be one train that would remain unraided by Icarus, although Bart would have been excited if it had. It was one of the many things Jazz loved about her—her exuberance for situations that would make most people run away screaming.

If only she had her own ship like the *Lilliput*, she would already be here. Personal dirigibles would revolutionize travel—if Ezra and Jazz ever managed to act upon their patent.

She had given Bart a list of parts she needed, which Bart was to pick up before they set out for Settler’s Pass. Luckily, the *Lilliput*’s damage had looked worse than it actually was, although that was due partly to Jazz getting the ship away before Kneebone’s attackers could put more bullets in her and managing to have her pretty close to the ground before she crashed. She had spent the day pulling out ruined parts, replacing them with spares for those they had spares for, and when there was nothing left, patching up the holes in the hull made by the gunfire.

And in the meantime, she was slowly going crazy without having someone to speak to. She wasn't sure why; there were periods of time when she and Ezra could go without talking (although that was admittedly rare as the man liked to hear the sound of his own voice). It was just the oppressive silence of the downed aircraft, out in the middle of the desert, without even the sound of the engines running to give any form of background noise. She had never realized how comforting such a simple sound was before.

But now she only had the dead of night to look forward to, and she was dreading it. Having experienced it already, the anticipation of a second night alone was even worse.

She exhaustedly fell into her chair and was about to pull the blankets over herself when she heard someone—or something—scrabbling around the ship.

The sensors had been turned off to conserve the power couplings, as the engines weren't keeping them juiced up. She fired them up quickly and grimaced at the reveal of three men nosing around the *Lilliput*. Scavengers. They would be hoping for scrap metal at least, but desiring parts and consoles if they were lucky.

She activated the external speakers and said clearly, "Move away from the ship, gentlemen, unless you would like your breeches filled with lead."

She could see them jump on the sensors, and had to swallow a laugh. They were obviously expecting a derelict airship.

Through the speakers in the console she could hear one of them yell, "You all by yourself in there, little lady?"

Little lady. There was nothing she hated more than the condescension of a man who thought he was more than he actually was. Like having a johnson between your legs made you so much more... *equipped* for life.

She hit the comm button again. "I may be little," she said, and flicked a series of switches to her right. On the outside of the ship, the guns would now be winking into life and swiveling around to take aim at the intruders. "But my guns are big."

Rather than dissuade them, she only heard laughter.

“Lady, you better sound like you mean it if you threaten us with your toys.”

She was already bored with them. Fighting a yawn, she said loudly and clearly, lest they mistake her meaning, “I’ll only tell you this once, even though it probably won’t be absorbed by your pea brains, but don’t ever call me *lady*. Lady is what you call my girlfriend.”

And she fired.

They were lucky she was such a good shot. The guns spat bullets in perfect circles around them. The men stood, too petrified to move until the guns fell silent and they could breathe again, although with difficulty due to the dust plumes that were now billowing in their immediate vicinity.

“Now, scat!” Jazz yelled through the comm.

They did so, running to their horses and taking off for the safety of Settler’s Pass, the laughter of a woman echoing across the desert plain after them as if she were giving chase.

Back in the *Lilliput*, Jazz felt as if she would sleep soundly tonight, and dream the dreams of the righteous.

EZRA shook his head vehemently. “I can’t go down there.”

“Are you claustrophobic?” Icarus asked with a sympathetic but determined look on his face.

“No, I just happen to *love* small dark tunnels that I can barely fit in.”

They were on a relatively flat plain, just out of the canyon they had been sheltering in earlier. So far they had managed to evade any survivors from the ship that had taken them hostage but suffered its own wreck. However, Ezra knew that their luck could run out, which was why he was going to have to entertain the notion that Icarus had just presented to him.

"I'm pretty sure they won't know about this cave," Icarus reassured him. "All the times I've used it, I've never seen any other sign of habitation by someone other than myself."

Ezra stared glumly at the small hole. "It looks barely big enough for a hare."

"It's not that far before the tunnel opens up. That's why it's so deceiving," Icarus said. "Look, you can follow me, and then you'll know it'll be fine. If anything happens, it'll happen to me."

He said it lightheartedly, but it didn't exactly assuage Ezra's fears.

Obviously realizing he wasn't going to get much of an answer out of Ezra, Icarus dropped to his knees and crawled into the tunnel. Ezra looked around their surroundings, making one final check to ensure they weren't being observed, and began to follow suit.

Having Icarus's ass in his face was not as pleasant a prospect as he would have earlier imagined it to be, especially when you were encased on every side by solid rock and an eternal darkness was swallowing you whole. Ezra tried to take in slow, deep breaths so he wouldn't embarrass himself and begin hyperventilating and have to rely upon Icarus dragging him the rest of the way into the cave itself.

"You okay?" Icarus asked, although not stopping.

"Yes," Ezra managed to gulp out.

"Not that much further now."

That's what you said an hour ago, Ezra thought irrationally.

But eventually the tunnel seemed to open up, and Ezra found he could breathe a little easier. Soon enough he and Icarus were getting to their feet and walking properly, although having to slouch a little to avoid hitting their heads on the rock ceiling.

Maybe it was just his eyes adjusting to the gloom, but Ezra could swear it was getting lighter as well.

"Home sweet home," Icarus announced.

The tunnel opened up into a largish cavern, and Ezra could hear the unmistakable sound of running water. Thank the skies, they weren't going to die of dehydration.

A blue glow suddenly burst into being in the corner, and Ezra had to shield his eyes. When he glanced back, Icarus was looking rather pleased with himself, illuminated by the lamp he was holding. “Told you it was a home away from home.”

There was a cot bed in the corner, along with a trunk that Ezra could only hope contained food. Now he could see more easily, he identified the source of the water—a small waterfall caused a pool that then siphoned off into a small stream that led into the darkness.

Icarus set the lamp down on the ground and opened the trunk. “Hungry?”

Ezra could have kissed him. “Yes!”

Icarus produced a small bundle and unwrapped it. “Catch.”

Ezra caught the hard, flat piece of tack. So it was only tack, but it smelled heavenly after not eating for hours and assuming that food wouldn’t be available anytime soon. “Thank you.”

“I provide my prisoner with food,” Icarus said, settling down on the cot. “I notice you never offered me any on your ship.”

“We weren’t on there long enough,” Ezra grumped, and bit into the tack before he realized exactly what Icarus said. “Since when was I *your* prisoner?”

“You have to admit, the tables have turned.”

“In neither of our favor,” Ezra argued.

“Really?” Icarus asked quizzically. “As far as I can tell, we’re in my home, eating my food, and later drinking my water. I think it’s decidedly in my favor.”

“If it helps you sleep tonight,” Ezra muttered.

“I intend to sleep very well, indeed.”

“You’re forgetting something.”

“What?”

“Jazz has your wings.”

He got the reaction he wanted. Icarus colored, looked mutinous, and then calmed himself. “That can be fixed later.”

Ezra decided to let *that* argument drop. Like Icarus had pointed out, the tables had turned. He was Icarus's "guest" now, and relying upon his hospitality and protection from both the elements and their pursuers. So he chewed on his tack and let the uncomfortable silence remain between them.

Chapter 16

JAZZ jerked awake when she heard the thundering of horses' hooves outside the ship. For a moment, she recalled a ghost story her parents used to tell her about a headless horseman that rode the streets of their town, and a small shiver of fear ran through her. But the logic that comes with full alertness soon prevailed, and she leaned over and switched on the sensors.

A carriage was pulling up. Jazz frowned. Ever since the development of airships and steamcars, the use of horse-drawn vehicles was really only left to the very poor or those who rejected technology as uncouth or work of the Devil.

But the person who stepped out of the carriage was definitely not from the Devil.

"Bart," Jazz breathed.

She jumped up from her seat and ran over to the cockpit door. As she was fumbling with the manual lock she had put on for extra security, she could see Bart being assisted down from the carriage by Albert. Dammit, she was even happy to see the old codger, even though he was the one person she sometimes found intimidating, if only because he knew Bart so well and was her first line of defense (when Jazz felt the position should be rightfully hers).

Jazz ran to the door and threw it open. Bart looked up at the noise and gave a wide smile that Jazz instantly wanted to kiss. Albert gave a small hmmph to himself, and discreetly looked down at the dirt.

Jazz couldn't help but let out a huge guffaw as she swept Bart up in her arms and whirled her around.

“Jazz,” Bart said sternly, even though there was a smile hiding behind it. “Just because we’re in the desert, it doesn’t mean we should lose all decorum.”

Trust her to defend social proprieties above all else. “Screw decorum,” Jazz said.

“Jazille!”

Jazz swore she could have heard Albert give a small, short laugh. “See?” she demanded of Bart. “Even Albert thinks decorum is best left in normal society.”

“I said no such thing!” Albert protested, and Bart waved it off.

“Don’t worry, Albert. I have long learned that when it comes to Jazille and Mr. Kneebone that one should take everything they say with a grain of salt.”

“I’ll take the horses around the back, m’lady,” Albert said, and taking them by the reins, he led them free of the carriage and shuffled off into the dark.

Bart looked at Jazz with a twinkle in her eye. “Now I believe you can, as you say, screw decorum and kiss me.”

Jazz did so happily, hungrily kissing Bart as if she hadn’t seen her for months rather than days. Bart pulled away and stroked her hair lovingly.

“How are you really, dear?”

Jazz looked away. “I feel like I’ve let Kneebone down. And I’m sorry for dragging you out here. I should have been able to manage this by myself.”

“Don’t be silly. I’m glad you contacted me. What else do you think I would have done, once I found out?”

“Come into the ship,” Jazz told her, and took her hand.

Lady Bart allowed herself to be led up the small gangplank into the cockpit, and was directed to Ezra’s seat.

“I don’t feel right sitting here,” she said. “Maybe I should sit in the back.”

“Kneebone would be happy to let you sit there. He would insist.”

“He likes playing the gentleman when he wants to.”

Jazz looked away again.

Bart reached across and took her hand. “You did what you had to do. And Ezra would have wanted it that way. That’s the kind of man he is.”

“I’m glad you came,” Jazz murmured. “I would have told you to stay away, but I know you would have come anyway.”

“Don’t you know it’s because I love you? There’s nobody else on this earth I would tear across it for to come to their aid.”

Jazz laughed. “You would do it for anybody if they asked, because that is the kind of woman *you* are, but I love you too.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” She rustled around in her pocket and produced a blue velvet box. “I brought you something.”

“I do like presents,” Jazz grinned. “But what’s the occasion?”

“Now we know our hearts belong together, of which I never had any doubt, I wanted you to wear something that would make sure a piece of me was with you always. No matter where you are.”

Jazz opened the box, and sighed happily. Resting upon a layer of cream velvet was a brooch unlike any other Jazz had ever seen. Brass wings unfurled from the top of the piece of jewelry, held together by small cogs, and below dangled a jade heart. “It’s beautiful,” she said, knowing that it was an understatement.

Lady Bart reached within the box and fastened the brooch upon the pocket sitting just above Jazz’s breast. “I had it made especially. The wings are yours, my lady of the skies, and the heart is mine. Together they make a fine pair.”

“They do indeed,” Jazz murmured, kissing her. “I wish I had a present to give you.”

“You’re all the present I need, as long as you always return home safe. No one has ever claimed my heart as fully as you have, Jazille. I mean, just look at me, I look a fright in this garb! I know you love wearing trousers, Jazille, but it’s hardly befitting for someone who isn’t a pilot.”

They were back to trading humorous jibes, but there was no denying the love beneath them. "I don't know," Jazz said, with a lusty glint in her eye. "I think you wear them very well."

"Of course I do. But that's not the point. I think now we should strike a deal. You have seen me in trousers, now I wish to see you in a dress one day."

Jazz scowled.

"Well?"

She knew resistance was useless, and besides she now had a perfect gift to give Bart in return. "Fine."

"Really?" Bart's eyes lit up with glee.

"Tradeabout's only fair, I guess."

"I must say, I thought you would kick up more of a fuss."

"How could I, after you've come all this way for me?"

Bart smiled. "That's very sweet of you, Jazille. But I have another idea. Even though you like me in these trousers, why don't you come over here and help me out of them?"

Unlike the thought of wearing a dress, Jazz was much less resistant to this question posed to her.

It was just as well Albert was spending the night in the carriage and leaving the cockpit to them alone.

EZRA refused the offer of the cot, as it was Icarus's "home" and he deserved it, but he was not foolish enough to resist the extra blanket to try and soften the ground for him to lie upon.

"It must be hard," Icarus said.

"What?" Ezra asked, his eyes flying open in the dark.

"The ground," Icarus replied.

"It's okay. I've slept on worse." What Ezra didn't remark on was the cold. It seeped up from the rock beneath him, heading straight to his bones. Icarus was spared the brunt of it, most likely from the cot he lay

on. Ezra envied him, but his pride stopped him from giving any indication that he was even thinking of it in passing.

“Comes with the life, doesn’t it?”

“At least I have a ship to sleep in at night,” Ezra said stoically. “Must be worse for you, seeing you rely upon wings for transportation.”

“I have a ship,” Icarus admitted, which laid another theory to rest for Ezra. “At least, I hope I still have a ship. It’s probably been destroyed or scavenged beyond fixing now.”

Ezra heard the regret in his tone and could relate. No captain could bear the loss of a ship. He tried some semblance of comforting. “You still have your wings.”

“No,” Icarus replied with a steeliness to his tone. “Your woman has my wings. If she’s still alive.”

Ezra wanted to throw aside his blankets and punch the man senseless. “Jazz is alive, and I won’t have you saying anything different.”

Icarus remained silent.

“And she’s *not* my woman.”

Silence, then a query. “She ain’t?”

“You know she’s not.”

“You’ve actually never said, one way or the other,” Icarus told him.

“You were the one who said I looked like the kind of person who would enjoy the kiss of another man.” Ezra glowered in the dark, even though he knew Icarus couldn’t see his expression. “I would have thought it was obvious Jazz wasn’t my woman, then.”

“Plenty of men who like men front around with women.”

“Well, I don’t play that way.”

“Good for you.”

It was hard to judge the intent of anything Icarus said. “Are you poking fun at me?”

"No," Icarus replied, sounding honest at least. "I don't stand for that kind of behavior."

Ezra laughed.

This time Icarus sounded affronted. "Now *you're* laughing at me."

"You're the most moral outlaw I've ever come across, is all."

"I'm sure a lot of us are."

"No," Ezra said. "You're unlike anybody else I've ever met."

There was a pause before Icarus spoke. "That's sounding dangerously like a compliment, Kneebone."

"It is, of sorts."

"So you've gone from kidnapper to admirer in the space of a day?"

As Icarus's tone was jovial, Ezra decided to echo it. "It's been more than a day, hasn't it?"

"We might have passed a twenty-four hour period."

In the dark, Ezra found he could say more to this almost-stranger than he had even been able to tell his best friend the day before. "I never liked going after you. But I needed the money."

"You told me that."

"And you probably still think ill of me for it."

"I have to say, it's not your best quality."

"It's not all that I am," Ezra said defensively.

"Most likely it isn't. But what did you need the money for so bad?"

Ezra rolled over onto his side. He was now staring at Icarus directly, but he was still little more than a lump in the dark. "I guess I was seeking my own kind of freedom."

"That's understandable. But what exact kind of freedom? You don't look malnourished. You own a ship, so you have a roof over your head."

"Is it a crime to want more than the basics?" Ezra demanded.

“No. But maybe you can quit acting so entitled.”

“Look, it’s easy to be all holier-than-thou—”

“You’re right,” Icarus said smugly, “it is, actually.”

“You damn—”

“If it was so darn hard, then I wouldn’t be doing it.”

“Look at the life you’re living,” Ezra said heatedly. “You can’t say that it’s an easy one. Living on the run. Avoiding capture.”

“I’m succeeding at it. So could you.”

“The bullet in your belly and the bullet in my leg might say otherwise. Next time they may be in our heads.”

“Maybe.”

“Doesn’t that worry you?”

“Of course,” Icarus admitted.

“Then why do you do it? Do you want to be a martyr?”

“It’s not for personal glory that I do it.”

“Bulldust,” Ezra scoffed.

There was a fumbling in the dark as Icarus sat up. “You think I’m lying?”

“To yourself, yeah. I think to keep on doing what you’re doing there must be a little bit of self-glory in it.”

“Self-glory?”

“Knowing you’re doing a good thing,” Ezra explained, “seeing the looks on folks’ faces when you hand them food or money. They look up to you. They’re singing songs about you. One man in a bar we met was ready to make an army for you.”

“I don’t care about that.”

“You’re not a god, you’re human. There would be a part of you that likes it.”

Icarus lay back down on the cot. “I’m not arguing with you about this anymore.”

“You tell me, then. Why do you do it?”

“Do you think there’s some big reason behind it? Well, there ain’t. Now shut the hell up.”

Ezra was now more than aware that he should drop it. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I said shut up, Kneebone. Or you can crawl back out through that damn hole and freeze out in that desert for all I care.”

Ezra knew he wouldn’t do that—after all, Icarus *was* the moral outlaw. But he decided not to test his patience, and closed his eyes. Sleep was a fickle friend that night.

THE cave grew colder with each passing hour.

Ezra was now shivering, and keeping his jaw clenched in order to stop his teeth from chattering. He wrapped his arms around himself in an effort to conserve body heat and drew his knees up to his chest. It seemed to do little to help.

Icarus was silent over on his cot; not even a snore escaped from him. Ezra envied his easy sleep.

The wound on his thigh itched. He wished a slight infection would bring on a fever that would at least allow him the illusion of body warmth. But his body temperature remained constant and malleable to that of the external forces of nature.

He shifted again, this time on to his right side, which faced Icarus on his cot. It was too dark for his eyes to adjust—the other man was just a vague shape in the dark.

“You’re cold,” Icarus said suddenly.

“Hope I didn’t wake you,” Ezra said gruffly.

“You did,” Icarus replied, but did not sound unduly upset by it.

“I guess it’s just the limestone rock. Ordinary rock probably wouldn’t be as cold.”

“We’re in the middle of the desert,” Icarus reminded him. “You’d most likely be cold regardless.”

“Don’t mind me.”

Icarus shuffled in the dark, and there was the sound of something being thrown aside. "Get in here."

"What?"

"Hurry. The cold's getting in. And bring those blankets."

"I'm fine."

"You're not. And you're making me cold just listening to you."

"I'm—"

"Stop fighting me on this," Icarus said impatiently. "Are you worried I'll kiss you again?"

"No!" Ezra protested. He was amused by his own vehemence. It sounded almost like horror at the suggestion, and Ezra honestly knew that horror would be the last reaction he would have if Icarus were to repeat his actions upon the mesa that long week ago.

"Should I be worried you'll try kissing me?"

Icarus sounded amused, and Ezra felt like he was being made fun of. But he decided to fight back by getting up without a word and fumbling his way in the dark over to the cot.

"Might be a tight fit," Icarus said, in the same amused tone. "But we'll make it work."

The cot *was* small; there would be every violation of any rules on personal space. Ezra crawled in beside Icarus; the other man kept his back to him, and Ezra founded himself molded along the curve of his spine, his chest flush with the ridges that he longed to run his hand over. Icarus's skin was warm and smelled still of the sun, along with a slight undercurrent of sweat that was pleasantly masculine and made Ezra's pecker want to sing with delight. He shifted slightly so his arousal would not be felt by Icarus and immediately worried that the damn thing would rear its head again in the unguarded recesses of sleep.

But he was now warm, and he felt comfortable despite the cramped quarters.

"Better?" Icarus asked.

The words rumbled through his skin, and passed through into Ezra's chest. Ezra closed his eyes and let the sensation was over him.

“Much better,” he said, and wondered if Icarus was now feeling the same, almost sensual, movement between them.

“Good,” Icarus said. “Maybe now we can both get some sleep.”

Before Icarus could slip away into dreams, Ezra cleared his throat. It sounded like thunder in the darkness. “I thought you didn’t care if I froze to death or not.”

“Just be glad you’re no longer cold, Kneebone.”

Ezra took a deep breath. “I just wanted to let you know some things.”

“Shoot.”

“You may want to know why I was doing what I was doing.”

“Own it, Kneebone. Abducting me.”

“*Fine*,” Ezra said, trying not to let his irritation come out in his tone. “I was trading you for money. But it was for me and Jazz, so we could set up our own business.”

“Really?” Icarus snorted. “That makes it all okay, then!”

It was maddening to be fighting with Icarus and yet lying so intimately with him at the same time. “Jazz wanted nothing to do with it, but I forced her.”

“From what I’ve seen of her, she doesn’t look like the kind of woman who can be forced into anything.”

“Well, she was pressured. She’s my friend. I guess it came down to the lesser of two evils.”

“Glad that’s sorted, then.”

Ezra gave a frustrated sigh that stirred the hairs on the back of Icarus’s neck. “You know how the other day you were talking about Jazz knowing what it was like growing up in a town like Settler’s Pass?”

Icarus nodded, his hair brushing against the tip of Ezra’s nose.

“Well, I knew too. I grew up dirt poor. In a town worse than Settler’s Pass.”

“What town?”

“Daneen.”

He could feel Icarus stiffen against him. “You’re right. That’s a bad town.”

“It didn’t seem so, growing up there. It was all I knew. And it wasn’t all bad.”

“It wasn’t?” Icarus asked.

“No. I remember my folks taking me to a skyshow once. It seemed like everybody in the town went. It was the early days of airships, and they seemed like something out of a fairy book. It was then that I knew what I wanted to be when I grew up.”

“A bounty hunter?”

“Ah, forget it.” Ezra tried to turn his back on the man to put some distance between them, but the size of the cot made it impossible. He ended up floundering uselessly, and remaining on his side with his chest against Icarus’s back again.

“I’m sorry,” Icarus said. “Look, it’s a nice story.”

“Nice?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Actually, I don’t. Must be your holier-than-thou attitude screwing up the transmission.”

