

CHAPTER

1

KAT LAY ON THE BED WHERE STEPHEN HAD PLACED HER INSIDE Captain Grim's cabin aboard the airship *Lancelot*, her skin pale against the deep red coverlet. He shifted his hold on her cold hand and looked up.

Would Kat ever forgive him for taking her to the Tower? For the pain he had put her through at the hands of her father? Stephen sighed and dropped his head into his free hand. He wasn't sure if he could forgive himself.

God . . .

A dull ache filled his chest. He glanced back at Kat. Her eyes were tightly shut and her dark hair splayed across the pillow. She reminded him of those fairy-tale stories where the sleeping princess waited for true love's kiss.

He shook his head and placed her hand down at her side, his middle twisting inside him. The bedspread moved, revealing part of her body. Blood stained the sides of her white gown and seeped into the sheets. He swallowed and pulled the cover back. More reminders that he had left her at the Tower and what they had done to her. What *he* had done to her.

No, this was no fairy tale. No kiss would awaken Kat, and he was certainly not her prince. More like the villain.

The door burst open behind him.

Stephen glanced over his shoulder. Finally, someone with dressings for Kat's wounds.

A sailor stood in the doorway with a stern look on his face and no bandages in his hands.

Stephen frowned. "Where's your cook? And the bandages? Your captain said he would send someone to attend the lady."

Ignoring his questions, the sailor—Reid, he remembered—shot him an enigmatic look. "The captain requests your presence on deck."

Before Stephen could ask why, Reid disappeared, leaving the door ajar behind him. The deck above rumbled with shouts and gears grinded deep within the airship.

Something was wrong. Robert had said he would need a couple hours to restock his ship, so why were they leaving now?

Stephen leaned over Kat and pulled the coverlet up to her neck. He paused above her face. She was so pale that her lips were only a shade darker than her skin. The only sign she was still alive, and not a corpse, was the slight rise and fall of her chest and the shallow breath that escaped her lips every few seconds.

Stephen let out his own breath. He was not her prince. He was not the one who could awaken her from this deathly sleep. But he could keep her safe. "And I will," he whispered.

He straightened and crossed the cabin, bypassing the large table nailed to the floor in front of the wall of tiny windows that overlooked World City, past the bench and desk built into the side of the ship. His revolvers sat snug on either side of his hips. Whatever the trouble was, he would be ready.

Stephen pulled the rim of his hat down low across his forehead and left the cabin and Kat behind.

The main deck bustled with activity as the crew of the *Lancelot* prepared for flight.

Reid, the sailor who had come for him, spotted him and pointed at Robert Grim. The captain stood near the port-side rail, his

attention focused on the ground hundreds of feet below. Stephen crossed the deck and came to stand beside Robert.

Without saying a word, Robert handed him a spyglass made from gold and pointed where he had been looking moments before.

Stephen took the spyglass, leaned across the railing, and pressed the eyepiece to his right eye. Far below, at the bottom of the sky tower, were three figures.

"Blazes," he muttered, his fingers tightening around the metal rod. He couldn't see Jake Ryder's telltale tattoos from this high up, but he would recognize the bounty hunter's bearing anywhere. Piers Mahon was dressed in his usual impeccable white suit, hat, and pseudo-cane that hid his sniper rifle. And "the Judge" was with them, his cannon arm glinting in the sunlight.

Stephen pulled the spyglass away and clutched it in his hand. "How did they find us?"

Grim tapped a finger against his chin as he looked thoughtfully down below. "You know those men?"

"Yes," he said through gritted teeth. "They're World City bounty hunters. Jake Ryder, Piers Mahon, and 'the Judge.'"

Robert frowned and glanced at him. "Wait, Rodger Glennan is with them?"

Stephen handed the spyglass back. "You know the Judge?"

"I met him a couple of times. Never forgot that interesting prosthetic he had made for his arm." Grim tucked the spyglass into his side pocket. "Always wondered if I could find something similar for my eye."

Stephen blinked. How could Grim be thinking of that at a time like this? "If you know about Rodger's prosthetic, then you know what it can do. We need to get out of here before he takes a shot at us. That cannon of his could put a serious dent in your ship. Or worse."

"You're right." Robert turned around and faced the deck. "You heard him, men. Move it! Let's put some distance between the platform and us. Now!"

The sailors scurried across the deck and more shouts erupted.

Ropes slithered onto the wooden planks while a group of men rushed to engage the pumps that would deflate the huge balloon that held the airship afloat while docked. The four small rotors, two on either side of the ship, began to spin with a thunderous whirring sound.

Stephen looked over the railing again. Jake, Piers, and Rodger entered the sky tower far below. "Here they come."

Robert finished giving instructions to two of his men and turned around. "Where are they now?"

"They just entered the sky tower. We have a couple minutes before they reach the platform." He glanced at Grim. "How far do you think we'll be from the tower?"

"It'll be close, but we're ready." Grim's face held no trace of fear. Instead, his one eye glinted with anticipation for the possible fight.

There was a sudden lurch across the *Lancelot* as the balloon deflated. Too heavy for the four small rotors to support alone, the ship began to sink. Stephen braced his legs, his heart flying up into his throat.

"Don't worry, it's always like this on takeoff," Robert said with grin. "There's a moment between the stowing of the docking balloon and the main rotors taking over. It's a bit of a thrill, really."

Stephen wasn't so sure, as his heart continued to beat against his ribcage. At this rate, would they be far enough from the sky tower before the bounty hunters arrived?