Icarus twisted and turned, and effortlessly now faced Ezra. “I don’t mean to be holier than thou.”

He was so close that Ezra could make out his features in the dark. And even though it made him uncomfortable, he wouldn’t drop his gaze. “Can we just not start from scratch? I think we’ve been through enough now.”

Icarus stared at him, but didn’t answer.

Ezra took a deep breath. “Look, I just wanted to let you know... things have changed. I know it looks much better from your view than mine, now that the tables have turned, but even if they were to change again... I’m not out to turn you in anymore.”

Icarus shifted, and Ezra held his breath as their bodies were now even closer—which had seemed impossible mere moments ago, but a chasm had been breached nonetheless.

“Kneebone,” Icarus said, laughing. “You can be a gentleman of the skies, after all. I knew it would happen eventually.” He paused. “Now I’ll tell you something. I may have grown up in a town like Settler’s Pass, but I wasn’t one of the poor ones. I just saw what poverty could do to people, and knew that others could help them but chose not to.”

Part of Ezra was angry—after all, it just made Icarus another rich kid who slummed probably to make their daddy filthy mad. But Icarus had an honesty and earnestness to him that made it more than apparent he believed in the cause he had signed himself up for.

He waited for Icarus to elaborate, but instead there only came a slight snore. Ezra closed his eyes and waited for sleep to come to him as well.

IN THAT surreal state between dreaming and waking, Ezra felt as if all his senses had been kicked up a notch, like Jazz hitting the throttle on the *Lilliput*. The natural scent of the man lying next to him was invading and enveloping him, and the blood that worked beneath his skin to heat it was part of a river that threatened to suck him in and whisk him away from shore. He rested his cheek against Icarus’s warm back—he must have turned again during sleep—and couldn’t help but be reminded of the time he took Lee while imagining it was the man he actually wanted. He could feel his unrepentant cock hardening, and he shifted the lower part of his body away from Icarus so that the other man wouldn’t feel it.

He pressed his thumb into the inflamed flesh above his bullet wound, and bit on his tongue so that he wouldn’t cry out. The stab of pain that followed made the part of his body with its own will calm down, and he wiped away the sweat that had just started beading at his temples.

Icarus muttered something in his sleep and burrowed in closer to Ezra.

Nothing I can do about it, Icarus thought. He rested his forehead against the hollow between Icarus’s shoulderblades, and quickly fell asleep again.

JAZZ woke with an uneasy feeling. Bart lay beside her on the floor, her arm draped across Jazz's waist. All seemed quiet, but Jazz knew to trust her senses. And they were telling her something was coming.

She jumped up, reaching back down for her trousers and shirt. The sun glinted off her winged brooch and the jade heart sparkled, filling her with a new joy that she had to quell quickly. Barefoot, she padded over to the console and fired it up. The sensors hadn't detected anything yet, but she had set them on a lower range because of the power they would chew up. She couldn't afford the engines to die out on her before they managed to make the ship airborne again.

She recalibrated the sensor array, and it immediately squealed a proximity alert.

Bart immediately sat up. "Jazz?"

"Get dressed," Jazz told her. "We have company."

Bart was on her feet before Jazz finished speaking. "And we don't even have any refreshments to offer them! What kind of hosts are we, to be caught out so?" As cool and collected as ever, she stepped into her own clothes. "I suppose there are some benefits to not wearing a corset."

"It does make it difficult to fire a rifle," Jazz agreed.

Bart reached into her bag and produced her laser pistol. "Which is why I always pack my own. Although it never hurts to have two." She opened the weapons grille next to Ezra's chair and pulled out a rather rusty-looking model. "And wearing a corset never seems to impede my prowess with a gun, but I must admit I'm glad I'm without it on this occasion." She frowned as she checked the reserves. "This needs powering."

"Damn that Ezra," Jazz fumed. "He's meant to keep stock of that. I fly the ship, he handles the weapons. Is it that hard a concept for him?"

"I'll be fine," Bart told her. "I'm an excellent shot. I won't need that many chances at taking down our aggressors."

“I love your confidence in yourself.”

Bart swiftly crossed to her and gave her a passionate kiss. “You man the ship’s guns. I must go and prepare Albert.”

“Be careful,” Jazz told her, even though it didn’t have to be said.

“I know you’ll have my back,” Bart said, and slipped over to the door. It slid open, and she ran out in her bare feet to the carriage outside.

Jazz grinned. In her pants, with her shirt unbuttoned so that a fair amount of bosom was showing, and her unshod feet—not to mention the rifle in her hand—Lady Bart had never looked so alluring.

But it wasn’t the time to be thinking of that. Jazz, lit by the green glow of the console, watched the approach of the men on horseback. It was too dark, and they were still too far away, to make out their features, but she would have bet on a high hand that they were the same men she had driven off earlier. The cowards had decided to come back in the dead of night, thinking they would pick off a lone female.

They would soon think differently.

She swung the cam around to focus upon Bart. Albert was now climbing out of the carriage, looking less than regal in his faded longjohns, and Jazz hoped she would have the opportunity to rib him about it later. She was also glad that the horses were around the other side of the ship, so that they wouldn’t get caught in the line of fire.

“Bart,” she said, speaking into the mouthpiece connected to the external comms, “you and Albert come inside.”

“*We’re setting up a frontline here,*” she heard Bart reply through the static.

“No, you’re not,” Jazz said firmly. “Get in here.”

“*Darling, you can’t make me do what I have no intention of doing.*” Bart deliberately kept her back to the cam, which infuriated Jazz.

I guess I do have to have her back, then. She’s as stubborn as Ezra.

She bit on her lip to stop thinking of Ezra, and it was only at the first taste of her own blood that she stopped.

The riders began to fan out, hoping to cover a larger area. They had obviously noted the presence of the carriage by now and knew that she either had company or that somebody else had come along to finish her off and therefore they had competition for the rights to salvaging.

Jazz could only just imagine Bart pursing her lips and saying, “How mercenary.”

Indeed.

Bart and Albert were positioned by the carriage, using it as a small fort to cover them. Even though the power on one of the pistols was low, Bart still had an advantage over her butler. He was using a traditional rifle and would have to reload with lead bullets, while Bart could consistently keep firing.

But that was where Jazz would come in. The riders were now in range to hear the external speakers of the *Lilliput*. She activated them, and announced clearly, “This is the *Lilliput*. I suggest, once again, that you withdraw. This is your first, and final, warning.”

Their response was a volley of bullets that scraped along the *Lilliput*’s bow.

“Those damn Yeggs!” she cursed. And after she had just patched up the hull!

Bart and Albert were already returning fire. Jazz swiveled the cannons on the port side of the ship and let loose. On the console, she could see dirt kicked up in the air and the horses rear up. It was what she wanted; she would hate to see fine horses killed for the sake of their rascalion owners.

They were persistent, that’s for sure. Their numbers were even, and Jazz and her cohorts had the might of a ship’s arms behind them. The attackers would probably be hoping to dodge them long enough to dry up their weapons and then come in with their own fully loaded. Jazz knew Bart was cluey enough to realize this as well—after all, she hadn’t come to be Lady Bartholomew through looks and luck alone.

Jazz held off firing, and silence fell across the desert again.

The men regrouped, having turned in a circle to fall behind a short distance again.

Jazz leaned in to the speaker mic and whispered, “Hold off fire as much as you can. They’re trying to make us run out of bullets.”

She saw Bart and Albert nod tersely. Bart was probably rolling her eyes at the fact Jazz thought it necessary to tell her. But this wasn’t a time for miscommunications or hurt feelings.

Then there was the thundering of hooves across the sandy floor again. They were coming.

Guns remained quiet on both sides. The silence was the most threatening part of their attack.

Until Jazz watched Bart leap onto the step of the carriage and rest her arm against the roof while aiming the pistols in both hands in one fluid motion. She fired and one of the men fell from his horse, which subsequently took off in the opposite direction.

With pride in her heart for her talented lover, Jazz watched the other men drop back warily. Now was the time to end this once and for all.

“Gentlemen,” she said into the mic, “you have no hope of taking this ship from us. I will allow you to pick up your fallen comrade and retreat. You have exactly one minute. After that, we will fire upon you all without regret. You can see my friend here means business.”

And at that, Bart fired a warning shot into the air. It couldn’t have been more perfect unless it was rehearsed.

There was no word from either of the remaining riders. One trotted forward to pick up the groaning man Bart had shot, and throw him haphazardly over the back of his saddle. Then the would-be salvagers faded away into the darkness of the night.

The strange new crew of the *Lilliput* remained on alert for a few more minutes, however, just in case their words weren’t heeded. When Jazz was satisfied, with extensive checking of the sensors, that they had gone, she crossed over the floor of the ship and reopened the door.

“All clear,” she announced.

Albert only now seemed to realize he was clad in just his underwear, and blushed like a schoolgirl, which made Jazz laugh. Bart jumped down from the carriage and ran to her, drawing her up into a passionate kiss.

“Wasn’t I positively daring?” she asked.

“You were wonderful,” Jazz agreed.

“I could have picked off the rest, easily.”

“I’m sure that you would, had we needed to.”

Bart kissed her again. “I’m disappointed that I didn’t have to. It was fun.”

“Lady Bartholomew!” Albert admonished her.

She looked back at him. “Oh, Albert! It’s not like one gets to practice on live targets at the range. This needed a higher level of skill, and I rose to the challenge most admirably.”

“Most admirably,” Jazz echoed.

“Sleep well, dear Albert,” Bart said. “And don’t disturb us until we rise of our own volition.”

Albert blushed again.

Taking pity on the older, staid man, Jazz gave him a small smile. “We’ll be getting up at first light, Albert. I want to get those parts replaced and get the *Lilliput* back in the air by afternoon.”

Albert nodded. “Right you are, Miss.”

Bart linked her arm through Jazz’s, and together they re-entered the ship, sealing the door behind them, while Albert climbed back into the carriage and wished that Jazz would sleep through the first rays of the morning sun and allow them a little more rest.

Chapter 17

EZRA opened his eyes, feeling colder than he had last time he had been awake.

Icarus was no longer in bed with him. Ezra rolled over now that he had the room, and winced at the fact that the sun had risen and the cave was no longer dark but an impressive shade of murky cream, diffused by the light now coming in through the holes that must have been in the roof leading to the outside desert.

He sat up, looking around for Icarus.

And found him standing, naked, with his back to him, beneath the small waterfall that ran freely on the large wall that opened up the cavern.

Ezra was pretty sure his mouth was hanging open as he drank in the sight of the man blissfully unaware of his watchful gaze. Small rivers of water ran over his dark hair and down his back, coursing over the creamy skin until they spilled over the rise of his buttocks.

Ezra heard Icarus sigh, and the man turned so that he was now facing him. But his eyes remained closed, as he obviously enjoyed the water and the sensations it was causing across his body. He had a small bar of tar soap, and he lathered himself up. But Ezra could no longer watch that. His eyes, unbidden, had dropped down past the many square inches of flesh of the chest he had committed to memory, past the navel, which had a healthy tuft of hair arrowing to the sweetest of sights—the thick bush that accentuated rather than disguised the delicate but sturdy shaft that lay between his legs.

As Ezra continued to watch, Icarus began to soap himself down there, making sure he got a thorough cleansing. The suds began to run

down his legs, which were surprisingly wiry with strong veins. Ezra guessed he got a lot of exercise running around the desert from one scrape to another.

“Enjoying the view?” came Icarus’s voice, interrupting Ezra’s appreciative summation of his body.

Ezra knew he should have been chastened, put in his place, but he couldn’t bring himself to muster the required response. Instead, he met Icarus’s eye and said simply, “You’re beautiful.”

Without a hint of self-consciousness, Icarus chuckled. “That’s not exactly a compliment that makes a man feel comfortable with himself.”

Feeling his own self-consciousness slip away, Ezra pushed the point. “It’s the truth.”

Icarus stared at him for a long moment. “I guess I should say thanks?”

“Say whatever you want,” Ezra said gruffly.

Icarus nodded down toward his pile of clothes that lay messily beside the bed. “Pass them up to me.”

Ezra was hoping for more, but he obliged and crossed the short expanse of the cave to pass Icarus’s clothes up to him. Icarus began to wash them with the soap, methodically rinse them beneath the small waterfall, and beat the excess water out upon the rock shelf next to him.

“Won’t they be uncomfortable to get into wet?” Ezra asked.

“Would rather they were clean,” Icarus said. “Plus they’ll dry off quickly in the sun.”

“We’re not staying here?”

Icarus gave him an amused look. “Did you think we were going to hole up in here forever?”

“I wasn’t thinking that far ahead,” Ezra admitted.

“Well, I have somewhere else where we can go. And we can get horses from there to ride to the nearest town. It’s a bit of a hike, though.”

Ezra nodded.

“You might want to clean yourself up as well,” Icarus suggested.

“Are you saying I smell?”

“I might realize that you do, now that I’m clean and my own stink isn’t covering you up,” Icarus said lightly.

“Well, maybe I should.”

“And maybe,” Icarus teased, although there was an edge to his tone, “just maybe, I’ll get to see if you’re as beautiful as me.”

Ezra knew they were heading into dangerous territory, but he felt compelled to ignore all the warning signs and just plunge ahead. Icarus stepped out of the natural rock pool, and Ezra began unbuttoning his shirt. He was just slipping it off his shoulders as Icarus pushed aside his drying clothes and perched upon the ledge to watch him.

“Didn’t know I would have an audience,” Ezra said with a frown.

“You had your watch,” Icarus replied. “Now it’s my turn.”

Emboldened, Ezra let his shirt fall to the floor.

“Messy,” Icarus noted.

“I thought you could hand them up to me later.”

“Sure.”

The sound of the zipper of Ezra’s jeans was disconcertingly loud in the cavern. He pulled them down, along with his underwear, in one easy motion. He stepped out of his jeans and left them puddled on the floor. Trying to appear as free and easy as Icarus, he stood there for a moment as Icarus appraised him. His cock felt heavy between his legs, and he tried through the power of sheer will to make the usually unruly member play dead.

“Well?” Ezra asked as the silence remained in the air for some time.

As if he was drawn out of a trance, Icarus looked up at him. “I guess you’re not so bad yourself.”

Ezra laughed. “I think I was better with my compliment.”

“I don’t want you getting a big head,” Icarus said, and when he was aware of the possible innuendo that could come from his statement, he flushed slightly.

“Oh no?” Ezra teased.

“Don’t look so pleased with yourself,” Icarus admonished him. “Neither of us is huge, but we’re perfectly adequate.”

Ezra finally moved past him and stepped into the rock pool, pleased that Icarus didn’t take his eyes off him. “I don’t know,” he said, trying not to wince as he realized just how cold the water really was. “You seem more than adequate.”

Icarus really didn’t seem to take compliments well. He pushed the bar of soap into the small pool of water Ezra was standing in. “You’ll need this. You stink.”

Ezra laughed and pushed his head beneath the water. It was freezing, but he liked it. He had been run through dusty towns, kidnapped and imprisoned in greasy holds, fallen through skies, and slept in gritty caves over the past couple of days, and this was his only opportunity for who knew how long to get any semblance of clean. He scrubbed at his hair with the soap and grinned as he could feel it getting cleaner. He then soaped the rest of his body, and even though he was blinded by the water, he thought he would tease Icarus by paying special attention to his groin.

“Clothes!” he called out, and felt them slap against his body with force before falling into the pool of water he was standing in. “Charming.”

He scrubbed at his dirty clothes. He knew it wasn’t a proper wash, but it would be somewhat better than the state they had been in before. Ezra was surprised by how finicky he had become now that he was away from his creature comforts; what he wouldn’t give for properly washed clothes, a cold beer, and the latest download of the netpaper.

Which made him think of Icarus. He pulled his head out of the water and wiped his eyes free. Icarus was still sitting on the edge of the pool, watching him without any hint of self-consciousness at being caught doing so.

“How do you stand it?” Ezra asked.

The question seemed to catch the other man off guard. “Stand what?” Icarus asked suspiciously.

Now feeling self-conscious himself, Ezra stepped directly out of the waterfall and sat beside him, crossing one leg over the other so that his sex lay concealed. "Living like this."

Icarus's eyes narrowed and his gaze suddenly dropped to the floor, where the water running off Ezra's body pooled by his feet and turned the sand into mud. "You get used to it."

"But why? Can you really see yourself doing this forever?"

Defensively, Icarus stood up. "What else am I going to do?"

Knowing that he was sounding like he was trying to placate a caged animal ready to strike, Ezra kept his tone low and, he hoped, comforting. "You sound like an educated man. I'm sure there's lots you can do."

Icarus laughed bitterly. "You don't sound like a hick, yourself. And yet you're flying airships and acting as a mercenary. Should I aspire to be you?"

"There's nothing wrong with me," Ezra spat, and then realized he was lying. Both to himself as well as Icarus. "Okay, there's some things I could improve upon. If I could take it back, kidnapping you, for a start."

"Thanks for that." Icarus had stopped pacing, but he made no motion to sit down again.

And Ezra suddenly felt his own nakedness. Not just the fact that his pecker was hanging out for all to see, but that he wanted sorely to communicate with this other man. About his feelings, no less. Jazz would have a field day if she knew. "I told you before, I was desperate. But I was wrong. But you know what? I'm glad I met you. Because there's something between us. Maybe I'm just picking up on how much you hate me, and if so, I'm an idiot. But you kissed me that day on the mesa, and it wasn't just for fun."

His voice echoed in the chamber, and the last couple of words reverberated back to him. He waited a moment, then wet his lips and threw all caution to the wind. "Was it?"

"Maybe not." The words came out of Icarus like molasses, slow and resistant.

But his actions proved otherwise. Before Ezra even knew what was going on, Icarus had crossed over to him and suddenly he was holding the other man in his arms as he pressed up against his wet body, fingers scratching at the beard on his cheeks as they found a stronghold with which to hold him in place as their lips met. Ezra allowed no resistance as Icarus insistently laid claim to him with his tongue. The cave seemed to disappear from around them as if they were spirited away to the mesa again, where they had first given in to this temptation of each other. Was that a hawk Ezra heard, crying in the distance, even if he was aware that they were still beneath the ground and far away from the sky?

Icarus pulled away from him, and Ezra had to cross his legs once again to try and hide the state of his arousal. Icarus had a sly grin on his face; he had obviously noticed.

“Get dressed,” he instructed Ezra. “We have a long walk ahead of us.”

WHEN Jazz awoke in the morning, Lady Bart was not beside her. Perplexed, she yawned and stretched in the sunlight streaming through the cockpit window. She reached for her clothes and dressed hurriedly.

Stepping out of the ship, she was bemused by the sight of Lady Bart and Albert crouched around a pitfire they had built themselves. Bart was laying strips of bacon down in a heavy griddle, which Albert then took from her and settled amongst the stones and wood of the fire. The meat immediately began to sizzle and spit, and Jazz’s stomach growled in appreciation.

Bart heard the foreign but recognizable sound and turned. “Jazille! That’s most unbecoming!”

Jazz shrugged. “What can I say? I’m hungry.”

“It might be a while,” Albert said. “I still have to make the bread.”

“Fresh bread?” Jazz asked. “Have I died and gone to heaven?”

“Thankfully not,” Bart replied. “But start getting the ship fixed, or we may just die out here after all. Especially if those ruffians come back with numbers.”

Jazz took the hint and started rummaging through the carriage looking for the parts that Bart and Albert had brought with them. She could have kissed them as she gathered up the brown paper parcels in her arms; in fact, she could have kissed the parts as well. The sooner the *Lilliput* was in the skies, the better off they would all be.

Ezra couldn’t help but cross her thoughts again. She felt guilty for thinking of hot buttered bread with bacon when she didn’t even know where her partner was, and if he even had anything to eat for his own breakfast.

She stepped back out into the sunlight and caught Bart watching her. “You will let me take a break to eat, won’t you?” she asked.

Bart smiled. “Depends how hard you’ve been working until it’s ready.”

That was a challenge if there ever was one. With the underbelly of the ship her destination, Jazz made sure to put a little extra wiggle in her hip to tease her woman. The things you did for love.

ICARUS hadn’t been kidding when he said there was a long walk ahead of them. But how long was it, really, in the scheme of things? As he stumbled along in the heat and the choking dust, Ezra knew that the distance they had crossed in the past couple of hours would have been little more than five or ten minutes in the *Lilliput*.

Icarus had resisted telling him where they were headed, and Ezra had wondered if maybe kissing him again would drag his secrets out into the open, but his mouth was too dry. And Icarus had insisted that the amount of water they had managed to collect from the cave had to be rationed carefully in the heat. So Ezra decided his saliva wasn’t to be wasted at all—even if it being wasted on a kiss was better reason than most.

“Come on,” Icarus called over his shoulder. “You’re slowing us down.”

"I need a break," Ezra managed to say in between pants for breath.

"You know what your problem is?"

"At the moment I'd say it's this bullet in my leg, and you." Even when struggling to get words out, Ezra could always rely upon a cutting remark to make it through.

"Your problem," Icarus continued, undeterred, "is that you're too used to sitting in your comfortable ship all day. You don't get enough exercise."

Ezra couldn't believe what he was hearing. He was being lectured to about his exercise regime, or lack of one? "How much exercise are you getting a day when your wings carry you around and do all the hard work?"

"I'm not the one begging for a break, am I?"

Ezra would have swung for him if the distance between them hadn't been beyond the reach of his arms. He didn't have the time anyway, as he tripped over his own fool feet and fell face down in the dirt.

He was surprised, and strangely touched, when he felt the slight pressure of Icarus's hand upon his arm, helping him back on to his feet.

"You don't have to resort to such tactics to get us to stop," Icarus said with a gentle smile.

Ezra decided to play along. "Nothing else was working."

"Five minutes," Icarus commanded. "And one mouthful of water."

"You're all heart," Ezra muttered as he thankfully sought the desert floor again to rest upon.

Icarus, he noticed, remained standing, his hands on his hips and his chest gleaming in the sun thanks to the light sheen of sweat upon it.

A strangled beeping noise suddenly sounded from his wrist. Ezra almost jumped up, the sound was so foreign to him after a day of its silence.

"What's that?" Icarus asked.

"My cuff," Ezra replied, tapping the object in question carefully.

"I thought it was broken?"

"So did I. Maybe my fall jostled something within it to work again."

"Don't rely upon it to work for long, then," Icarus advised him. "One more shake and it'll probably self-destruct again."

"Oh, ye of little faith," Ezra chided him. "Technology is the marvel of our age, wingboy."

"Did you just call me *wingboy*?"

Ezra grinned up at him. "Yeah. You like it?"

"No!" Icarus protested, although the corner of his mouth twitched a little. "Anyway, technology is only a marvel when it works for you."

"I hope you don't think like that when you're relying upon your wings to keep you up in the air."

"They're a means to an end, just like anything else."

"You're sounding hypocritical," Ezra observed as he pulled a long thin wire out of the wrist cuff and used it to pry open the casing.

"Maybe. But don't you think we're going too fast, too soon? There seem to be more ships in the skies than on the seas now. And with this talk of mechanical humans—"

"Mechmen," Ezra corrected him, the wire now between his teeth.

"What?"

"They're called mechmen."

"I don't care what they're called. They're just... wrong."

"I had no idea you were a Luddite."

"Maybe they had the right idea. They challenged the iron revolution of their time; we're just lying down and letting it run right over us."

"I don't think we're in any danger of having mechmen take over the government," Ezra said, grinning, removing the wire and using it to slide two small pins back into place. There was a spark, and the cuff squealed in what sounded like pain.

"Is it working?" Icarus asked.

Ezra stared at the now-mute cuff. “I... don’t know,” he admitted.

“See?” Icarus said. “There’s technology for you. Now let’s get moving again, we’ve wasted enough time.”

Ezra struggled back to his feet. “I bet you wouldn’t say that if Jazz suddenly appeared in the *Lilliput* to give us a lift the rest of the way.”

“Maybe not. Especially if she gave me my wings back.”

Ezra didn’t know if he’d won the argument, but he let himself believe so, hoping it would make the rest of their “walk” bearable.

JAZZ was attaching the new filter and enjoying the smell of baking pan bread when an alarm sounded from within the cockpit. She pulled herself out from the belly of the ship and ran to the source of the noise. Lady Bart and Albert were standing up, obviously waiting for her to make an appearance.

“Are we under attack?” Bart asked, her rifle at the ready.

“It’s not the sensor alarm,” Jazz told them as she raced past them and up the short gangplank into the cockpit. The sun was scorching through the window; she’d be happier when the ship was fully functioning and they could get the air back on. Or at least fly with the windows open.

She could feel Bart behind her as she studied the sensors.

“If it isn’t the raiders again, then what is wrong?” Bart asked.

“It’s strange,” Jazz said slowly as she reacted to the readouts she was getting. “But it looks like I’m getting a signal from Kneebone again.”

“That’s good news!” Bart exclaimed. “Isn’t it?”

Jazz bit her lip. “It’s a very weak signal, and it keeps dropping in and out. That can’t be good.”

“But it means he’s alive, does it not?”

Jazz loved her for trying to find the silver lining, and she wished she could lie to put Bart's mind at ease, at least. But she couldn't do that. "We can hope so, but it doesn't prove it, no."

"Still, darling," Bart said gently, resting her hand upon Jazz's shoulder, "it's better news than we had a few hours ago, yes?"

Jazz turned and kissed her deeply, closing her eyes at the thought of how good, and how right, the feeling of Lady Bart's curves against her own was. It was like they fitted together, and the world was better for it. After all, if Bart hadn't been here, Jazz would be convinced that the world was now Ezra Kneebone-less—also another world Jazz didn't want to be a part of.

"You're right. It is."

"Then get back to work. We'll have breakfast, you'll fix... whatever it is you have to fix. I'm afraid Albert had to deal with the order for the parts. I'm good with a gun, but not an engine."

"I *know* you're good with a gun," Jazz grinned. "The engine, well, that I could help you with in time."

"All that grease?" Lady Bart shuddered. "It's becoming on you, dear, but not on me."

Jazz kissed her again and, buoyed by affection and the blind hope that her friend was alive, she went back to the engine and Lady Bart, back to bread, bacon and Albert.

"ARE we there yet?"

"Almost."

Icarus's reply wasn't exactly the most heartening that Ezra had ever heard, but it was a darn sight better than a plain "no."

Icarus turned back to him. "Just over this ridge."

That statement was sweet relief to Ezra. He nodded and followed Icarus on the steep slope. He was almost staggering now, but as he felt the end was in sight, he pushed himself harder. Icarus was clearly sweating as well, but he still breathed far easier than his companion.

“Do you need me to carry you the rest of the way, Kneebone?”

“I wouldn’t offer if I were you, because I won’t refuse.”

Icarus’s laughter floated back down to him, and Ezra wished he could grab the invisible tendrils and hold onto them in the hope they would pull him along. Instead he found himself concentrating on the shape and movement of Icarus’s ass, shifting beneath the denim of his jeans as he strode along. He closed his eyes and thought of how he had seen the man bare, his skin a topography just waiting to be charted. But their relationship was just as mysterious as an uncharted region, with just as many unknown spaces and monsters within it. It was indefinable, and every time Ezra felt he was getting somewhere with Icarus, the other man would back off. It frustrated Ezra to be continually chasing and having Icarus slip deftly away out of his grip. He didn’t just have wings; he seemed to be made from cloud itself.

Had Lady Bart been this hard to catch for Jazz? Was it easier when you were both women? Somehow Ezra thought that unlikely. Love and sex and all that chasing seemed as unquantifiable on both sides of the fence.

“Just a few steps more,” Icarus announced. He was standing on top of the ridge now, looking at what lay below.

Ezra was thankful for the fact that he had daydreamed his way up the rest of the slope. The brain could be a marvelous distraction sometimes when you needed it to be. He joined Icarus upon the edge, and they towered above the valley that stretched out before them.

“Where are we?” Ezra asked.

“Home away from home,” Icarus replied.

“Not another cave?”

Icarus laughed. “No. Look over there.”

Ezra followed his line of sight, and a small number of wooden buildings slowly made themselves distinguishable against the stark background of the desert.

“This is where you live?”

Icarus shook his head. “Family.”

It was the first time Ezra had ever heard him mention the existence of any family. "Who?"

"You'll see."

"This whole mysterious act," Ezra said, as they began making their way down the other side of the ridge, "is very fitting when you are the winged boy of the skies, showering the poor with food and coins. But I think I can be let in on the rest of it now."

"And what fun would that be for me?" Icarus asked.

"I guess no fun at all," Ezra muttered, and continued to follow him into the valley.

JAZZ wiped the sweat off her forehead and began screwing the filter back into place. It was proving resistant; the angle was such that it was practically impossible for her to hold it and screw it in without a third hand to add stability. She cursed as it slipped yet again, and threw the wrench away in fury.

Bart had to duck so she wouldn't get hurt as she shuffled in the small entryway. "It's a good thing your aim isn't as proficient as your engineering skills."

Jazz continued lying on the floor and staring up at the recalcitrant engine. "It seems they're on a par at the moment."

Bart offered her a plate that had a more than generous serving of bread and bacon. "I brought you breakfast, as I knew you would most likely want to work straight through."

Jazz sat up and took the plate gratefully. "Thank you. Is there coffee?"

Bart produced it with a patient smile.

"You're too good to me."

"I know, darling. But you're worth it."

Jazz laughed, and wrapped a thick chunk of bread around two rashers of bacon. She bit into it and groaned with appreciation.

"It's hardly *haute cuisine*, but it will do for today," Bart sighed. "I am hoping we may be back in civilization by nightfall."

"I agree. I just want Kneebone safe back on board ship. Then I can kick his ass for making me worry so."

Bart gave her a weary look. "You both need some classes in etiquette."

"You don't need etiquette in the skies."

"There are rules of etiquette everywhere. *Even* in the skies."

"I'll take your word for it," Jazz said, swallowing the rest of her sandwich and starting to roll another.

"You eat like a man," Lady Bart said with disdain.

"Only when I'm in a hurry," Jazz shrugged. "You've seen me eat without the benefit of a trough before."

Bart giggled, and ducked her head as if she wouldn't be found out for doing so. When she looked back up, her society mask was back on. "Even so, drink your coffee and let's hit the road. Or the sky. Whichever gets us out of here."

Jazz used the coffee to swallow down the rest of her meal and drank it in three huge gulps, if only to play up to Bart more. As Bart took the plate and mug, she gave her a swift kiss. Bart responded by giving her a light tap across the cheek. That only made Jazz laugh, unable to stop even as she rolled back under the engine and commenced working again.

EZRA and Icarus were only halfway up the path leading to the house when the front door flew open and a tall woman raced from within to greet them. The string from her apron came loose and flew free in the wake she left behind her.

"Tobias!" she yelled.

"Tobias?" Ezra asked in surprise, and Icarus steadfastly ignored him as he swept the woman up in his arms, even though she towered over him by a good three inches.

“Ruth,” he murmured.

Ruth came to her senses and took notice of Ezra. “Let me down, Tobias! And where is your shirt? You look like a savage! I almost thought you were one for a moment as you came up to the house. Except they’re far cleaner than you!”

“Calm down, Ruth. I got in a little bit of strife, that’s all. And there’s no ‘savages’ of any kind around here except the Maulson family.”

“That’s true. And a little bit of strife? You must be in a whole lot of it if you’ve ended up here again.” She peered out behind him to glare at Ezra. “Who’s this?”

“Ezra,” Ezra said politely, stepping forward and offering his hand. “Ezra Kneebone.”

Ruth sized him up, and did not take it. “Friend of yours?” she asked Icarus.

Icarus grinned. “I’m not sure. He’s a bounty hunter. I’m in his custody.”

“Hang on a minute!” Ezra protested.

Ruth snorted. “If you’ve ended up here, I’d think it’s more likely he’s now in your custody. Or under your protection.”

“Both of our worlds have gone topsy turvy,” Icarus said, giving Ezra a knowing look. Ezra didn’t know how to take it, so looked back at Ruth.

“Are you hungry, Mr. Kneebone?”

Food, the universal basis for finding common ground. He would take whatever he got. “I’m famished.”

“Lucky it’s lunchtime,” Ruth said. “You two are not sitting at my table looking like that, however. You can get washed up in the barn.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Icarus said mockingly.

“Don’t sass me. I’ve got a large wooden spoon in the house I could paddle you with.”

“Kneebone might like that.”

Ruth clucked indignantly and shook her head before gathering up her skirt and heading back into the house. Ezra was amazed at the change that had come over Icarus—*Tobias*—no, he still couldn't see him as anyone but Icarus—ever since they had ended up in this valley. Somehow he had stripped away his defensiveness, and reverted to... well, a kid brother around his older sister.

It was like Icarus and Tobias were two entirely different people.

Ezra wondered which one was the real man. And which one was he interested in, really?

"IS IT all done?" Bart called as Jazz passed her and Albert on the way to the cockpit.

Jazz watched them loading up the carriage for a moment, shielding her eyes against the sun. "I think so. It's time to flick the switch and hope for the best."

"Should there be some kind of ceremony?"

"It's not a launch."

"Still, it feels like one."

"Just cross your fingers and hope for the best."

As Jazz made her way into the cockpit, she could hear Lady Bart sigh and say to Albert, "Oh well. It's not like we had champagne with us, anyway."

EZRA closed his eyes and smiled with the bliss of deep contentment as he slid under the water until his nose was in danger of being submerged. The water was cool, and Icarus had scented it with petals of some kind that Ruth had foisted upon them, claiming that she wanted men who smelled good at the table. She had even insisted upon taking their clothing, laying out spare replacements from her husband's wardrobe. He was apparently away on business for a couple of days, and the children seemed to be used to their uncle's comings and goings,

as the sight of Icarus appearing half-naked out of the desert sands didn't raise an eyebrow with them.

"Good?" a voice enquired.

Ezra sat up, and looked over to the small wooden screen that divided him from the other tub. He had thought it amusing that the modesty screen had been erected, seeing he and Icarus had already seen just about every inch of skin of the other.

"It's perfect," he replied.

"I know you want to ask," Icarus said.

"Ask what?"

"Don't play coy. Just get it off your chest."

Funny how the modesty screen acted like the dark, and the two of them could be more honest with each other than they were face to face.

"Okay," Ezra said. "*Tobias*."

There came a sigh from beyond the screen. "Yes, yes, you found out. My name is Tobias."

"Can I know your surname?"

"Is it necessary?"

"Seems stupid, or just plain stubborn, for you to keep it from me now."

"Fine. My name is Tobias Daedalus."

Surprised and amused, Ezra snorted, trying to contain his laughter.

"What?" Icarus demanded.

The modesty screen teetered dangerously as a dripping wet hand came around and pushed it back. Ezra could now see Icarus lying in his own tub, although he looked in no way as relaxed as himself.

"Okay, I have a couple of comments and questions," Ezra began.

"Fine. Fire away."

"First, *Daedalus*? Your surname is really the same name as the real Icarus's father?"

"You know that?" Icarus asked, looking slightly embarrassed.

"I'm not stupid. I do know some of the Greek myths."

"I didn't think you *were* stupid."

"You're surprised I figured that out, though."

"It's not exactly something that pops up in common conversation," Icarus said.

"*This* isn't common conversation? Anyway, my father liked all kinds of myths. He said they were doomed to repeat throughout time, and they taught us valuable lessons we would just ignore anyway."

"Now I see why you are the way you are."

Ezra studied him for a moment. "Is there that much wrong with me?"

Icarus gave him an indefinable smile. "You're growing on me. Anyway, you had more questions."

A warm feeling was rapidly spreading through his body, and Ezra tried to dismiss it as being a result of the temperature of his bath. Except the water was cold. "Questions. Yes. You're not by any chance part of Daedalus Industries?"

The smile rapidly turned into a scowl.

"Sore subject?"

"The sorest," Icarus muttered.

Ezra wanted to be kind and let the subject drop, but the question ripped out of him before he could stop it. "It explains a lot, given what you said before about how you were raised. Daedalus Industries is one of the biggest moneymakers in the world. Why are you robbing trains?"

Icarus didn't look at him. He skimmed his hand over the surface of the water, creating small waves. "That business wasn't what I wanted my life to be. But it was decided that it wasn't for me anyway."

His tone suggested there wasn't anything else forthcoming about the topic.

Ezra tried for a light tone. "So you were just being a wanker when you decided to name yourself Icarus with the surname you had?"

This purchased his desired effect: a true smile from the other man.

"Maybe I was. It seemed fitting."

“You weren’t scared someone would make the connection?”

Icarus finally met his gaze again. “Who would? It’s just too crazy.”

He might have been right, but Ezra thought it was a long shot. “Are you scared you’re jinxing yourself by naming yourself after a guy who died while flying?”

There was that smile again. “I try to never fly too close to the sun,” Icarus murmured.

In an equally low tone, Ezra replied, “I’m glad to hear it.”

Icarus looked up, obviously surprised. “I still don’t get you.”

“That’s okay, as I don’t really get you, either.” Ezra let that statement sink in, and then continued. “Doesn’t mean I don’t want to.”

Icarus grasped both sides of the tub and pulled himself out. The water streamed off his hard body, and Ezra swallowed at the sight of the hardening pecker, which made his start to follow suit.

Icarus’s feet didn’t even touch the floor. His long legs allowed him to cross over the small divide between their tubs, and in seconds, he was standing above Ezra within his own bath.

Ezra swallowed hard, trying to find his voice. “What are you doing?”

Icarus sank down into the water. It was a tight squeeze, but Ezra didn’t voice any protest. “You know what I’m doing.”

“Your sister—”

“She’s busy cooking. Now shut up for once in your life.”

“You tell me to shut up a lot,” Ezra said, amused.

“Because you never do,” Icarus replied, now hovering slightly over him, hunched up in the small tub, his lips only a short distance from Ezra’s.

Ezra parted his lips, waiting for Icarus to kiss him. When Icarus continued teasing him, Ezra decided to take action. He pushed himself up, and pushed Icarus back with his chest. Icarus fell against the back of the tub, and Ezra pinned him down, feverishly working his mouth against the other man’s. Icarus laughed, his hot breath invading Ezra’s mouth, working its way down the nerves and through the bloodways

that led straight to his pecker. He felt Icarus's arms circling around his back, holding him in place, and then one hand snaking up through his hair and pulling his head back so Icarus could look at him.

"This isn't the most orthodox way," Icarus said. "But it will do for now."

That there was a promise of more, and later, made Ezra even more wild. He moaned as Icarus nibbled at his exposed neck, his lips surely grazed by the two-day growth of beard.

"I want you," Ezra managed to grunt.

Icarus laughed and shifted beneath him. There was a glorious moment of frisson as their cocks finally made contact with each other beneath the water. "I'm pretty sure you can have me."

Ezra cursed softly as Icarus arched up, and began to thrust—such a small, slow movement, but with each sway came that agonizingly brilliant contact between them. Now that Icarus was in his arms, or more technically, *he* was in Icarus's arms, Ezra couldn't help but think of how different it was to his fantasies—when he had used fucking Lee as a substitute for what he had thought was a sure impossibility. Being buried within Lee, as nice as it was at the time, was nothing compared to what was little more than a mutual jack-off session with Icarus. With Icarus he felt vulnerable, because he wanted him so damn much. It was probably marked upon his face much like a branding iron would do, and the problem with being so naked about your desire was that it made it so much easier to be used against you later.

But he couldn't think about "later." In the here and now, here was Icarus, or Tobias, or whatever he wanted to call himself. Ezra would call him by any name he wanted, as long as it was attached to this very man who he really knew nothing about. Even that was what surprised him—the fact that he wanted to know more. Icarus had gone beyond a mythical figure; he was now a real man with motive and ideals, and Ezra had swung around from being his captor to willingly considering becoming his follower.

Ezra was so distracted by his own thoughts that Icarus suddenly reversed their positions, pushing against him so that *he* was now on his back against the tub and Icarus was on top of him. Ezra widened his legs so that Icarus had more access and pulled him down against him so

that there was no longer any distance between them. Chest against chest, pecker against pecker, they writhed in the water, which continued to spill out of the bath in small waves, turning the dirt floor into mud.

Icarus dipped his head and trailed kisses down Ezra's neck to the hair on his chest. The tip of his tongue trailed through the wet fur until it found a home against the pink, pinched nipple resting just slightly above the surface of the water. Ezra moaned as teeth lightly nipped at the bud, and then it was soothed by being taken wholly into Icarus's mouth, with his tongue calming the rougher affections that had preceded it.

"You like that," Icarus said, a statement, not a question.

"Fuck, yes," Ezra spat.

"What about this?"

Ezra could only cry out as his other nipple was pinched between Icarus's teeth and tugged at gently before the softer process of sucking was repeated. The heat from the play was as self-consuming as that between his legs. Ezra couldn't take anymore. He reached between them—turnabout was fair play, and he wanted to see Icarus buck wildly, wanting release.

He took both them both in hand beneath the water, and began rubbing furiously. He wanted this to be quick.

Icarus threw his head back and cried out. He now could no longer concentrate on teasing Ezra; he grabbed the sides of the tub and just hung on as Ezra continued to pump them both. Now it was his turn to curse and thrust madly as he sought relief and release.

Feeling his balls tighten, Ezra held onto that image of Icarus caught in the spasms of ecstasy as the barn around them seemed to explode with light.

And unbidden, the name that burst out of him as he came was, "*Tobias.*"

The man who bore that name only when it suited slumped against him. "Say that again," he panted.

Ezra exhaustedly kissed him; all he could strain for was the side of his neck. "*Tobias.*"

“It’s been a long time since anybody else knew that name,” Icarus said. “I like to hear it coming from you for some reason.”

“Maybe I’m finally growing on you.”

“I think you are,” Icarus agreed.

“Say my name,” Ezra prompted him. “All I’ve ever heard you call me is Kneebone.”

“Because it suits you.”

“Well, I want to hear you say my name.”

“Ezra,” Icarus said, tracing his jawline with kisses. “Ezra, Ezra, Ezra.”

“Just what the hell is going on between us?” Ezra breathed, taking it all in.

“I don’t know,” Icarus replied. “But I kind of like it, don’t you?”

Ezra wrapped his arms around Icarus and felt like he was close to heaven. “I do.”

Chapter 18

IT WAS a small ceremony, to be sure, but Lady Bart looked more regal than any queen as she solemnly announced, “Bless the *Lilliput*, and all who sail in her!”

Jazz kindly refrained from rolling her eyes, and Albert gave a polite round of applause.

Bart waited a moment, and then folded her arms. “Well?”

Leaning across the console, Jazz flicked the starter motor and was thankfully rewarded by the sound of the *Lilliput*’s primary engine roaring into life.

Lady Bart clapped her hands and gazed with admiration at her partner.

“So does this mean you can fly again?” Albert asked.

“I think all signs are pointing to yes,” Jazz grinned.

“Don’t trust airships,” Albert said gruffly. “If the good Lord meant us to fly, he would have given us wings.”

“And if He wanted us to ride horses for all time, he would have made us centaurs,” Jazz shot back.

“Now, now,” Bart said placatingly to both of them. “Part of man’s greatest mystery is the ability to be innovative and improve upon his lot.”

“Don’t leave out the women,” Jazz growled.

“I never do,” Bart replied with a mischievous glint in her eye.

Albert harrumphed to himself. “Shall I prepare the horses for departure, Lady Bartholomew?”

Unable to stop herself from being so open about what she wanted, Jazz shot Bart what she was sure was a look of abject desperation.

Coolly, almost nonchalantly, Bart acknowledged the look with a small tilt of her head and turned to Albert. "I believe I may travel with Jazille a little further, at least until we find out poor Ezra's fate. You may return home, Albert. I am sure I am in good hands here."