He drew out one of his revolvers, checked the chamber, and stood near the railing where a ladder had been moments before. He would be ready just in case.

From this vantage point, he could see the opening from the sky tower to the platform. The ship dipped farther below the wooden scaffold as the twin main rotors worked themselves toward flight speed at an agonizing pace. Stephen swallowed. Blazes! When were they going to take off?

He trained his revolver on the opening. When Jake and the other bounty hunters arrived on the platform, he would have little warning. They had the advantage of cover and surprise. Piers could stay in the shadows inside the tower and use that sniper rifle of his. And

Rodger . . . well, that cannon of his could take the *Lancelot* out of the sky.

Stephen went down on one knee behind the railing, keeping his body flush with one of the posts and his eyes level with the hand bar. The ship gave a hard lurch, cracking his forehead against the rail. Stephen grabbed the post and straightened himself as the air spun above his head, whipping his hair around. Slowly, the ship began to rise. Robert shouted more commands behind him, but they were gibberish in the hail of wind above him.

The ship was eye level with the platform when Jake appeared in the doorway. The moment he spotted Stephen, he went for his revolver.

Stephen shot first, aiming right past Jake's head and hitting the wooden doorframe behind the man.

Jake flinched and dove for the side.

Stephen peered between the railings, keeping his gun close and ready as the ship continued to rise and maneuver away from the sky tower. Piers and Rodger could show up any minute. He sent another bullet toward Jake when the man began to stand.

Another shot answered from the shadows of the doorway, whizzing past Stephen's head and pinging off the rotors above. Stephen twisted around and planted his back against the post, breathing hard. That shot could have only come from Piers.

The ship began to pick up speed. Stephen glanced between the railings. He glimpsed the barest hint of a man in a white suit standing inside the sky tower before something large and dark barreled past Piers.

Rodger stopped outside the doorway, glanced at the airship, and raised his prosthetic cannon.

Stephen couldn't hear the whine of Rodger's cannon over the ship's propellers, but he could see electricity arc around the prosthetic and knew what was coming next. So did Jake and Piers—they rushed toward their comrade to stop the blast.

"Brace for impact!" Stephen shouted and took aim at the cannon-arm. Maybe he could nick the weapon and throw it off target.

Stephen let his breath out, focused on the corner of the cannon, and shot.

The cannon went off and Rodger jerked back, sending Jake and Piers sprawling to the floor behind him.

A white beam shot toward the ship and struck just below the aft rotor. The ship rocked. Smoke rose into the air from the hole and the men shouted across the deck.

Far below now, Rodger stared up at Stephen, shouting. He could guess what the bounty hunter was saying, and it wasn't fit for a lady's ears.

Stephen snorted. Rodger should be thankful he only hit his cannon. Another man might have aimed for his heart.

There were two more pings along the deck, probably from Jake and Piers, but they were too far away to do any damage with a gun.

Stephen bowed his head and let his breath out. They had escaped.

He stayed on one knee beside the railing while Robert's crew finished stowing the balloon. The ship drifted steadily upward beneath him, a different feeling compared to undulations of a ship on water.

After a moment, the ship stopped ascending and began gliding along the air current. Stephen stood. The sky tower below was the size of a finger, blending in with the rest of World City, a landscape of thousands of rooftops and smokestacks. The sky above was robin's egg blue with only wisps of clouds hanging along the horizon.

The air was cooler up here, but not uncomfortably so, and the blades rotating around the ship had ceased their straining and settled into a loud hum now that they were coasting along.

A small plume of smoke still curled from the hole Rodger had left in one of the smaller masts near a rotor blade. Grim came up beside Stephen and tapped his chin, staring at the hole. "Yes, I would like a prosthetic like that very much. Next time I'm in World City, I need to find whoever created Rodger's cannon."

Stephen shook his head and put his revolver away, trying to picture Grim with a prosthetic eye that shot back.

For some time he remained there at the rail, watching the city pass by below. He should go check on Kat, but he couldn't make

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his body move in that direction. Invisible manacles held him place. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw that wounded look on her face and felt the gut punch all over again.

Like now.

He groaned and bowed his head. *What a fool I was! If only I could go back . . .*

He shook his head. No. There was no going back. What was done was done. He could only hope now to repair the damage between them. He looked up and clenched his hand. He would do whatever it took to mend the breach.

But would Kat forgive him?

They passed over the Meandre River. The airship turned and headed for the coast, where hundreds of ships rocked gently in the blue-green waters below. At this height, the ships looked like a child's toys left along the edge of a pond. Soon the airship would be past World City and start across the Narrow Strait.

Part of him wanted to stop the airship and head back to the city. He had saved Kat. What more could he do?

But that was the coward's way out. No, he owed her more. And . . .

Stephen pulled the brim of his hat down across his forehead. He couldn't deny what he knew deep inside. He loved Kat. Which made what he had done in the heat of hurt and betrayal even more heinous.

He straightened and turned around. The door that led to Robert's quarters was on the other side of the deck. The rotors swirled above him, powered by the solar panels Robert had brought out.

He stood rigid and stared at the door. *Go. Just do it. Tell Kat—What? That I'm sorry? I am. That I love her?*

Stephen pressed his lips into a thin line. He couldn't tell her that. Not right now. Not after what he had done. But he could be with her. And he would, at least until she woke up, then after that . . .

Then maybe we can talk.

But the thought of talking about what he did made his stomach clench hard and bile fill his throat. Nevertheless, he made his feet move. He would be there when she woke up, no matter what.

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