Albert looked as if he was ready to disagree with her, but Jazz knew that it wouldn't do for a servant to argue with his mistress. At least in public. Jazz had seen (and heard) enough behind closed doors to be more than aware that Albert never minded unleashing the full fury of his tongue at Bart, a privilege he kept as he had known her from the time she was a child, many years before she had taken on the moniker of her departed husband.

"If that's what you wish, Lady Bart," Albert said stiffly. "I'll go and attend to the horses now."

"Oh dear," Bart said fretfully as he exited the cockpit. "I'm afraid I've offended him."

"Thank you for staying," Jazz reached for her hand and stroked it gently with her thumb.

"Do you really think Ezra has come to harm?"

"Kneebone is tenacious," Jazz said softly, "but he's only human. I can't help but fear it in the back of my mind."

Bart kissed her, her lips as gentle as feathers against Jazz's cheek. "I should go and speak to Albert before he leaves, and give him the opportunity to yell at me and tell me how irresponsible and unladylike I'm being."

"Hurry back."

"I will."

Jazz let her hand drop, and watched her leave for a brief moment before returning to the sensors and satisfying herself that the *Lilliput* was indeed ready for launch.

EZRA and Icarus had remained in the water together for as long as was decent, and before Ruth would be inclined to come and seek them out for lunch. After their intimacy together, they suddenly became shy, dressing with their backs to each other.

Now they sat at Ruth's kitchen table with barely a word between them. Ruth kept up the conversation, asking questions of each man, but there was little interplay between the three of them at once. The two men wolfed down the food supplied for them, and like any woman who has children, Ruth was pleased to watch them eat until they were bursting at the seams.

"How long have you been out in the desert for?"

"About two days, ma'am," Ezra replied politely around a mouthful of chicken.

Ruth made a sigh of disapproval. "Tobias!"

Icarus noticeably jumped, and Ezra couldn't repress a smile at how much younger he looked around his taciturn sister.

"Well, I wasn't expecting to be shanghaied," Icarus said.

"It was a double shanghai, really," Ezra told Ruth. "I mean, he was meant to be my prisoner, but then we both ended up captives of other men."

"I believe that's called karma." Ruth poured them all more cool water from a stoneware jug.

"Most likely." Ezra let his eyes wander around the kitchen, marveling at how free it was from modern contraptions. No mechanized refrigeration units for her; an old-fashioned gunnysack safe sat in a corner. It all felt very Spartan, and Ezra was sure he couldn't live like that himself, although he had immense respect for the woman.

It was obvious that it wasn't the way Icarus would have chosen to live his life, either, or else he wouldn't have developed his wings and been flying all over the countryside.

"Well, it's all changed now," Icarus said, perhaps to defuse the awkward pause the references to Ezra's original intentions with himself seemed to bring up. Ezra shot him a grateful look.

And he found it difficult to tear his gaze away. Funny how Icarus seemed even more desirable to him now, in a crisp blue shirt with only one button undone, hinting at the smooth skin of his chest, even though he had been used to seeing him wearing nothing more than a pair of pants. Of course, a shirt would only get in the way of the wearing of the wings' harness....

"Do you still have the stuff I left here?" Icarus asked his sister, interrupting Ezra's train of thought.

"Of course. What else would I have done with it?"

"I just need to grab some of it. Are you putting on coffee?"

"I suppose I could do that."

Icarus nodded at Ezra. "Keep her company for me?"

"Like I need it," Ruth huffed.

"Sure," Ezra replied uncomfortably.

Ruth wasted no time honing in on Ezra once Icarus left them alone. "Did you really intend to turn Tobias in to the sheriffs for a reward?"

"At one point of time, yes."

He suddenly had the feeling that if Icarus hadn't been upstairs, Ruth would have crossed the room in one giant leap with a knife in her hand to take him out.

"He's obviously a better man than you are, because when he had the chance to, he didn't leave you in the desert to die."

"I know, lady!" Ezra didn't mean to snap at her, but he was quickly getting tired of all the judging.

"Don't you *lady* me. You're in my house, and the only reason you're not full of lead is because my brother has taken some kind of shine to you."

Ruth *knew* about her brother's... proclivities?

Apparently mind reading was one of her many surprising traits as well. "Don't give me that coy look. I know all about Tobias and what he likes in a partner. I can't say I understand it, but I'm not going to judge him for it. There's been enough judging of him by others without me adding to it."

"Are you talking about his father?"

Her eyes narrowed. "He told you?"

"Not in so many words. Just—I'm pretty good at putting the pieces together of what is said and what is left unsaid."

"Daddy isn't as... accepting of Tobias."

Ezra's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean by *accepting*?"

"I mean he threw Tobias out of home when he was seventeen and caught him with another boy. I was already married and living here by then, so he came to live with me."

"That was good of you."

"He's my brother, what else was I going to do?"

"Obviously not treat him like his father did."

She harrumphed to herself. "I wouldn't treat a dog that way, so why would I Tobias?"

Ezra wasn't exactly sure he liked the analogy, although he was sure she meant well. "Can I ask you something?"

"I guess."

It wasn't exactly a ringing endorsement to go ahead, but he decided to run with it. "You haven't done anything to incur your father's wrath. So why—"

"Why am I living in this house in the middle of the desert?"

Her eyes were fiery, and Ezra swallowed hard. "Yes."

"This is my home. And you're insulting it."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to. But your father is one of the wealthiest men in the country—"

"And he's a bastard," she spat. "He practically disowned me when I married my husband, said he was below me."

"Practically?"

"Well, he said I made my bed when I took Tobias in."

Ezra felt a warm semblance of affection for her grow within him.

"No great loss," Ruth shrugged. "I had already resigned myself to this life when I got married."

“But you married for love. Isn’t that the important thing?”

“Of course.” But then a small smile fluttered across her stern features. “But I would never say a little money wouldn’t help.”

Seemed they had a little in common after all. Icarus obviously felt more betrayed by his father’s disowning of him and had entirely rejected any ties to the old morals of his past. Money was anathema to him now, unless it could be used to help other people poorer than himself, whereas Ruth still held onto a commonsense approach despite her siding with her brother and the probable loss of her inheritance. It made Ezra wonder if the creation of Icarus was just a way to get back at the old man, especially as Tobias didn’t seem to pocket any money for himself. The rejection of money just kept continuing on, in whatever form.

“What are you talking about?”

Ezra turned to see Icarus in the doorway, staring at them with wary interest.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” Ruth asked.

“Just a pair of boots. There may be some walking ahead of us still.”

“I can lend you a horse,” Ruth said brusquely. “I’m not going to let you walk into town.”

“Why should we leave in more luxury than we arrived?” Icarus asked, sitting back at the table.

“You already are. Don’t forget you arrived here half-naked, like a heathen.”

“Then I’m walking out like a veritable king.” Icarus grinned.

“I thought we came here for horses?” Ezra asked.

Ruth pursed her lips, glad that her brother was caught out. “See!”

The cuff on Ezra’s wrist suddenly sent out a squawk, making all three at the table jump and staving off the argument that would inevitably follow.

“Sorry,” Ezra said, red-faced. “It’s been acting up ever since we jumped out of that dirigible.”

Open-mouthed, Ruth turned on her brother. “You *jumped* out of an *airship*?”

He shrugged.

“Please tell me you were wearing your wings.”

Icarus shook his head. “*He* took them off me, remember? But we shared a chute.”

Ruth shook her head as if he were mad. “Shared?”

The cuff sounded again. “—*ra*?”

“Jazz!” Ezra yelled, but in his excitement forgot to hit the response button. He did so. “Jazz?”

“Ez— —*bone*?”

“Jazz! Come in!”

“*Can you —ear —e*?”

The cuff gave one more undignified sound and then died off.

“I don’t think they heard you,” Ruth told him.

“Do you think they managed to get a lock on the signal?” Icarus asked.

“I hope so,” Ezra replied. “But we probably shouldn’t expect it. Our luck, in the brief time we’ve known each other, has never been that good.”

An ominous rumble in the distance made Ruth cock her head. “It didn’t look like we were due for a storm.”

Ezra watched ripples form on the surface of the glasses of water on the table. A brief flare of hope blossomed within him. It was a familiar sound; one he loved more than anything. “That’s no storm. That’s a ship coming in.”

Icarus and Ruth both jumped up as one.

“The cellar?” he asked.

She nodded. “You can follow the tunnel out to the back of the barn.”

“Tunnel?” Ezra asked.

"Come on," Icarus said impatiently. "What if it's someone looking for us?"

"That's what I'm hoping!" Ezra said. "It's Jazz!"

"Kneebone, don't be stupid! We can't risk it! We should hide."

"And I'm telling you, I know the sound of my ship. That's the *Lilliput*!"

He could see Icarus's desperation—caught between wanting to believe him and wanting to save his skin for just a while longer.

"Trust me," Ezra said gently. "I know my ship."

And surprisingly, Icarus did just that. He swallowed heavily and nodded. But he couldn't resist adding, "If you're wrong—"

"Then you can chide me as much as you like while we rot in our cells."

"What a satisfying resolution," Ruth snapped. "Tobias, get in the cellar!"

Her brother leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. "Like I said, I trust him. For some reason."

Ruth shook her head. "Well, we are all made fools by men at times."

Ezra tried to give her a conciliatory look, but she would have none of it. He followed Icarus out of the kitchen and to the front door. As Ezra opened it, sand kicked in, brought by the wind. They both shielded their eyes and stepped out onto the porch.

The sound like thunder was now more recognizable as ship engines, although they still couldn't see any presence of it. Ezra walked off the porch and turned to look back beyond the house out to the barn, and that was when the *Lilliput* swung into sight. He felt his face ache with relief as he smiled, and the weight he was feeling on his shoulders began to drop away.

"It's the cavalry," he announced to Icarus.

"*Your* cavalry," Icarus pointed out, and Ezra was disappointed by his response.

"It could be your cavalry too."

"We're on different paths, you and I," Icarus said.

"What are you saying?"

"You let me go. Now I have to go and do what I always do."

"You won't be able to do it forever," Ezra reminded him.

"Maybe not," Icarus admitted. "But I'll keep on doing it as long as I can."

"Until you're killed?"

"Hopefully it won't come to that."

He's a fool, Ezra thought as he looked away to the *Lilliput*. It was circling above their heads now, looking for a stable place to set down. "It'll come down to it, sooner rather than later."

Icarus made some kind of noise that was hard to hear above the noise of the engines. But Ezra heard him say, "I started this. I can't stop."

Ezra turned on him. "Don't you want some kind of life of your own?"

"This *is* my life."

"But what about beyond that?"

"What are you asking of me?" Icarus demanded. "We've kissed and we've fooled around, but we still barely know each other. Do you want me to come back to Shrevesport with you and settle down?"

"I don't know!" Ezra said. "But I feel like we should do something."

"That sounds really definitive," Icarus scoffed.

Before Ezra could retort, Ruth joined them out in the yard. "I hope they're not going to tear up my azaleas when they land," she said in a dry tone.

Ezra wasn't sure if she was serious. For one, he couldn't even see any azaleas anywhere. Plus, he wasn't sure if they could even grow in the soil out here, let alone survive if they even dared to take root.

Ruth turned to her brother. "He's right. You should go with him."

"What?" Icarus demanded.

The *Lilliput* was now setting upon its struts, and the engines were beginning to cycle down. If it hadn't been for that, Ezra would have been sure he had misheard her as well.

Ruth didn't seem to be able to look her brother in the eye as she made her impassioned plea. "You know this will not end well if you continue on as you do. Give this up, Tobias. At least they're offering you a way out. You may not get such an opportunity again."

Icarus didn't answer her. Ruth turned from him, seeking assistance from Ezra. But he knew there was nothing he could do, short of making Icarus his prisoner again. And he had promised him he wouldn't do that—even if it might have been for his own good. He could feel the intensity of her gaze burning through him, but there was nothing he could do to salve her pain.

She turned on her heel and marched back into her house. Ezra watched Icarus; would he react, go after her?

He did not. He kept his eyes upon the *Lilliput*, where the door was now opening and the gangplank descending.

Ezra left Icarus standing where he was and began to run over to his beloved ship. He expected Jazille to emerge, probably full of insults telling him how inconsiderate he was and how much she had worried him, but the elegant figure of Lady Bart stepped out.

"Lady Bart!" he choked. What was she doing here? And—was she wearing pants?

"It is good to find you alive, Mr. Kneebone," she said grandly.

He bowed, which got a twitter of amusement from her. For added measure, he took her gloved hand and kissed it.

"It's not me you should be acting in such a manner to," Bart said. "You have much ground to make up with Jazille."

As if she had been waiting to be announced, Jazille stepped out behind Bart. She stared at Ezra for a long moment, and he began to wince, waiting for the tirade to begin.

She almost knocked him to the ground when she threw herself into his arms. "Don't you *ever* put me through that again!"

He brushed his lips against her cheek, a rare action. "I'll try not to."

Jazz pulled back and punched him in the stomach. “You’ll *try* not to? You bastard! You have no idea what I’ve been through the past couple of days! How much I’ve worried about you! I was convinced you were dead!”

And he would have been on his knees, if she wasn’t supporting him. “I’m sorry,” he managed to say between pained wheezes.

“That’s very magnanimous of you, Mr. Kneebone,” Lady Bart said. “Jazille, I believe you don’t have to make the poor man suffer any longer.”

Ezra again struggled for breath as Jazz embraced him once more. Her hug was like a steel vice across his ribs. “I didn’t know you cared so much,” he said, a feeble attempt at a joke.

“I’ll hit you again,” she warned him.

He hugged her back. “Thanks for not giving up on me.”

“I know you’d do the same.”

“I hope you weren’t doing it because you felt you were obligated, then.”

“Don’t push it, Kneebone,” Jazz growled.

“Listen to her for once, Mr. Kneebone,” Lady Bart instructed in her most imperial voice, which brooked no possible resistance from him.

He grinned at her wickedly and fingered the brooch now on Jazz’s shirt. “I take it you’re responsible for getting her to wear jewelry?”

“Kneebone!” Jazz protested.

“I think it looks marvelous on her,” Bart said.

Ezra smiled at Jazz. “It does. It’s beautiful.”

Jazz smiled back, then pulled away and called out to Icarus. “I’m glad to see you’re safe as well.”

He nodded at her but didn’t say anything.

“Is he still our prisoner?” Jazz whispered to Ezra.

Ezra shook his head.

“Good.” Jazz looked relieved. “What is he going to do?”

Ezra turned away to look back at Icarus. "No idea."

But the man himself stepped forward. "You still have my wings?"

Jazz shot a quick look at Ezra, but he didn't meet it. "Yes," she finally answered.

"I would like to get them, and be on my way."

Once again, she received no look of instruction from her boss and business partner. "They're in the cockpit."

As Icarus moved around them to make his way on board the *Lilliput*, Lady Bart stepped up to him with a look of surprise on her face.

"Why, Mr. Daedalus," she said. "I haven't seen you since you were a young man still living under the guidance of your father."

Icarus did not look happy to be reacquainting with someone from his past. "Lady Bartholomew," he said shortly, bowing to her.

"No need to stand on formality," she said, returning his bow with a slight dip of her own. "You're amongst friends here. Call me Bart, as my friends do."

"I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that, Lady Bartholomew," Icarus said, although there was still a measure of respect in his tone.

Jazz leapt forward, ready to defend Bart's honor, but Ezra held her back.

"Kneebone!" She struggled against him, but his grip was firm.

"Your father is not exactly my most favorite person in the world, either," she called after him as he made his way up the gangplank.

He hesitated, his back to her. "We have that much in common," he said over his shoulder.

Bart nodded and made her way down to join Jazz and Ezra. Icarus disappeared into the cockpit.

"You really knew him?" Ezra asked.

"Am I a liar, Ezra Kneebone?" she asked without rancor.

"No."

"Then, yes, I did," she shuddered. "A most detestable man."

“What was he like?” he asked, adding, “as a kid,” so she knew he was talking about the son and not the father.

Bart sighed heavily. “Very quiet. Afraid of upsetting his father at every turn. No wonder he has chosen to take on this mantle now that his father has disinherited him.”

“Obviously he’s inherited his father’s manners,” Jazz sniffed.

“He’s used to being alone,” Ezra snapped.

Jazz raised her eyebrows, but said nothing.

“You cannot blame him, my love,” Bart said to Jazz. “He’s been through a hard life.”

“None of us here have had an easy life,” Jazz pointed out. “But we found people to shoulder it with.”

Bart produced a fan from up her sleeve and opened it fully, trying to escape the heat. “Quite so. And maybe he will one day. But not today.”

“I hope he does.” Ezra said, trying not to show too much emotion in his words. “One day.”

He was as transparent as glass to his friends, and he knew it. But they did not call him on it, and he was grateful. They were also distracted by Icarus’s reappearance, his wings in his hands.

“Thank you for taking care of them,” he told Jazz.

She nodded and marched up the gangplank. Her actions were obvious; they were going, no matter what unfinished business was left behind.

Bart gave Ezra a sideways glance; wordlessly she conveyed everything he knew she would have whispered in his ear. *Try and sort this out.*

But to Icarus, she took one of his hands and clasped it in both her own. “Tobias,” she said gently, surprising him with the use of his real name, “anytime you need help, or any assistance at all, please get a message to me.”

“Thank you, Lad—” he paused, and offered her an olive branch of his own. “Bart.”

She nodded and broke away to follow Jazz into the cockpit.

"You don't have to do this," Ezra said, before Lady Bart was even out of earshot.

"We've already been through this," Icarus said stiffly.

"I'm just trying to make you see sense." As soon as those words slipped out, he grimaced, because he knew it was absolutely the worst thing he could say.

But Icarus didn't bristle this time. He just looked tired. "I have to do this."

Beyond all patience, Ezra lost his. "It's pride, nothing more."

Icarus nodded slowly. "Pride's the one thing I own and can call my own."

"If I asked you to come with us, would you not do so?"

"No."

It was a simple refusal, and it sounded like the last word between them.

Except for one.

"Tobias."

The sound of his real name coming from Ezra's lips, made the other man stop for a moment. Ezra longed to learn what he was thinking; Icarus's eyes were guarded, but they flickered for the briefest of seconds, and Ezra could have sworn they teared up a little.

But Icarus, leaving behind his name and any chance of a new life, walked away while starting to unbuckle his wings and strap them over his chest.

Ezra watched him go. Was Tobias Daedalus a lost cause? That's what it certainly seemed like.

Especially when Icarus started the small engine that gave him the power of flight. Without even going to say goodbye to his sister, he began running, and his feet left the ground as his wings bore him upward, disappearing into the sky.

Behind Ezra, the engines of the *Lilliput* roared into life. Feeling heavy, Ezra shuffled up the gangplank and turned to look once more at the farmhouse where he had spent those few furtive moments of bliss

with the man who had left him behind, seemingly without a second thought.

Ruth was standing upon the porch again. Even from this distance, Ezra could tell by the slump of her shoulders that she was disappointed her brother was not getting on the airship with him. He raised his hand to her in goodbye, and she returned it.

And with that, Ezra stepped into the cockpit and hit the button to retract the gangplank. He had his own bit of sky to take to.

PART THREE

Chapter 19

A WEEK had passed and there was no news on Icarus, nor any on hijacked trains. Ezra figured he must have been lying low for a bit, hoping that the full posse that had been sent on his tail would give up when there was no action. Of course, that guaranteed nothing once Icarus came out of hiding again. The posse would return.

That thought made Ezra sick to his stomach.

Life had returned to normal; the daily routine was stifling. The taking of mundane delivery jobs; Jazz flying while he dozed in his chair and unloading the *Lilliput* when they landed. He was moving in a daze, and he knew it. So did Jazz, and, by default, Lady Bart. He had been invited to dinner at Bart's mansion one night during the week, and he had left before dessert. Being around those two lovebirds had only served to accentuate his own feelings of loneliness, and the sense he was being pitied. He had detoured by Whiskeytown on his way home, but he had stopped himself from seeking out Lee. Now that he had been with Icarus, sleeping with him by proxy through Lee would be even worse than the transparent fantasy it always had been. It was Icarus he wanted, this man who weighed on his thoughts despite the short amount of time they'd known each other.

He scoured the netpapers on his lek-book, searching for records on train schedules and their cargoes. Maybe they could give him some insight into the next move Icarus would make.

"It might be too soon for him to go back to robbing," Jazz said when she caught him at it the next morning.

"He would see it as liberating, not robbing," Ezra replied.

"You've certainly changed your tune."

“People change all the time.”

But Jazz was now distracted as she stared out of their office window. “What the hell is *he* doing here?”

Ezra looked up and grimaced. “Oh, blazes.”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

Thomas Harding was making his way over the planks leading from the street. His usual look of disdain was plastered over his face. Even his mustache looked haughty and disgusted at its present location.

“You deal with him,” Jazz said. “I’ll be in the back, going over the *Lilliput*.”

“We’re partners. Maybe it’s time you stepped up a little.”

She whacked him across his ear. “The day you can keep that ship in the air, maybe I’ll start helping you out in talking to the idiots.”

Whistling, she sauntered out the door to the loading bay.

Ezra sighed and pulled on his duster. He didn’t want Harding in their office, because he would feel like he had to scrub it down afterward.

He was shutting the door to the building behind him when Harding crossed over the last plank, holding a handkerchief to his nose.

“You’re a delicate little flower, Harding,” Ezra said, by way of greeting.

“I’m refined, and unused to living amongst filth.” Harding pulled a small metal tin out of his pocket, opened it, and treated himself with a pinch of snuff. “Aah, that helps.”

“Did you notice I didn’t respond by saying that you *would* be used to living amongst filth?” Ezra asked him.

Harding glowered. “Except, you just *did*.”

“Yeah, but I wanted to say it that time. Anyway, give up the gun—what are you doing here?”

“No time for small talk, Kneebone?”

“Not with the likes of you.”

“You’re not going to offer me a seat in your office?”

Ezra jammed his hands in his pockets. "I'm a mite more comfortable dealing with you out here. Once again, what are you doing here?"

"Well, firstly, I just wanted to say how glad I was that you seem no worse the wear for your recent trials in the desert."

"I survived," Ezra said with a sheathed dagger of a grin, not even questioning how Harding would know the extent of what had happened to him recently.

"But you lost your man."

Ezra faltered slightly at the choice of words, but shook it off. "It didn't help that he was purloined from me, no."

"Last I heard, you were both seen together bailing from the ship when it breached." There was a glint in Harding's eyes that Ezra didn't like.

"We both escaped from the hold at the same time. From the moment we landed, there was no way I could keep him as my prisoner."

"That doesn't sound like you."

"Well, I had no gun. It was removed by the skullduggers that imprisoned me."

"I would have thought you could have still restrained him without weaponry."

Between gritted teeth, Ezra replied, "I was more worried about my own skin than his, seeing I was on the run from mercenaries, away from civilization, and had no gun, protection, or food to my name."

"Still, it must have been frustrating. I know you wanted that money."

"If you're here to try and make me go into business with you again—"

"Come, come, Kneebone. Your options are drying up."

"Icarus is still out there." *Any port in a storm*, Ezra thought. He had no inclination of going after Icarus, but it was a good excuse to try and get Harding off his back.

"Not for much longer," Harding shrugged.

A chill ran through Ezra. "What are you getting at?"

Harding was a landshark with a smile far more dangerous and unsettling. "I have some friends in the know. The higher-ups are planning a little rendezvous with our friend Icarus."

"Rendezvous?" Ezra asked, sweat breaking beneath his pits.

"Let's just say it will be a cargo that the winged thief won't be able to resist. It will bring him out of hiding, and the full force of the law will be upon him. No escape."

Trying not to sound too interested, Ezra shifted slightly. "What kind of cargo?"

"Ha!" Harding barked. "You still want the reward money!"

Better to play along with Harding's suspicions instead of anything else. "All's fair in... war and war."

"You never change, Kneebone. But if I'm doing this favor by giving you a head's up, I may expect one from you later."

Ezra shrugged. "Doesn't mean you'll get it."

"I'd be disappointed in you if you agreed readily." Harding appraised him through hooded eyes. "But then, I'm used to you disappointing me, so why should now be any different?"

Ezra felt like he would need to bathe after this conversation, but he kept his thoughts focused on Icarus. "Expect the worst, and one day you'll be pleasantly surprised."

"Oh, I hope so, Kneebone. I certainly hope so. Just because one gets married doesn't mean you don't get to still play around."

Ezra's stomach lurched, and he was surprised that he didn't offload his breakfast onto Harding's shiny shoes. "Indeed? Your wife must be very forgiving."

"We both like our playthings."

Ezra had to stand his ground as Harding leaned forward and invaded his personal space. Backing away now would not get him the information he needed. He closed his eyes as the shadow from Harding's body crossed over his face and blocked out the sun.

"You always had the best lips," Harding murmured. "I liked them best when they were wrapped 'round my cock."

“So it wasn’t my sparkling conversation skills?” Ezra asked, his eyes still closed and his stomach churning.

“They were the only times you weren’t rabbiting on,” Harding said, and his lips grazed across Ezra’s.

Ezra decided to give him a taste of what he wanted. He opened his mouth and allowed Harding’s tongue to enter. The taste of the tobacco-flavored muscle, and the knowledge that it was attached to Harding, made him want to break away immediately. He focused once more on Icarus. This was for him, no matter how bad it may have appeared from the outside.

Harding’s tongue was like a snake, and it batted dangerously against his own. There was no passion there, just the thrusting of something out for its own need. From the firm thigh pressed up against his own, Ezra could feel an extra insistent organ reminding him of its existence. Now *that* was just going too far.

He pulled away, and discreetly wiped off his mouth as Harding grinned to himself. “Remind you of old times?”

Harding pressed his handkerchief to his lips, his face flushed and his eyes gleaming. “I wonder if you still fuck as good as you kiss.”

And I hadn’t even been kissing him, Ezra thought. *He really does have low expectations.* “I hope you’re not expecting me to show you if I do.”

Harding laughed. “Maybe I’ll plan to seduce you some other time, but I have a dinner party to attend tonight.”

Ezra almost laughed back in his face. He could never read Harding that well—he couldn’t even begin to discern whether the man was serious or just maintaining an elaborate game that only he seemed to care about winning. “That’s the life of a man of great social standing.”

Harding harrumphed to himself. “I suppose now that I’ve gained a kiss, you want that information in return.”

“The thought was crossing my mind.”

“It’s why I haven’t completely lost respect for you, Kneebone, even though my social status is so elevated above your own now.

You're still scrappy, and out to get whatever you want however you can."

It sounded more like he was describing a dog than a man, but Ezra let it slide. "That's me. Scrappy."

"Anyway. This coming Tuesday. The train to Waulkham Hills is being advertised as carrying more loot than they ever have before. Icarus won't be able to resist taking it, and possibly giving the government boys even more embarrassment than he's already given them."

"You don't think it's more likely that he'll see it for the trap that it is?" Ezra asked. "I only knew him for a short time, but he certainly wasn't stupid."

"Maybe not." There was that cold glint to Harding's eyes again. "But he knows that it will be a challenge, and if he pulls it off, he'll be even more of a hero to the poor, undertrodden, shirtless rabble than he already thinks he is."

Ezra pulled his hands behind his back so that Harding wouldn't see they had balled themselves into fists. "I hear they're singing songs about him in the Waulkham Hills."

Harding snorted. "They'll be singing his elegy soon."

Ezra froze. He could feel the blood running out of his face, but luckily, Harding didn't seem to notice as he tipped his hat and said his goodbyes.

Icarus. That was the only thought going through his mind. He *knew* Icarus would still try and take the cargo from the train, even though he would be well aware that it was a trap. He was stupid and stubborn like that.

And because Ezra knew that he would do the same exact thing in his place. Neither of the two men had a lick of sense to share between them. Maybe that's why he thought they could work together.

Icarus would most likely die if he didn't do something to stop him—but he would need Jazz's help, and he wasn't sure how she would likely respond to his plea for assistance after the last set of shenanigans he had dragged her into.

As he turned to step back into the office, a voice cut through his wrist cuff. "*Kneebone! What the hell were you doing out there?*"

Of course it was Jazz. She must have been watching him on the cams.

"I'll talk to you about it inside."

"*If I let you in!*"

He wouldn't put it past her, but thought that her indignation would be overridden by her natural desire to know what had happened between him and Harding. And he was proven correct when the doorknob twisted easily underneath his touch and allowed him entrance. Jazz was standing by the window, her arms folded and her face glowering.

"Here I am, feeling sorry for you," she said with a voice tightened by restrained anger, "thinking that you had had your heart broken, *worrying* about you... and then I look out there to find you swapping spit with one of the worst men in Shrevesport?"

"Involuntarily," Ezra said bitterly.

Jazz scoffed at his reasoning. "It didn't look that involuntary to me!"

"Well, you weren't there in that moment." He was about to continue his defense, when she interrupted him once more.

"Have you completely lost your mind? You've been pining after Icarus all week, and then you go and... I can't even say it, it disgusts me so much... you canoodle with *that man*! I can't even say his name, because it's like naming the devil—"

No matter how much he might have agreed with her on that matter, Ezra held up his hands in surrender. "Icarus is in trouble."

This immediately quieted her. "What kind of trouble?"

Momentarily distracted by what she had said before, he asked, "Canoodle?"

"Don't try to turn this into a joke, Ezra Kneebone! What are you playing at? What kind of trouble is Icarus in?"

He told her all that Harding had disclosed. The frown on her face, which had been one of fury at the thought of him kissing their nemesis

(or at least one of their many nemeses,) now changed to a frown of concern for the certain doom that lay before Icarus should he choose to rob the decoy train.

“We need more details,” she said firmly.

Ezra nodded. “But how do we get them without Harding and his lackeys getting suspicious?”

Jazz grinned. “Leave that to me. Or at least, to a dear friend of us both.”

LADY BART laid the map upon the large table in the center of her library. The clock struck midday as she did so, and she became distracted. “Should I call for luncheon, or can it wait?”

“Wait,” Ezra and Jazz said together.

Frowning at the lack of adherence to her usual decorum, Lady Bart gave a delicate sigh and a slight shrug of the shoulders. Ezra watched as she obviously decided to go in for a penny, in for a pound, and stripped her long gloves off her hands and laid them beside the map she had just unrolled.

“The train they’re luring in Icarus with *is* scheduled for Tuesday,” she said, pressing a button on the leg of the table. With a gentle hiss of steam, the table cranked into life, and a muted light shone against the underside of the map. In the air before them, the reproduced map of the Waulkham Hills began to materialize. Bart produced a pointer, and highlighted the train line. “The final destination, is of course, Waulkham Hills. But they want to limit the amount of points from which Icarus can plot to steal from them.”

Ezra nodded. “If they load the cargo at a point closer to Waulkham Hills, it will give them a narrower time and distance which they have to watch and have men ready to take him.”

“Indeed.”

Jazz scowled. “Then he’s crazy. It’s so obvious that it’s a trap, and he’ll just go blundering in anyway.”

"It's pride. The Daedalus family excels at it," Bart said without any hint of disapproval.

It was the code of blue-blood families, Ezra thought. What was, just was. "He wants to win," he said aloud. "It will enhance his reputation."

"Plus get back at Daddy even more," Jazz snorted.

"That may be a factor." Bart nodded. "But I doubt his father is even aware that his son Tobias is the famed Icarus. It isn't as if there has been a clear picture of him released to the public."

"That wouldn't matter to Icarus," Ezra said. "As long as he still feels like he's giving his father the bird."

Bart turned her attention back to the map. "They're loading the cargo at Broadmeadow Pines. There isn't even a station there, but that is where they'll stop the train. There's a small cargo hold close to the tracks."

"That might be the best place for Icarus to strike. Fewer crowds, and the advantage of surprise."

"This is crazy!" Jazz protested once more.

Ezra fixed upon her with eyes of steel. "I'm quite capable of doing this alone, Jazz. I got us involved in this whole Icarus mess and already put you and the Lady Bart through enough. I can go from here."

"I didn't say I wouldn't do it!" Jazz snapped. "I'm just remarking that it's crazy. And it *is*."

He couldn't disagree with her; he knew it was insane as much as she did. "This is big. We could be accused of treason if we're caught, for aiding and abetting an enemy of the government."

Jazz slammed her hand upon the button on the table leg, and the map disappeared from the air. "Then we just won't get caught."

MONDAY night found them readying for take-off, and Lady Bart once again came down to say her goodbyes.

“I do wish you would let me come,” she said unhappily. “I even bought a new pair of breeches for the occasion, and Jazz *does* like it so when I wear breeches.”

Ezra privately agreed. He always wondered why it was considered unseemly for a woman to wear pants when they ultimately ended up enhancing their natural assets. Even he admired how well Jazz’s legs looked in her trousers, and had he been so inclined, he would have been drawn to the way the material clung to the curve of her buttocks as she strode across the cockpit to her chair.

Lady Bart looked around the small area with envy. “I did like traveling in this great iron bird.”

“That wasn’t the last time you’ll be on *The Lilliput*,” Jazz promised her.

Bart smiled. “Good.”

“Always pleased to have you on board,” Ezra said. “Just not this time.”

He was surprised when she leaned in to him and gave him a kiss. “You’re such a charmer, Ezra Kneebone.” She then shared a far more intimate kiss with Jazz and sashayed out of the cockpit and down the gangplank.

“I don’t think she really meant that,” Jazz grumped as she began flipping switches and checking their readings.

“Lady Bart is an excellent judge of character,” Ezra said.

Jazz rolled her eyes.

“After all,” Ezra continued, “she chose you.”

Jazz smiled and then ducked her head to try and hide it. “Dropping ropes,” she commanded in a tone that was all business and showed no delight at what had just been said.

The *Lilliput* began to ascend through the roof of their office and into the skies above. Once more, their bounty was the winged man. But this time they were trying to protect him, not capture him—although Ezra wondered if he may just have to resort to the latter in order to achieve the former.

“I WISH I could help you, Mr. Kneebone,” Ruth said. “But the honest truth is that I haven’t seen my brother since he left, the same day I met you.”

Ezra tried to read her face for any sign that she might be lying to him, but he knew that she wouldn’t. She had wanted him to take Icarus back to Shrevesport from the very beginning; he believed that if Icarus was there now, or if she knew where he was, she would be pulling him out of hiding and demanding that he go with Ezra right now and not miss the opportunity again. “Do you know if he has any other hiding places?”

Ruth began gathering the washing off the line. She had ushered her husband and children into the house after making perfunctory introductions between them and Ezra. They hadn’t seemed that surprised that Ezra was here for Icarus, although from what Ruth had said as they made their way to the back of the house for more privacy, they had no idea that the man they knew as Tobias was the same man renowned all over the county for his crimes against their civic leaders. “I’m sure he has more, but I only know about that cave he took you to. Plus our barn, of course. But he hasn’t been camping out there, I know this much.”

“If he attacks this train, they may just kill him rather than let him escape.” He hated to be so rough on her, but it had to be said.

Ruth closed her eyes and swayed for a moment, so much so that Ezra was about to spring forward and catch her. But once again he had underestimated her—she was made of stronger stuff than that. She swallowed heavily, opened her eyes again and stared up at him. “You don’t think I already know that, Mr. Kneebone?” She threw the washing she had collected into the cane basket by the side of the house and strode back to him, lifting the arm of her left sleeve as she did so. There was a nasty yellowing bruise that promised it had been far worse looking when it was caused over a week ago. “I tried locking him in the cellar. For his own good. He fought against me like a wild animal, and it only stopped when he accidentally threw me against the wall.”

Ezra let out the breath he wasn’t even aware he had been holding. “Ruth....”

“He didn’t mean it. I was the one who was attacking him, but ever since he was eleven, he could get a handle on me, despite me being older and taller. Why do you think he created wings to fly with, Mr. Kneebone?” She took a deep breath, and for the first time Ezra saw tears forming in her eyes, even though they were held back by monstrous will. “Because ever since he was a child, he wanted to escape and be free. Of our father, our society, and finally, even me.”

“Not you,” Ezra replied, grabbing her hand. “Never you. But like you said, he wants nothing holding him down.”

She covered his hand with her other one. “Thank you, Mr. Kneebone. Check out the cave. That’s all I know.” She turned her back on him, picked up the basket, and made her way back around the house.

Ezra activated his cuff. “Jazz?”

Her voice crackled back over the airwaves. “Yes?”

“Bring the ship back. There’s nothing here.”

“I DON’T want to alert him to our presence,” Ezra said, keying coordinates into his console that then appeared on Jazz’s. “Set me down here. If he’s in the cave, he shouldn’t hear us from that distance. You can just wait there for me.”

“What are we going to do if he’s not there?” Jazz asked.

Ezra sighed. “I don’t know—maybe head back into Waulkham Hills and do some reconnaissance.”

“That’s a two-buck word you’re using there, Kneebone,” Jazz teased.

“And I’m running out of cash.”

She gave him a rueful smile. “Be careful out there.”

“I’ll yell if I need you.”

“You probably will.” Jazz reached across and pushed the button that allowed the door to clang open.

Ezra stood and pulled on his duster. His hand strayed to his holster, just to make sure he had his gun. You never could tell what lay

ahead. He didn't think Icarus's reaction to him would be a dangerous one, but knowing him, he would probably already be upset at the scuffle he had had with his sister, and it could cause him to lash out at a friendly target such as Ezra.

Or it could be that Icarus might not be there, but other varmints looking for him would be.

Now that the sun was going down, the temperature was rapidly dropping. Ezra shivered slightly as the door to the *Lilliput* rolled down behind him. His wrist cuff squawked.

"Good luck, Kneebone."

"Thanks. I'm going quiet for now."

He signed off and brought up the fragmented info that had recorded when his cuff was malfunctioning after the bailout from the ship that had captured him and Icarus. Hopefully it would help him pinpoint the location of the cave if he couldn't find it by recognizable land marks.

As the sun disappeared, the cast from the moon was enough to illuminate the desertscape, which Ezra was thankful for. He had walked for about an hour when his cuff began beeping. He was near the cave, and an outcropping looked familiar.

He dropped to his knees and scrabbled toward it. The small, musty opening reminded him of the claustrophobia he had felt before. This had to be it. He grimaced and reached into his pocket for the lumistick he was carrying. There was no way he would be crawling through here in the dark. He snapped the center of the barrel, and there was the acrid nose-hair burning smell of the phosphorous igniting. Cheered by the warm glow that now radiated from the torch, Ezra put it between his teeth and recommenced crawling further into the tunnel. His leg began to ache, even though the bullet wound had begun healing. It was probably still too early to be exercising it in such a fashion.

The tunnel gradually began to widen, and soon he could walk once more rather than crawl. He stuck the lumistick into his pocket; he didn't want to surprise Icarus and maybe give him a bead upon which to aim and strike down what he would undoubtedly suppose to be a bounty hunter coming for him. Likewise, Ezra didn't want to call out

his name and announce his presence, just in case it wasn't Icarus out there in the cavern. That would be the quickest way to the gallows for aiding and abetting if it were government agents in there waiting.

The lumistick gave off a faint glow in his pocket, as if he had trapped a firefly within the material. His eyes were becoming accustomed to the gloom, but he soon realized that he was reaching the cavern and it was the filtered moonlight through it that he was seeing.

But the cavern was empty. Ezra could still make out the cot in the corner and the pile of miscellaneous items that served as a supply closet. His heart sank, and he was furiously trying to figure out what his next move would be when he felt cold metal press against his temple.

"Are you armed?" asked a familiar voice.

Ezra's knees felt weak with relief. And hope. "Tobias," he said, knowing that nobody else knew the man by his real name.

The press of the metal was gone, and Icarus moved around to step in front of him. "Kneebone?"

"Yeah," was all he could say. He was still trying to figure out how close he had come to getting his head blown off.

"It really is you," Icarus said in awe.

"As far as I can tell," Ezra said, and sighed heavily. "You have no idea how glad I am that you're here—"

Evidently Icarus must have felt the same way, because the pressure of his lips were now upon Ezra's. Ezra responded eagerly, even though he knew that he should be pulling away and trying to knock some sense into the other man. He thrilled at that first taste of Icarus's tongue against his own again, and as he drew him in tighter to his own body, he felt the bare skin of Icarus's back. He had ached for the touch of this flesh again, and even now that he held Icarus again, it wasn't enough. He wanted more, and he wanted it now. He sank to his knees and he pulled Icarus down with him, still kissing. Playfully, but also with a desperate edge to it, he nipped at Icarus's chin, which brought a delighted laugh from the other man.

"I can't believe you're here," Icarus said. "Part of me wanted you to chase me, and you're here."

"You could have chased me," Ezra said huskily. "It would have made me one happy man." To prove how happy it would have made him, he dipped his head and sucked Icarus's left nipple.

Icarus groaned against him, tenderly stroking Ezra's hair. "Have you come to stop me?"

Ezra lifted his head. "You know about the train, then."

Icarus laughed. "Of course I know. They might as well have sent me a telegram, they've been so obvious about it."

"Then shouldn't that make you see sense, and not pursue it?"

"You didn't come here just to fight me, did you?" Icarus made to pull away, but Ezra tightened his grip.

"Yes, I did," he admitted. "This is suicide."

"This is the worst-kept secret in the entire county," Icarus shot back. "If I don't do this, it will destroy everything I've worked so hard to achieve."

"You can't continue feeding the poor if you're dead!"

"This is an old argument."

Ezra dropped his hold on the other man. "What next, then? Say you manage to survive this; do you just keep rising to the bait every time they raise the stakes and make it even harder for you? Do you still plan to be doing this when you're an old man? Or do you not want to make it that far?"

Icarus didn't answer him.

Realization dawned on Ezra. "That's it, isn't it? You *don't*."

"What did I say about trying to analyze me?" Icarus asked, scowling.

"You just think that because you had the life you had taken away from you that there's nothing else you can do except this."

"There is *nothing* else!"

"There are other things you can do! Other ways you can help people! There's your sister! Your nephews! They're all still there for you!" Ezra nervously reached for him again. "And there's me."

"For how long?" Icarus asked.

“For how long what?” Ezra repeated, feeling stupid that he didn’t quite get what Icarus was asking.

“How long are you there for me?”

“As long as you want me,” Ezra replied. “Which you seem to think isn’t long at all.”

“I don’t know anything right now.” And Ezra felt that maybe it was the first time Icarus had ever voiced that doubt out loud.

“Come back to Shrevesport with us,” Ezra pleaded. He thought of his lone ship, which now could have been a fleet if he hadn’t been so stubborn and proud—in essence, the very same emotions that Icarus was a prisoner of. How could he criticize and rail against Icarus when he was guilty of doing the same very thing?

“Why are you doing this?” Icarus asked.

Ezra wondered why he had been fighting this all this time. Why had he played fool with his own, and Jazz’s, future? They could also have had the lives they dreamed of, but he had dragged them down. Would it have been so bad to accept Lady Bart’s help? Especially now, when it could have saved Icarus and given assistance to many others in the long term? He could have presented Icarus with a range of concrete options, plans to draw upon the business to set up schemes to help the poor while helping themselves if that was what Icarus was so focused upon.

Unnerved by the silence, Icarus asked, “What are you thinking?”

“You ask me why I’m doing this,” Ezra said softly. “I’m doing it because you’ve grown on me. You want to make a change in peoples’ lives, well, you’ve made a change in mine.”

It wasn’t exactly a declaration of love like in those books Jazz read, and even he had picked up himself on their longer hauls, but it was the most eloquent and heartfelt speech that Ezra had ever made to another person. Perhaps time would allow him to take it further, but that all depended on how Icarus reacted.

Icarus studied him for a long moment, but couldn’t say anything. Instead, he kissed him.

This time Ezra didn’t pull away. He knew Icarus was showing him in his own way that there was some depth to how he was feeling as

well; there had to be a reason why they kept being drawn to each other. Ezra didn't know what Icarus's final decision would be, but in this moment, he at least knew Icarus felt for him too. Maybe this was a moment to get lost in, and try to hold onto it for as long as he could. Icarus's hands were already impatiently pulling at Ezra's duster, yanking it off his shoulders and letting it fall to the cavern floor. They were past talking now—it was all tactile, all action. Icarus sat back on his heels and unbuttoned his jeans. Ezra had a glimpse of the pecker already jutting through the waist of the denim before it was swallowed by the gloom of the moonlight as Icarus leaned forward again and started to unbutton Ezra's shirt for him. After his speed stripping him from his duster, Icarus's actions now were patient and delicate. He nuzzled the hair on Ezra's chest, seeking out his nipple and licking it. Ezra's hands slid down Icarus's back and came to rest within the material, cupping his cheeks. As Icarus turned his attention to the other, neglected, nipple, Ezra groaned and began to pull Icarus's jeans down, exposing his ass to the blue light of the cavern. With his jeans still puddling around his thighs, Icarus freed Ezra of his shirt, and their chests bumped. This thrilling touch of skin against skin only made them want to be completely bare so that every inch of their flesh could meet without barriers.

Ezra gently pushed his lover back, and with a laugh, Icarus fell onto his ass. Ezra was instantly on top of him, removing his jeans. Icarus lay before him, exposed, and his hand inched toward his pecker. Ezra pushed his hand away and took it into his mouth. He heard Icarus moan and smiled at the man's weight upon his tongue, sucking him in further until his nose crinkled at the touch of pubic hair against its tip. He pulled off with a hearty lick up the vein in the shaft, and Icarus looked at him through a happy haze.

“Get your pants off, Mister.”

He was only too happy to comply. As he shucked himself out of his jeans, he watched Icarus roll over onto his stomach and begin rooting around in his supplies, his ass raised tantalizingly in the air. Ezra threw his jeans next to his duster and turned to find Icarus on his back once more, his knees bent and his hands slick as he fingered himself, ready for Ezra to claim him.

Ezra was humbled, but it wasn't what he wanted. He reached out and took Icarus's hand. He lay before him and drew Icarus down to his own ass.

"What are you doing?" Icarus breathed.

"I want you to take me."

"Are you sure?"

Ezra nodded, and to make sure Icarus couldn't deny him, he helped guide his fingers within him. He groaned and closed his eyes, scared of the emotion that his partner might be able to read upon his face. Ezra was scared of what tomorrow would bring, and that this could be the only time he was with Icarus. If that was the case, he wanted to hold onto a piece of him forever—this certainty that one time they had been one, joined together, and Icarus had moved within him as close and as intimate as anybody could ever get. He could sense Icarus positioning himself between his splayed legs; Ezra hooked one of his legs around Icarus's ass to draw him in. Icarus was slick with sweat despite the cold in the cavern, and his body took on a sheen in the filtered light that rendered him as if he were a painting in a gallery.

He felt empty as Icarus's fingers left him, and he ached to be filled again. It was a breathless moment until he felt the blunt head of Icarus's pecker against his entrance. There was an initial resistance and a slight burning sensation as Icarus slid into him. Ezra wanted to be past that already, and in his haste as he began moving against his partner, he felt Icarus slide out again.

"Sorry," Icarus panted, wiping the sweat off his face.

Ezra reached up and pulled him down against him, and then rolled over so that he was lying flush against Icarus's chest. Icarus looked up at him with wonder, and Ezra pulled himself up into a half-seated position, reaching behind him for Icarus's pecker, guiding it home. Icarus bit his lip as he slid back into Ezra, and Ezra began to move for them. He took pleasure in watching Icarus watching him, as if they were caught in a crazy hall of mirrors, reflecting in each other's eyes. His pecker slapped heavily against Icarus's belly as he rose and fell upon him, Icarus gripping onto his hips hard enough to leave bruises. There was a desperation mounting between them as they rode to their release, which spilled white hot across Icarus's chest as he continued

thrusting into Ezra. Finally he tensed, and Ezra leaned down and kissed him as he fell back against the dirt.

“Holy blazes,” Icarus breathed.

Ezra carefully rolled off him and settled on his side, pulling Icarus into his arms. “Isn’t this something you could want? A life, with a partner, going forward?”

Icarus sat up, breaking their embrace. “Of course I would. But it’s not that simple.”

“It can be.”

“It seems we always come from opposite directions,” Icarus said bitterly, pulling his knees up to his chest. “You offer something so readily that I know can’t be taken so easily.”

“You’re just fighting against it,” Ezra told him. “You could just as well capitulate.”

“Then I would be changing myself.”

“We’re always changing ourselves, especially for other people. I’m not asking you to change who you are or what you believe, I’m just wanting you to stay alive and find some other way to do it.”

“And I was kind of hoping that if you came here, it wasn’t to philosophize.”

It was like Icarus had leaned over and jabbed his thumb into Ezra’s bullet wound, breaking it afresh. “I’ve wasted my time, then,” he said brusquely.

“No, no,” Icarus protested, turning back to him. He dropped his knees and pulled Ezra against his chest, holding him in place. “I *have* planned for this, believe me. I’m not going into this unprepared. You’ll never understand, but I have to do this.”

“You’re right. I’m past understanding.” Ezra stood and made his way over to the small waterfall and pool. He stood beneath the cold water, washing away every trace of Icarus from his body. It was a shame the water only went skin-deep.

Icarus climbed in after him, and hugged him from behind. “I’m sorry.”

Ezra shrugged. “Why become a lost cause?”

There was no response.

Ezra jumped out of the pool and dried himself with the sheet off the cot as best he could. Icarus silently watched him as he dressed, sitting wet and naked on the natural shelving of the pool.

Standing at the entrance of the tunnel, Ezra said, "Come here."

Icarus did so, and looked surprised when Ezra fastened a leather and metal cuff upon his wrist. "It's set to the frequency of the *Lilliput*. If you need us, at any time, let me know."

He could have sworn there was the glimmer of a tear in Icarus's eyes, but maybe he was fooling himself. He nodded curtly and turned to leave, but was stopped by Icarus pulling him back for a kiss. This time it was only the pressure of lips against lips, but it was hard, it was intense, and there was a sorrow behind it that could barely be named.

Against his better judgment, Ezra reached out and stroked Icarus's chin. And then with one more brief kiss, he turned on his heel and made his way through the tunnel.

Chapter 20

“IT’S not over, is it?” Jazz asked as Ezra sank exhaustedly into his seat.

She watched him with concern, and that only made Ezra feel worse. He pulled his goggles over his eyes so she couldn’t see the exhaustion and the hint of tears threatening to form. “We’re staying here to the bitter end, my friend.”

Jazz nodded and decided to leave it at that. She knew he would talk when he was ready. “Prepare for take-off.”

“Open the window, Jazz,” Ezra instructed. “I want to feel the wind in my hair.”

She did so, and despite the fact that the wind felt as if it was stripping him to the bone as they flew through the dark skies back to Waulkham Hills, he still felt that the story of Icarus was written all over his body.

THE small town of Waulkham Hills had never experienced such activity. Every hotel, saloon room, and spare room amongst the general populace was currently being inhabited by those looking to capture Icarus.

Like before, Ezra and Jazz gave up trying to get accommodation for the night. Instead, they stocked up on supplies and trudged back toward the *Lilliput*.

"This is going to be even more difficult than we thought," Ezra said as he sank into his chair, opening the bag of hot biscuits he had managed to get from the local diner before it closed.

"I don't know, I was expecting it to be pretty difficult," Jazz grumped, reaching for a biscuit and blowing on it to cool it down. "Do you have any ideas?"

"Not a one," Ezra admitted.

"Great."

"I'm relying upon your piloting skills, I'm afraid."

"How so?" Jazz bit into her biscuit. "Oh good, these are buttered."

"I know you like them that way."

"So you're trying to butter me up?" Jazz said, grinning. "With buttered biscuits and compliments?"

"More like biscuits and truth." He paused, and laughed. "Okay, and a little bit of buttering you up. Is it working?"

"Maybe."

"The only thing we can do is get amongst the fray when it begins. All hell is going to break loose when Icarus approaches that train. All these hunters are going to go after him. We're smaller than they are; we can outmaneuver them far more easily. So we shield Icarus while looking like we're chasing him."

"They'll shoot us out of the sky," Jazz told him. "Some plan."

"Icarus said he had something planned, but I don't know how useful it would be and he wasn't exactly forthcoming about it. Like I said, I trust your skills."

"So it's all on me, then?" Jazz really didn't seem to like that one bit.

"You'll have me on board," he assured her.

"I feel better already." She shook her head. "Give me the rest of those damn biscuits."

THE sun rose mercilessly that next morning, looking to burn the landscape below it. The temperatures had peaked to an all-time high, and Ezra wasn't happy with how sluggish the engines were sounding as Jazz ran through her usual preflight checks.

"Can you hear that?" he asked.

She nodded, her expression inscrutable behind her goggles as she leaned into the engine and observed it. She gave him the signal to quit the engine, and came back into the cabin. "I might do an oil change. It'll probably help, because I can't see anything wrong with the motors themselves."

"We need the *Lilliput* working at a hundred and ten percent, Jazz."

Pulling her goggles up to rest in her hair and push it back, Jazz said calmly, "I *always* have them working beyond that, and you know it."

He could feel the heat rise in his face; he had been told off, and rightly so. Jazz always pushed the *Lilliput* to its utmost limits, and then some. "Sorry," he murmured. "Just feeling anxious."

"I know," Jazz replied, "and that's why you're not lying in the dirt right now."

Point taken. He nodded.

"Look," Jazz said, kinder now. "We're going to be out there doing our best to protect him. In the end, that's all we can do."

Ezra knew she meant well, but it didn't exactly fill him with confidence. But he gave her a smile to try and reassure her he was fine and had taken her sentiment on board. She watched him for a moment and then went back to her inspection of the engine. That, she knew how to fix.

"You know, this is a tough situation," she said, working with her back to him. "You can't beat yourself up because it's hard to come up with a plan. It seems like the odds are against us no matter what we do this time."

He wished she had left it at the last rally for the troops, but he reached out and squeezed her shoulder before returning to the cockpit

to check the airwaves and see if there was any inter-airship chatter about the day's events.

AN UNEXPECTED storm front rolled in midmorning. Ezra didn't like the look of the skies; if they had been waves on an ocean, he would be convinced that their ship might not last the day.

Jazz stomped through the doorway of the cabin and bounded into her chair. "Glad I did the engines that early. Don't want rain getting in them."

Ezra was still frowning at the dark dense clouds through the windshield. "I'm more worried about this big hunk of metal attracting lightning strikes when we're up in the air."

"There'll be bigger ships than us to attract them," Jazz said with a shrug.

He found himself laughing, even though it was nothing to joke about. One lightning strike could fry their systems and their hunk of metal would be just that, and plummeting to kiss the earth on top of it all to boot.

"Kneebone?" Jazz asked.

He frowned at the hesitant tone in her voice, which was very un-Jazzlike. He hoped she wasn't about to ask him something personal concerning him and Icarus. "Yeah?"

"If we get out of this alive, I want you to do something for me."

"Uh, sure." He wondered just what in the hell he was setting himself up for. "What?"

"I want you to buy me a dress—"

Before he could even make any squeak of response, she continued.

"And I want you to help me choose it."

Had he come back to the right ship, and the right Jazz, after his final night with Icarus? He stared, open-mouthed, at her for a good while before she looked away.

“Okay, laugh. I know you want to.”

“I’m not going to laugh,” he said truthfully. “I’m just a mite perplexed about why you want a dress. And why you think I’m a good judge of character as to what kind of dress you should obtain. Isn’t that the kind of thing Lady Bart would be good at?”

Jazz mumbled something to herself that he didn’t catch, and then said more clearly, “It’s for Lady Bart I want to wear it. As a surprise.”

“Oh.” Ezra grinned to himself.

“Don’t look so goddamned happy about it! It doesn’t mean anything! It would just ruin the surprise if she helps me shop for it, that’s all. And a man’s opinion would be helpful, even if that man would rather see some young shirtless vagabond with wings upon his back modeling for him!”

Such a vision of Icarus distracted Ezra for a brief moment, but he shook it off because currently it only brought him a feeling of melancholy. The weather wasn’t helping. “I’d be pleased to go dress-shopping with you, Jazz.”

“Don’t get any ideas!” she chided him. “This isn’t a full time thing, I like my pants thank you very much! Dresses are....” She got lost, trying to think of the appropriate insult with which to throw at them. “Anyway, it’s for Bart. A flight of fancy, if you will.”

“Because she wore breeches for you?” Ezra asked in a stunning moment of clarity—as analyzing Jazz could be a dicey proposition at the best of times and was usually to be avoided.

Jazz looked fierce, as if she were about to shoot him down, but she settled back into her chair and admitted it was so. “Yes. So I want to do the same thing for her.”

“Is that—” Ezra began to say, but broke off.

“What?”

He felt foolish, but thought he might as well go through with it because he really wanted to know. “Is that what love is like?”

“Like what?”

“Doing things to please people, even if you don’t like it or don’t agree with it?”

Jazz raised an eyebrow. “We’re not talking about a dress now, are we?”

Ezra licked his lips nervously, and shook his head. “I guess not.”

“It’s part of what love is, I guess. I want to do this because it will make Bart happy if I occasionally wear a dress for her, just like she knows I like it if she wears breeches once in a blue moon. Sometimes you do what you don’t want to do just so you can make that other person laugh. So I guess that’s what is part of love, yeah.”

Ezra mulled this over.

“You let Icarus go, even though you wanted to kidnap him all over again just to keep him safe, right?” Jazz asked.

He nodded.

“Because it makes him happy, even though it makes you miserable?”

“I don’t think it makes him *happy*, but it’s what he wanted to do. So, yeah.”

Jazz flipped a switch on her console, and the starter engine of the *Lilliput* kicked into life. “Then I think you’re in love.”

It sounded ridiculous to say it, or even to think it, but Ezra tried it out on her anyway. “You may be right.”

Satisfied, her hands skimmed over the console as she gave the ship one final check. “Let’s go save your man, Ezra Kneebone.”

As the *Lilliput* shot into the sky, neither of its riders could resist whooping with a myriad of emotion that neither one of them could define anymore.

THE sensors were giving strange readings, the clouds were ever-darkening, and Ezra couldn’t help but wonder if they were portents of what was to come. He couldn’t help but think of Icarus flying through the storm, a target for both men and Mother Nature, with the odds stacked against him. He wished he could rip his accursed brain out of his head and no longer think of anything—it was far too distracting. Of course, flying around brainless would be no help either. And there

would be the obvious joke that Jazz could make, that how would he be able to tell the difference?

“That weather is affecting the sensors,” he told Jazz grimly.

“The wind shear isn’t helping us stay up as easily, either,” she replied just as grimly.

“I don’t think we’re going to be able to read other ships until we’re almost on top of them.”

“Good think I’m such a brilliant flyer, then.”

“We’re going to need it.”

Their bravado rang hollow to Ezra, and he suspected it did to Jazz as well. They were in trouble, and the only good thing about that was the fact that everybody else in the skies would be in the same unenviable position. Even though Icarus was the most likely target, Ezra thought that they would be lucky beyond reckoning if they got through the day without loss of life. The lure of the reward was too much for people to be scared off by the upcoming storm and the surefire risk involved. Not to mention the glory of capturing or killing the county’s most famous bandit.

“A miracle’s too much to ask for,” Ezra murmured to himself.

Jazz didn’t question him; she was too busy consulting the instruments and keeping an eye out ahead of them when the sensors failed to give them the usual information they provided.

And the alarm squealed before they even saw the ship in the gloom, so at least something was working in their favor.

“Pull up!” Ezra yelled. “Pull up!”

“Already on it,” Jazz said through gritted teeth.

Like a mythical creature from below the sea, a whale hanging in the air, the dirigible looked far too close for Ezra’s liking. “We’re going to hit it!”

“Keep your pants on!”

“If you keep yours on!”

Jazz laughed like a loon as they fell back against their seats, the *Lilliput* almost perpendicular in the air, their world feeling like it was turning upside down. Ezra expected to see sparks striking off the side

of the ship, they were that close, but thankfully they weren't close enough. He could, however, read the name of the ship as they shot past it—and groaned. It was the *Bubulcus*.

And sure enough, a familiar voice squawked over their comm system. “*Kneebone! What the fuck are you playing at?*”

Ezra opened a channel to the *Bubulcus*. “Sorry, it's the weather. Didn't see you.”

“*Well, that's bleeding obvious! Tell your little lady to cool her heels!*”

“You call me *little lady* one more time and I'll ram your monster of a ship so hard through its core they'll be searching for your body parts with tweezers upon the ground!” Jazz yelled.

“Did you hear that?” Ezra asked.

Just as Harding began to sputter a response, Ezra closed the channel.

“That man!” Jazz said venomously.

“I think we'll just mute him from here out.”

“No,” Jazz said, obviously unhappy. “Keep the channel open. You never know if he might have something useful to say. Any chance of this storm coming down?”

Ezra pored over the sensor readings. “Don't like your chances.”

“I wonder how many ships there are out there.”

“We're still the smallest. We can go places they can't, and get in closer.”

“This is madness, Kneebone. But you know what?”

He was almost too scared to ask. “What?”

“I *love* it.” She downchanged the thrust and the *Lilliput* lurched nose-first toward the ground, which could still not be seen. It seemed instinctual for Ezra to shut his eyes, but he forced them to stay open.

They broke through the cloud, and the town of Waulkham Hills lay below them and to their right. The gloom hadn't dissipated, however, and the streets looked far different than on the days when they blistered in the desert sun.

But the sky was full of their “colleagues,” other dirigibles and airships all hoping to get their piece of Icarus.

“Laying in course for Broadmeadow Pines,” Jazz said resolutely.

“There’s one good thing at least,” Ezra said.

“What’s that?”

“They’re all still hanging out here. Maybe everybody didn’t get the inside info we got.”

“Which is strange,” Jazz frowned. “If they want him caught, they’d want as many people to know to reduce his chances of getting away.”

“Unless someone wants the glory for themselves,” Ezra said.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out who it was. With the sensors working a little more consistently now that they were below cloud cover, Ezra watched as one ship detached itself from the others and began turning in the same direction they themselves were headed.

The *Bubulcus*.

“Harding,” Jazz breathed.

Ezra nodded. “Should’ve known.”

“It means there’ll be fewer ships in the skies. Less people to fight.”

“It also means that we’ll be far more recognizable amongst the scrum,” Ezra said softly. “They’ll be able to tell we’re set on saving, not capturing, him.”

The shadows above them darkened, and the cabin felt oppressive with the new silence between them.

“*KNEEBONE*,” crackled a voice over the *Lilliput*’s speaker.

Ezra and Jazz exchanged glances, and he flipped a switch to activate their end. “Kneebone here.”

“*You have good sources*,” replied the voice. Harding, of course.

“As good as yours, Harding. Obviously.”

“The Lady Bartholomew really shouldn’t be so careless.”

Ezra could see Jazz bristling, and he held up a hand to quiet her. As if that would stop her if she had a mind to blow her stack. “You think I don’t have sources other than her? I guess you underestimate me.”

“That’s not so difficult to do. If it wasn’t the good lady, who was it?”

“You expect me to tell you?” Ezra laughed. “At least give me the least amount of credit you can afford.”

“I told you before, Kneebone. Icarus is mine to bring in. I’ll blast you out of the skies if I have to.”

Jazz flipped the mute button. “The *Bubulcus* is right behind us!”

“He wouldn’t dare,” Ezra fumed, toggling the switch again. “Then you’ll have to do it now, Harding!” And he blocked the lines of communication between them before the other man could even respond.

Aghast, Jazz said, “You did *not* just dare him to fire upon us!”

“I might have.” Ezra calmly activated the guns, preparing for a defensive shot.

When the fire from the *Bubulcus* came raining upon them, Jazz made the *Lilliput* duck and weave as if she were a dancehall partner drunk on wine and still thinking she was steady on her feet. “Why aren’t you firing back?” she yelled.

Ezra, his finger on the trigger, remained calm. “Just wait a minute.”

Jazz continued to fly in a zigzag pattern just in case, but it seemed that the *Bubulcus* had only released one volley of fire.

“Return to normal flight path,” Ezra told her. “It was just a warning shot. As I suspected.”

The *Lilliput* maintained a steady position, and Jazz’s hands relaxed their grip on the throttles. “Okay, what made you think it would only be a warning?”

“Because if he did shoot us down, it would only be a distraction from his real goal.”

“Getting Icarus.”

“Yes. And he couldn’t risk that.”

“Nice of you, however, to risk our lives taking a chance on that,” Jazz grumped.

Ezra grinned. “Is it taking a risk if I already know the outcome?”

“You’re getting too cocky, and that’s worrisome.”

“I need to be cocky,” Ezra shrugged. “I can’t go into this half-hearted. Not today.”

An alarm sounded from the console, and Jazz slapped her hand upon it. “We’re nearing Broadmeadow Pines. This is it, Kneebone.”

The fog, unfortunately, was still out in full force and visibility was disconcertingly low.

“I don’t like this,” Jazz murmured. “We’re going to have to go in pretty close. We’ll be able to see the numbers of the carriages.”

“The fog’ll help with his getaway, though.”

“The *Bubulcus* is a pretty big cloud-buster.”

“Just take us in, Jazz.”

The *Lilliput* dipped toward the ground, and Ezra felt his stomach drop. Jazz sailed them right along the now-perceptible railway tracks. “Two clicks,” she announced.

They would be there in under a minute. Probably less than it took him to think it would be less than a minute. Ezra found himself biting at his thumbnail; a habit his mother had despaired of when he was a child.

An alarm rang out on the console.

“The *Bubulcus* is gearing up!” Jazz yelled. “Dammit, too close!”

Ezra saw the shadow pass over them before the *Lilliput* shuddered with contact. The readouts indicated that they were just clipped on the port side, but it threw them off course and Jazz had to fight for control. The ground below rushed up to meet them, but at the last second Jazz pulled them out of freefall.

Defly, one hand on the comm, Jazz broke the silence between the ships. “Damn you, Harding!”

"*You're in my way*," came Harding's smug reply.

"And you're in ours," Jazz replied coldly.

Ezra only had time to scream her name before the *Lilliput* banked to the port side again and gave chase to the *Bubulcus*. They were merely a fly against the flank of a horse, such was the difference between the span of each craft—but Jazz was determined to be the nastiest fly that ever bothered a horse.

"Target them, Kneebone," she demanded.

"Jazz, this is madness—"

"He'll resort to firing on us again. And next time he won't miss."

"We need—"

She ignored him. "Take out their weapons! Do you want them to use them on Icarus?"

That settled the matter. Deep down he knew he was probably making the biggest mistake of his life—for Harding would make sure he would more than pay at a later date—but Ezra took a deep breath and fired upon the *Bubulcus*, targeting their cannons.

The sky erupted in flame as the *Bubulcus* was hit. It was a perfect targeting on Ezra's behalf; there was no other damage to the ship other than their weapons system.

Their console immediately lit up as the *Bubulcus* tried to open communications with them.

"Ignore it," Jazz instructed. "What can they say that we don't already know? They'll make us pay, get us back, so forth, so forth. I'm tired of hearing that pompous git squawking at us!"

She was tired of it? Ezra laughed heartily, even though it seemed like he was laughing more in the face of their imminent destruction.

"They're targeting us again," she reported.

"I don't have to tell you—"

"I'm already on it, Boss. Evasive maneuvers."

There was no slick slide of escape for them this time; the *Lilliput* screamed in protest as Jazz rapidly changed course.

The *Bubulcus*, now weaponless, had seemingly decided that if they couldn't blast them out of the sky, it would take the next best course of action and simply ram them. The sheer size of the *Bubulcus* would destroy them; no trace of the *Lilliput* would be found any bigger than a dime.

If Ezra had had an instruction to yell at Jazz, he doubted it would have been heard over the cacophony of sound within the cockpit. Between the shrill alarm of proximity breach, their own overworked engines, and the approaching engines of the *Bubulcus*, human noise would have been easily drowned.

The *Bubulcus* was now filling their entire line of sight out of the cockpit window; time slowed as the *Lilliput* began to edge away, a small sliver of sweet blue sky appearing on the eastern fringe. Ezra's eyes widened as salvation and sanctuary beckoned, and he wondered in a mad fit if it was possible for him to get out and just give their ship an extra push that might be enough to buy their freedom.

But freedom was theirs regardless. The blue of the sky widened and the proximity alarms died out as the *Lilliput* slipped out from under the shadow of the *Bubulcus* and back out over the railway tracks below them.

For once, there was no victorious whoop from Jazz. She wiped sweat from her brow and simply said, "That was close."

"Need I remind you that that was *your* idea?"

"And it was a good one."

Seeing they were still alive, he couldn't disagree. It wasn't worth the argument, although he liked to believe that she was relieved he didn't press the point.

Having been distracted by their run-in with the *Bubulcus*, they almost overshot the coordinates for Broadmeadow Pines. They flew overhead, almost taking the roof off the small weatherboard building that served as a hold for cargo, and that the *Metal Bird* was now pulling up beside. People milling about on the veranda that was now serving as a platform looked up, holding onto their hats as the kickback from the engines threatened to steal them away. It was almost enough to make Ezra grin again.

"They're definitely loading the train," he observed. "Perfect timing."

"So we haven't missed the show yet," Jazz said grimly.

"Icarus will probably wait until the train is in motion. Although it makes it harder for him to shift the cargo, it also means it will be harder for them to defend it."

"And attack him," Jazz added.

"Yeah." Ezra took a deep breath. "That too."

"You ever get that feeling that no matter what we do, we'll end up getting screwed?"

Ezra ran his hand over his console lovingly. "Every time we go up in the air."

"Here comes the *Bubulcus*," Jazz yelled, interrupting his reveries.

Harding's ship looked even more monstrous as it emerged from a roll of fog. Its weapon banks were still smoldering. Ezra expected retribution to rain down from Harding, but the *Bubulcus* maintained a steady position, keeping both the train and the *Lilliput* within its sights.

"As far as I can tell, as much as the readings are accurate because of this damn fog, there are no other ships here yet." Ezra frowned. This was seeming too easy so far, although he doubted it would remain that way.

"Harding did tell you he wanted Icarus all to himself."

"Yeah, maybe nobody else had the sources we did."

"Source, singular," Jazz reminded him.

"One's all you need as long as the intel is right."

"It must be, if Harding is here. Plus he seemed pretty pissed that Bart found out."

"He doesn't like anybody swimming in his—" Ezra broke off. "We have movement on the train."

The train was now lifting off the track again, ready to depart, steam pouring out from beneath the undercarriage.

It felt like a nest of snakes was gnawing on him in his belly. It was all systems go now; at any moment Icarus would reveal himself and all hell would break loose.

Jazz gently lowered the *Lilliput* into place to follow the train as it began to pull away from the station. Ezra continued to monitor the sensors, and frowned when he saw the *Bubulcus* begin to do the same, even though he was expecting it.

Ezra tuned into the frequency that the train comms operated on, but there was no chatter at the moment. All seemed well.

“We’re only thirty clicks from Waulkham Hills,” Ezra said. “He’s running out of time.”

Jazz remained silent, but pulled her goggles down over her eyes. She was all business now. “Opening the windows.”

He knew she was preparing for the fact that they could have to effect a rescue of Icarus again and drag him back into their cabin, and he silently thanked her for it.

The speakers on their consoles squawked into life. It was a garble, as many people seemed to be talking over each other, but the excited tones of their voices gave it all away.

“Take us closer,” Ezra instructed.

“On it.”

The *Bubulcus* was mirroring their movements, but Ezra was distracted by the door of one of the carriages below them bursting open, and a winged man standing on the small platform at the back of the train.

Icarus.

You damn fool. You should have stayed away.

He obviously wasn’t intending on sticking around. He jumped free of the train and took to the skies. His style seemed even more sluggish than usual, and zooming in on him on the console, Ezra could see the moneybags attached to his harness. He had overloaded himself, and the wings were under strain.

It’ll only make it harder for him to get away.

Suddenly, the *Bubulcus* was diving down, aiming for the man Ezra was pretty sure he loved.

“Get in there!” he yelled at Jazz.

Smaller, faster, and a definite pain in the ass for Harding and the *Bubulcus*, the *Lilliput* maneuvered in between Icarus and the larger ship. If the *Bubulcus* had still had weaponry, Ezra was sure that the *Lilliput* would now be crashing toward the ground with her body wracked with bullets. Harding was certainly determined to claim Icarus as his bounty.

But then something surreal happened. Below them, on the train, the back doors opened once more and another six winged men appeared. Moving in unison, they threw themselves up into the air and took flight, moving in toward Icarus.

“What the hell?” Jazz breathed.

“Get in behind them, Jazz.”

He had no idea what they were planning to do from here, but he knew they couldn’t let Icarus out of their sight. The others would be a distraction, but it was still Icarus who was in the most danger. If they could stay on him, Ezra knew Harding could as well.

No sooner had the *Lilliput* maneuvered behind the men than they all took off in different directions. “Stay on Icarus!”

“I’m on it!” Jazz yelled back.

It was as if the fog were churning, between the frenzied flight patterns of the winged men and the airships that were desperately trying to follow them once they decided upon which one to target. Ezra opened up the comm channel again to hear Harding barking orders and knew they had to act fast.

Because once Harding saw the *Lilliput* taking after a certain man, he began changing his orders. Ezra knew Harding wouldn’t assign the *Bubulcus* to follow a fake Icarus, because he was counting upon Ezra to know which man Icarus truly was—after all, he had spent actual time in person with him—and as the *Bubulcus* was still weaponless, he would get another ship to follow them so that if worse came to worst he could blow either the *Lilliput* or Icarus out of the sky and still guarantee himself the reward money. For Ezra knew there had to be other ships

waiting in the vicinity; Harding was smart enough to have planned for this very situation, even though he would hate to be taken out of the major play.

As if on cue, he was justified in his thoughts.

“The *Kagu* is following us,” Jazz informed him.

And so it was. Sleek, dark and ominous looking, although nowhere as big as the *Bubulcus*, both Ezra and Jazz knew the captain of the ship by reputation. Gerard Frailden was a fighter, having trained in the aerial army before deciding to go into business for himself.

“This is not good,” Jazz said.

“Just stay between him and Icarus,” Ezra told her.

“I guess dying *is* an option today,” she muttered.

Ezra began firing up the guns, knowing they would have to be used sooner rather than later. *Just make sure you stay out of his way as well, Tobias.*

Funny how he was now starting to see him as Tobias, rather than Icarus. Icarus was a legend, a story pieced together by snatches of folk legend and tales of heroic deeds. Tobias was human, a flawed individual running from his own past and refusing to see the reasons behind why he did the things he did. Tobias had potential to live up to; Icarus’s days were numbered.

He just hoped he got to call Tobias by his real name again. The events of today were taking a turn for the bizarre—as all things went, this would have been the least expected scenario he could have thought might happen today.

“Decoys,” he said, finally. “But how did he arrange it?”

Jazz didn’t bother answering him. She had other things to worry about. The other ships were now visible through the fog, and obviously answering orders from Harding as they lined up with the *Bubulcus* to create a “net” around the flyers that would be difficult for them to escape.

Icarus was flying in a zigzag pattern, dangerously swerving in between the ships that were pursuing him, obviously hoping that they wouldn’t fire upon him if he were using them as a shield. He would

soar up on pockets of air and then just as recklessly plummet from them in order to lose altitude and keep his movements unpredictable.

Ezra was suitably awed by his skills of flight, and wondered what Tobias would be like behind the throttle of a dirigible, when he showed such grace and daring with only a set of man-made wings strapped to his back.

A voice crackled through the comm speakers. *“Ezra Kneebone, can you hear me?”*

Jazz shot him a look, and Ezra pressed to reply. He already knew who it was, but did not speak his name in order to protect him should anybody else be listening in. “Yes.”

“Is this a secure channel?”

He made it so, linking their signals and then dampening them with static so that Harding and his cronies would have trouble listening in. It wasn’t foolproof, but it would give them a little bit of time at least. “Make it quick—they’ll be able to break it soon enough.”

“Is your offer still open?”

Ezra couldn’t believe what he was hearing. What had happened over the past few days to change Tobias’s mind? However, he was wasting precious time by stopping to debate this stroke of good fortune. “My offer is always open to you. I just fear you’ll never take it.”

Offer? Jazz mouthed at him, but he waved her off.

“Never say never,” Tobias replied.

Through the cockpit window, Ezra could see him still, ducking and weaving through the darkness of the fog and the shadows of the airships following and dwarfing him.

“I just had to plan it right,” Tobias continued.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m declaring this to be Icarus’s last flight. Such as this is, anyway.”

Although a flood of emotion was tearing through him and threatening to destroy the barriers erected against it, Ezra only allowed himself to close his eyes for a moment and say, “What do you need us to do?”

“Just get me to safety. At least, away from my new friends. Lose them for me.”

“The *Bubulcus* has no weapons,” Jazz butted into their conversation, her expression telling Ezra that he was wasting airtime that would be far more valuable discussing strategy.

“So you have nothing to fear from it,” Ezra added. “But watch out for the *Kagu*. It’s fully armed and operational.”

“Noted,” Tobias replied. “Now—”

Communication was cut out as the *Lilliput* was struck from behind. As sirens sounded and the comms were giving conflicting readings, Ezra couldn’t tell if they had been hit by bullet fire or rammed by an actual ship.

“This damn fog!” Jazz yelled.

The *Lilliput* shuddered again as she fell victim to attack. Ezra could see fire spreading on the port side and leapt out of his chair to reach for the extinguisher.

“You can’t go out there!” Jazz yelled. “In case you didn’t notice, we’re in the middle of a war zone!”

There was nothing else that could be done, and he was about to say that to her when he was knocked to the floor as the *Lilliput* sustained damage once again. It was already two strikes too many, and Ezra was torn between the need to put out the fire or to start firing upon their aggressor so obviously hellbent on wiping them out of the skies.

He dropped the extinguishers and scrabbled back to his seat. The fire would have to wait for now.

“We have to put it out somehow!” Jazz said.

“We have to stop them from making it worse,” Ezra replied bleakly.

Jazz ran her finger over the sensors, bringing up fresh information and readings. “Hang on, I’m going to try something!”

But Ezra was too distracted, and when the *Lilliput* tilted steeply to the port side, he almost tumbled out of his seat, but managed to hold onto the arm and right himself.

“I told you to hang on!”

He watched with wonder as the fires on the side of their ship struggled to stay alight in the sheer force of wind now fighting against them. The problem was, they were now heading away from Tobias—and the *Kagu* was closing in on him once more.

If it wasn't one damned thing, it was another! No plan ever went smoothly, but this one was truly cursed.

One thing he was thankful for was that the *Kagu* had fired upon them first. From here on in, anything that happened could stand up in a court of law as natural self-defense. If Harding didn't pay off the judges, that was. Or if they even survived to be charged, then had to defend themselves.

Lining up the target, Ezra focused in upon the *Kagu's* weapons array and fired. The ship took on a noticeable lilt. Definite contact.

"Nice work, Boss," Jazz said appreciatively.

"Nice flying, Jazz."

The meeting of this mutual appreciation society had to remain brief. Jazz looked down upon the side of the *Lilliput* and grinned to see that the fires were out, reduced to little more than smoldering embers floating away like blazing petals on the wind produced by their kickback.

"Good work, team," Ezra laughed.

Now it was the *Kagu* that had fires to contend with, and they dropped off their pursuit of Icarus, falling back and unwillingly allowing the *Lilliput* to pass them while the *Bubulcus* still tried in vain to catch up with them both.

"Get to Tobias!" Ezra instructed. "We'll bring him in through the cockpit. If he's telling the truth about this being his final flight, we'll finish it here and now."

Tobias? Jazz mouthed, but remained silent, leaning on the throttle. The *Lilliput* accelerated and dipped down to settle in behind Icarus. Ezra started scanning the comm frequencies, trying to locate Tobias on the wristcuff he had given him. All he found was static.

"Maybe the comm is damaged," Jazz suggested. "We're not going to know exactly what damage we took until we get to land and go over everything."

The *Lilliput* was finally within range of Tobias, and Ezra was starting to climb out of the cockpit and onto the roof when another airship suddenly appeared before them, rising into what had previously been beautiful, empty sky.

“Quick!” Ezra yelled, looking back down at Jazz in the cockpit. He hoisted himself up and onto the roof, latching his belt onto the safety line. He grabbed onto it as the *Lilliput* lost altitude at a sickening rate in order to avoid crashing into the other ship.

But even from his view on top of the cockpit, Ezra could see it was too late. The *Lilliput* might avoid collision, but Tobias was in danger. He was trying to fly in a pattern which would stop him from being targeted by sensors, but he had also been taken by surprise, and the movements of the wings were still too sluggish due to the extra weight of the moneybags stolen from the train.

Over his headset, Ezra yelled to Jazz, “Get between them!”

It was hopeless. He was still yelling his order when the lasers struck Tobias, and smoke and fire exploded from his wings. Tobias began to fall immediately, and Ezra’s yell turned into a guttural scream. The *Lilliput* jerked below him as Jazz changed course to follow Tobias down, and hope sorely stabbed in his chest as he watched a silk chute unravel from Icarus’s back—he was obviously conscious enough to instigate emergency procedures.

As the *Lilliput* came dangerously close to the other ship, Ezra drew his pistol and fired. It was the equivalent of using a peashooter against the hide of an elephant, but it made him feel good for all of two seconds.

He recharged the pistol and shoved it back in his holster, pulling his goggles over his eyes and focusing upon the man he loved. He could see Tobias trying to ride the wind with directional hand-pulleys, guiding himself to a nearby mesa.

“Jazz,” Ezra spoke into his headset. “Get me to that mesa. At eleven o’clock.”

“Got it,” she replied in his ear, and the *Lilliput* changed direction.

Ezra couldn’t focus closely enough on Tobias’s face to see how injured he was, or if he was in any kind of pain. He had turned into a

dark shadow against the sun, still twisting defiantly in the face of all odds.

Coiling a rope in his hand, Ezra latched the safety clip onto it. Below him, the mesa was looming up, and Tobias hit it with a cloud of dust billowing out from under him as he crumpled into the dirt.

As soon as he could see the ground of the mesa directly below the *Lilliput*, Ezra threw himself off the cockpit roof. His stomach was in his mouth, and the force of the wind was threatening to rip his ears off, but Ezra determinedly let himself free fall, the rope unspooling in his gloved hands. If they had been bare, the rope would have stripped skin off down to the bone—even with the gloves, he could feel the heat of friction. Rappelling down the side of his ship, he ran out of rope and dangled at the bottom of it for a moment before trusting himself to the fates and releasing the safety.

Like Tobias, he hit the ground too fast and lay sprawled, stunned, trying to catch his breath back. He slowly rolled over and gingerly checked himself for broken bones; he seemed okay and intact, so he stumbled to his feet, still breathing heavily and erratically.

He lumbered over to Tobias with the grace of a newborn foal.

“*Kneebone?*” Jazz asked in his ear, and he realized she had been yelling at him for quite some time, probably ever since she had watched him jump off the *Lilliput*. “*Are you okay? Speak to me!*”

“Fine,” he managed to grunt. “Land as close as you can.”

He heard the engines of the *Lilliput* kick back in as Jazz moved off.

Tobias was trying to move as Ezra finally reached him, but the wreckage of his wings had practically caged him. It was proving difficult for him to extricate himself from them, and Ezra fell to his knees beside him.

“You’re alive,” Ezra said with relief.

“Barely.” Tobias grinned, and Ezra was alarmed to see that one of his teeth had been knocked out in his fall and blood was now pouring down his chin.

“You’re hurt,” he said gently.

“You’re not looking that great yourself,” Tobias said, running a finger along a deep cut on Ezra’s arm. “But you look pretty good to me.”

Ezra kissed him fiercely, and despite the blood, the sweat, and the grime—all of this coppery-tasting mud that he could taste—Tobias had never seemed sweeter. It was life and hope that embodied those warm lips now pressed against his, and that inviting mouth that welcomed him in.

Tobias reluctantly pulled away and gestured to the wings. “Help me.”

With hands that threatened to shake on him, Ezra began ripping at the leather and metal that covered Tobias’s back and chest. “I take it you want the money safe?”

“Of course,” Tobias laughed. “There are still people it has to get to.”

The horrendous sound of metal scraping against metal distracted them, and they looked above to see the *Lilliput* and the *Kagu* locked in combat together, the former trying to stop the *Kagu* from getting to them.

“I’m sorry,” Tobias breathed. “I should have known this time wouldn’t be so easy. I thought I had everything planned—”

“We’ll dust up about that later,” Ezra said, yelping as his finger ripped open from nail to knuckle as he finally managed to free Tobias from his damaged wings. They fell to the ground with an ominous clank, and Tobias began to gather the bags.

“I’ll leave the wings here,” he said. “They’re really of no use in that condition.”

“They can be salvaged,” Ezra told him.

Before Tobias could reply, the sound of a smaller engine caught their attention. Coming in to land was one of the *Icarus* decoys. He moved stealthily, running toward them and pulling his wings in behind him at the same time. As he drew up to them, he yanked off his goggles and Ezra was taken aback by the fact that it was Cornelius Mace.

“Mace,” he stammered.

“Howdy, Kneebone,” Cornelius grinned. “I guess now you know why I was such a supporter of our friend Icarus here.”

They didn’t have time for explanations.

“You have to get out of here,” Tobias admonished him. “What the hell are you thinking?”

“Jackson reported you were down. I brought you my wings.”

“I have an escape,” Tobias said, nodding toward Ezra.

Mace shielded his eyes against the sun, looking up at where the *Lilliput* and the *Kagu* were still facing each other off. “May not be the best option for you.”

“It’s the option I’m taking,” Tobias growled, and Ezra warmed at his determination.

Mace ignored him and started taking off his wings.

“Cornelius!” Tobias yelled, and Ezra was surprised at the familiarity and the ferocity in the tone. “Take an order when it’s given to you!”

“Not this time, partner,” Mace replied.

“How are you getting out of here, then?” Ezra asked.

Scratching at his temple, Mace laughed. “Thought I’d thumb a lift with an old friend.”

“We already have a passenger. Put those wings back on,” Ezra growled.

Cornelius opened his mouth to argue, but his expression slackened as his chest exploded with a spray of blood that hit Ezra in the face. Cornelius sagged immediately, and Ezra caught him. The surprise made him stagger, and he fell to his knees with the other man. He was vaguely aware of Tobias trying to pull him away to safety, but all he could do was look into Cornelius’s eyes as the light faded from them. There wasn’t even time for one last goodbye to his once-friend, who had seemingly become one of Tobias’s closest cohorts without him ever knowing.

Suddenly all sound seemed to fade back in, and he could hear Tobias yelling. “Come on, Ezra!”

It was combined with Jazz's frantic, garbled yelling in his ear. She was probably saying the same thing.

He had to leave Cornelius's body in the dirt, where blood was now pooling beneath him. Even as Tobias was now pulling him to his feet, Ezra had enough presence of mind to grab the wings.

Bodies were now spilling out of the *Kagu*, rappelling down much like Ezra had, and some had already hit the mesa floor. Ezra could see Jazz landing the *Lilliput*, and without speaking, began to maneuver Tobias toward it. Bullets sprayed the dirt around them, but they continued haphazardly, avoiding being hit by sheer luck more than divine intervention.

That was when Ezra began to lose all hope. Frailden was now acting in his own best interests and disregarding any guidelines Harding might have put down before. It didn't matter to Frailden and the crew of the *Kagu* whether Icarus was brought in alive or dead—it was easier for them to bring him in dead.

If only they could get to the *Lilliput* in time—

Still shoving Tobias along, Ezra began to throw the wings over his shoulders.

"What are you doing—"

"Shut up!"

But nobody ever told Tobias Daedalus to shut up. "Ezra—"

Ezra ignored him, fumbling with the straps as he tightened them, while they were still running along. "You have to fly, Tobias."

"I can't leave you!"

"You can! I have Jazz to get me out of here. I can still say that you evaded escape from me, thanks to them bumbling in—"

"It's too dangerous—"

"Just do it."

"One man is already dead because of me!"

It was no time to think of Cornelius Mace and his sacrifice. Ezra concentrated on the last strap, and was relieved as it slid into place. He looked up just to see a man hitting the ground ahead of them, his chute

billowing around his feet as he straightened up and aimed a pistol at them, directly centered on Tobias's chest.

Ezra yanked on the starting motor, and the wings opened. In one deft motion, he stepped around and in front of Tobias, hissing in his ear. "Go—for me."

He heard Tobias yelling in response, but it was covered by the sound of a pistol firing. Ezra felt pain burst within his chest, and he looked down, surprised to see his own blood cover where Cornelius's had been before.

"Get out of here, Tobias," he managed to spit out before falling to his knees.

He tried to turn, to see for himself whether Tobias was in the air, trying for one last shot at freedom.

But everything went dark.

Epilogue

EZRA KNEEBONE came to the slow realization that he probably wasn't dead, as he found himself floating in and out of consciousness over the next few days. If it even was days—time had no meaning to him during this period.

He wanted to talk, but found he couldn't. He knew Jazz was one of the many vague faces floating above his bed, but only because of her voice. His sight was bleary, perhaps affected by the intense pain he felt in his chest.

"Will he make it?" That was one of the things he was sure he heard her ask.

"The doctor's the best money can buy."

Lady Bart. His savior yet again. Once again, he could only tell by the voice.

At times he was aware of someone prodding at him, doing something to his chest. Pain would follow, and then he would be fed something and slip away into blissful, narcotic-induced sleep.

Over time, the pain lessened and he became more aware of his surroundings. Able to finally speak again, he heard Jazz's voice and managed to rasp, "Tobias?"

"Later, Ezra. Later."

Things had to be bad if she was calling him by his first name. But sleep called again.

There came the time when everything around him refocused again, and he was able to sit up without assistance. He waited until he

was alone with Jazz again, and asked her as calmly as he could, "Tell me, Jazz. Did Tobias get away?"

Her face drawn, she took his hand. "Ezra—"

He could feel his face getting hot and his stomach twisting, although there was barely anything in it. "Jazz, for all that is—"

With her other hand she stroked his cheek gently. "I saw him fly away from you. At first he tried to fly with you in his arms, but the weight was too much for the wings. They shot him in the arm, and he dropped you."

"He tried to take off with me?" Ezra asked in wonder. After all he had done to try to make him free, and he wasted precious moments which could have seen him safe—

"Of course he did. You think he wouldn't?"

"What happened next?"

"You fell back to the ground, and he had no choice but to fly on. It would have been suicidal to go back for you, and I guess he knew that I would get to you. So he flew on, and rather than risk him getting away, they fired upon him...." Jazz broke off, and covered her face for a moment. She took a deep breath, and looked back at Ezra again. "The wings... well, they disintegrated. He fell, Ezra. He fell from the sky and into the crevices of the mesa. They searched for him for days, but you know what the mesas can be like. There are places they can't get into... everyone saw him fall. He's gone."

Ezra wished for the blanked-out state he had been in before to return, but this time he wasn't so lucky. He knew Jazz wanted to stay and comfort him, but he told her to go. It was only when the door closed behind her that he allowed himself to cry. He wouldn't allow himself the pain of believing against hope that Tobias had somehow escaped. Jazz would have given him some sliver of optimism if she believed it possible.

It seemed days that he lay in his bed again, unwilling to pull himself together, until Lady Bart arrived with a sheaf of papers in her hand. "Jazille is worried about you," she said coolly, but with deep concern. "Truth be told, she hasn't stopped worrying about you ever since that day."

“Am I not allowed to grieve?” Ezra asked.

“Of course you are,” Bart responded. “Look at me, for heaven’s sake, I’m still in mourning wear. I lay in bed for weeks when my husband died, but you have to get up one day. And that day is today.”

“Why?”

“Because we have a business to run.” She began to lay the papers across his blankets. “I’ve drawn these up with my lawyers. All they need is your signature. Jazille and I have already signed.”

The pen that she handed him felt heavier than it should have. “It would have saved a lot of heartache if I had agreed to this from the very beginning, I guess.”

He was surprised by her leaning in and kissing him on the forehead. “It wouldn’t have been worth never knowing him, my dear.”

Ezra wanted to believe that, but the pain was still too raw. His hand shook slightly as he signed the papers, but his signature was legible. He handed the pen back to her and stared at the documents. “I guess we’re partners now.”

“Jazille allowed me to look at the designs for the new ships,” Bart told him. “You’re a very talented man, Mr. Kneebone. Everybody will want one of these ships for their own personal use when they roll off the manufacturing lines. Of course, I expect the first one.”

Ezra smiled, a slight smile, but a smile indeed. “Maybe we’ll call the fleet the *Bart*.”

Lady Bart laughed. “No, my friend. We’ll think of something better.”

When she left, he groggily got to his feet and began pouring a bath. Bart was right; he had to get up sometime.

The first thing he did, after meeting with Jazz to assure her that he was back amongst the living again and to start arranging meetings with engineers and manufacturers, as well as factory space, was to journey into Whiskeytown.

Not for pleasure. He didn’t feel like there was any pleasure to be had at the moment. It was strictly business.

Lee was at his old haunt, and he recognized his old customer as soon as he approached him. "It's been a while, sir."

Ezra took him by the arm before Lee turned to lead him upstairs. "I'm not here for that. I'm here to offer you a job."

Lee laughed. "You've come to take me away from all this? Sorry, sir, but I've heard that one before."

"I'm serious," Ezra said. "And really, what are you going to do later on? Whores have a short shelf life, especially when younger and prettier ones move in." He hated having to speak so harshly, but he still felt an emptiness, a baseness, ever since those events on top of the mesa that made him blunt and forthright. After all, what was the use in not being direct? It got you nowhere.

"You're full of compliments today," Lee said, looking unhappy.

"Just so you know," Ezra continued, "I'm not doing this to make you my own personal whore. Whatever happened between us is past, and I don't want it to continue. What I am offering you is a job, and stability."

Trying to look aloof, but failing, Lee said, "I'll think about it."

Turning on him, Ezra walked away, calling over his shoulder, "Don't think about it too long."

And so life continued on. Lee, as it turned out, didn't take very long to think about a new job at all. By the end of the week, he was a member of the team, setting up meetings and helping Jazz and Ezra with the monotonous tasks that always seemed to slip away from them and could prove costly if they continued to do so. Contracts were signed with other businesses, and it seemed that a lot of people were beginning to take interest in the idea of small, personal dirigibles for the "common man" ("And woman!" Jazz added indignantly). Pre-orders were already bringing in money, and Lady Bart said it would be no time at all before she was paid back in full and they would all start to profit.

Life *seemed* good. But Ezra still moved in a daze, his thoughts still affected by Tobias whenever his brain had a moment not taken up by the rigors of his new work life. He thought of journeying out to visit Ruth, but dismissed it as being too painful—probably for the both of

them. He couldn't imagine seeing Ruth without seeing some vestiges of her brother imprinted upon her features, or looking out upon the barn where he and Tobias had shared each other for the first time. Better to remain in Shrevesport where he was only haunted by memories and not tangible remnants of a life now lost to him.

But all that was to change.

Night was falling as Ezra locked the office behind him, stepping out onto the street. People rushed by, eager to get home out of the cold. Ezra wrapped his coat around him and dug his hands into his pockets.

It was a little over three months since Tobias, although known in that capacity as Icarus, had been declared dead by the government. At times it felt like three days; other times, it felt like three years. No matter how elastic the time felt, the pain still hadn't lessened. Despite what Lady Bart had assured him, it wasn't getting any better. You open your heart for once, and this was how you got treated.

He almost didn't hear the other man as he passed by the mouth of the alley that ran between his building and the next, and it would have been easy to continue walking on, but something made him stop. Something about the timbre of the voice, an innate recognition was sparked within him....

"Kneebone."

Ezra turned, and when the man stepped out of the shadows, he felt his knees give way and he stumbled forward. The shock was just too great. Had his grief led him now into hallucination?

"Ezra," Tobias said, catching him easily and pulling him back into the privacy of the alley. His breath, hot and *real*, brushed against Ezra's ear; no vision could cause that tactile a response. "I'm sorry it had to be this way you found out, but no matter how I could have done it... well, it would have been a shock anyway."

A shock? A mere *shock*? Ezra regained his balance and stepped away from Tobias to take him in more fully. He was leaning heavily on a cane, and as Ezra's eyes grew accustomed to the dimness of their surroundings, he could see that there were scars and burns across Tobias's left cheek and down his neck.

“It really *is* you.” Ezra reached out for him, and pulled back, before taking Tobias’s chin in his hand and regarding him gently. “Jazz thought you were dead.”

“It’s true. Icarus *did* die on that mesa,” Tobias murmured. “However, Tobias did not. He just had to bide his time before he could reveal himself.”

“And recover.” Ezra winced as he looked closer at the injuries on his lover’s face.

“Still doing that,” Tobias said with a bitter smile.

Ezra’s eyes widened as the realization struck him once more. “You’re alive!”

“I am. And so are you.”

Their full stories would be exchanged later—of how Tobias had indeed crashed into the crevices of the mesa and, badly injured, had crawled in further to escape discovery. He had been found much later by his Icarus decoys, loyal followers who had traced the signal of the very wrist cuff Ezra had given him. He had been spirited away to safety but spent much of the first few weeks after the event unconscious. Once he had awoken, it had been necessary to remain in hiding; Icarus had died, but Tobias couldn’t appear straight away lest someone put two and two together, such as his father, despite the likelihood of it happening being a long shot.

“Even Ruth only found out recently, and she would have liked to have killed me again,” Tobias said wryly. “She came to town to see how you were, because we couldn’t find out anything through the news services—”

“I never saw her.”

“Well, no. She was trying to speak to Lady Bart, and when she went to meet her at the council offices, she saw my father and fled so he wouldn’t know she was there.”

They were now lying in bed together, having explored each other anew and catalogued each injury as it was written upon their skin. There was still so much to talk about, to find out, but for now, once the basics were dealt with, they were happy just to lie together and think only about each moment as it happened. The world outside Ezra’s

small bedroom was inconsequential as long as they remained wrapped up in each other's warmth.

"Just tell me one thing for now," Ezra murmured. "Why did you decide to give up being Icarus?"

Tobias rolled over onto Ezra's chest and rested his chin upon it. "You, you fool," he said honestly. "I knew I wanted to do it when you came to me in the cave, but I was stubborn. I had to figure out a way to end it first. I had made plans, but I wanted to make sure they would work."

"You could have asked for my help."

"I know. But I wanted to do it without getting you hurt."

Ezra guffawed so much Tobias almost bounced off his chest. "The irony, in hindsight, is amazing."

"I know that now," Tobias conceded. "Before, it was just me to worry about. But I dragged other people in, and they got hurt because of me. Worse. Cornelius got killed."

The ghost of their mutual acquaintance was awakened between them.

"I still dream about it," Ezra said softly.

"I don't have to dream to see it still," Tobias sat up and wiped at his face. "He made the decision to help me, knowing the danger. But it doesn't make it any better."

"I know."

"That day was meant to be the last time. It was my pride and my ego that led me to challenge their plan. Had I known what would happen... but that can't be changed."

Ezra reached up and pulled him back down. "I told you, we can find other ways to continue Icarus's legacy."

"When I saw you shot, it killed me. When I had to drop you, I didn't care anymore whether I lived or died. It seems funny now that we're both here, together. It seems like a dream."

"Then don't let me wake up," Ezra said, kissing him.

"We have to wake up. We have to leave this room at some point."

“And what do we do from there?”

“Icarus is dead. Long live Tobias Daedalus.” Tobias grinned. “I have to start living up to my old name again. Probably scare the bejesus out of my father when I show my ugly head—the son who shamed him so abominably. And I have to get adjusted to living in a big city again. I need someone to show me the town; let me know who to avoid, who to trust.”

“I can help you with that.”

“Really?” Tobias held out his hand, as if they were meeting for the first time. “So what is it you do for a living, Mr. Kneebone?”

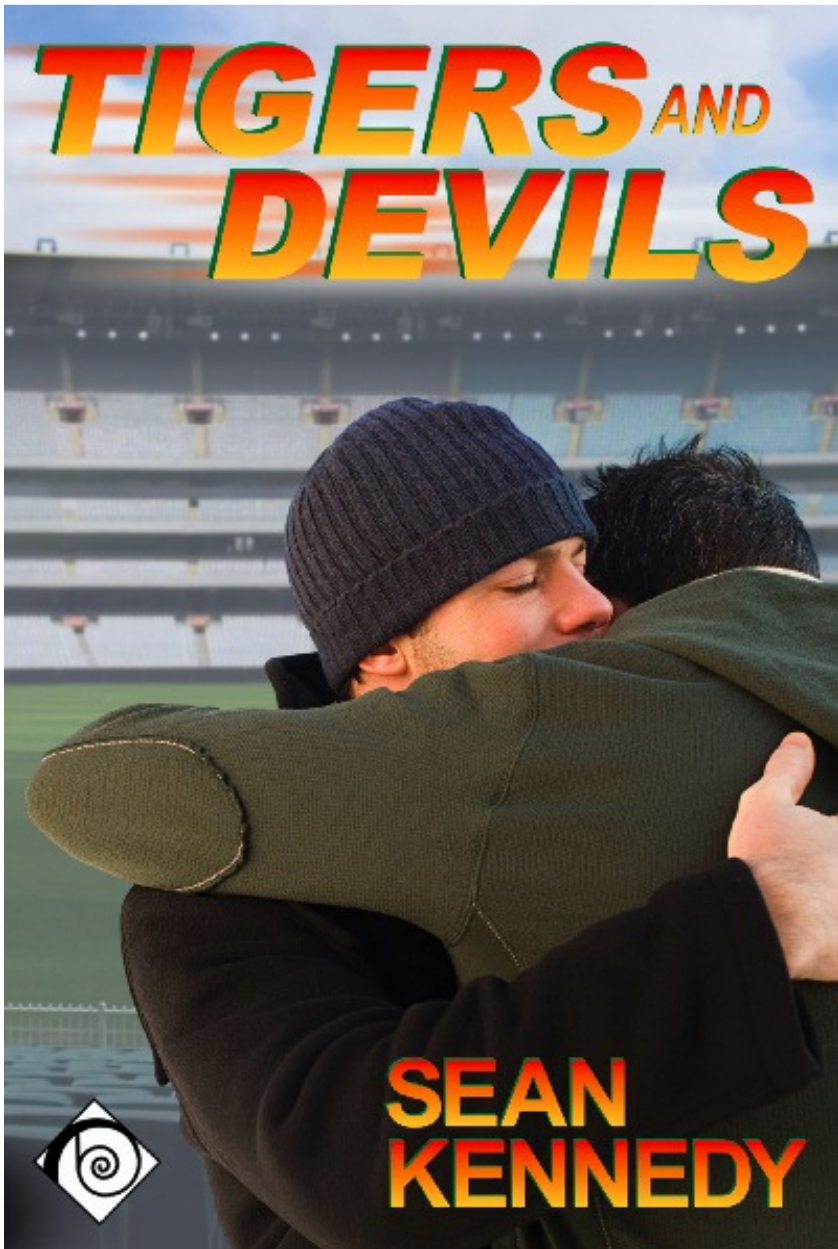
Ezra took the offered hand, but instead of shaking it, held it tightly against his chest. “I’ve just gone into business. Building my own airships.”

“What a coincidence.” Tobias kissed the back of the hand that held his. “As it so happens, I love to fly.”

SEAN KENNEDY lives in the second-most isolated city in the world, so it's just as well he has his imagination for company when real-life friends are otherwise occupied. He has far too many ideas and wishes he had the power to feed them directly from his brain into the laptop so they won't get lost in the ether.

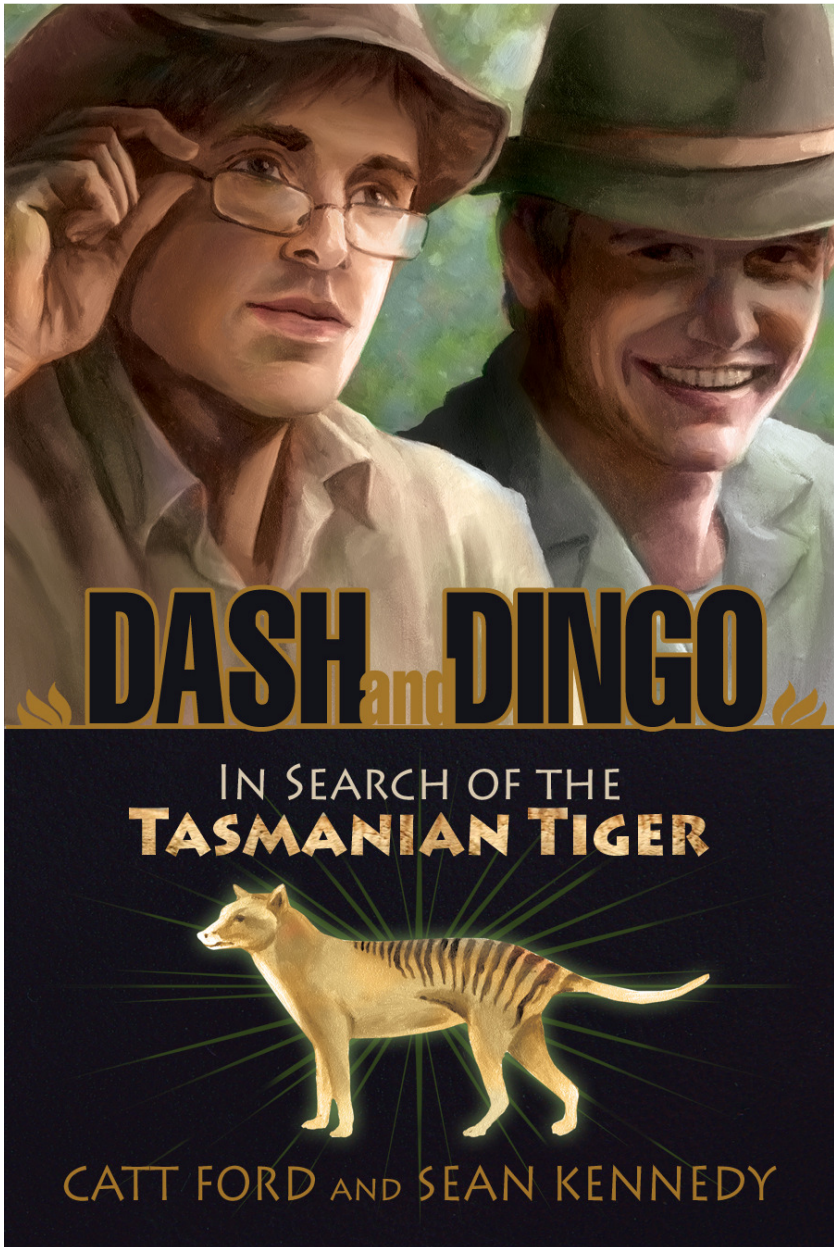
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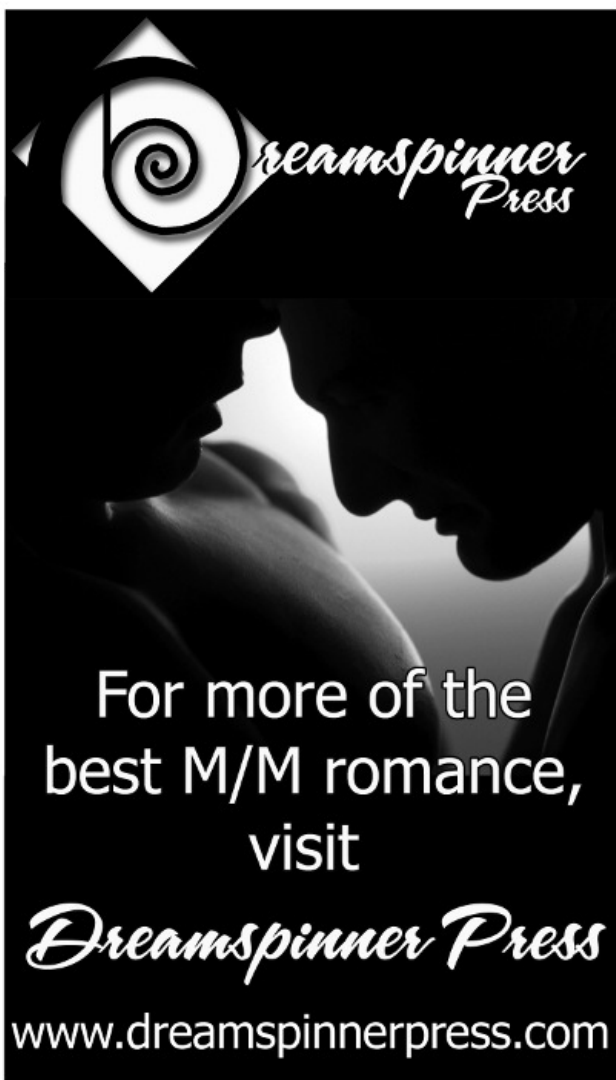


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