



Malkin pressed his forepaws against the flight-deck window and peered out. The silver airship was still following; gaining on them. The purr of its propellers and the whoosh of its knife-sharp hull cutting through the air sent a shiver of terror through his clockwork innards.

The fox tore his eyes away and stared at his master. John's ship, Dragonfly, was fast but she had nothing in the way of firepower. The silver airship, by contrast, bristled with weapons. Sharp metal spikes stuck out from her hull, making her look like some sort of militarized porcupine.

Just then, Dragonfly's rudder shifted, and she pitched as John twisted the wheel into a one-eighty turn to swoop back past her pursuers.

The silver airship shrunk away, but within seconds she'd swung around to follow. She began closing in once more; her propellers chopping through the clouds, throwing dark shadows across their stern. When the two airships broke into a patch of blue, she fired.

A harpoon slashed across the sky and thudded into Dragonfly's hull, the point piercing her port side.

Thud! Another harpoon speared into the stern.

Malkin let out a bark of alarm as a stench of burning gas filled the flight deck, and the needles in the rows of instrument panels flickered into the red danger zones. Over the whine of their stalling engines, the crackle of straining steel cables could be heard. The silver airship had begun to pull them in.

John locked Dragonfly's wheel, and engaged her autopilot. He threw open the cockpit door and, with Malkin at his heels, dashed towards the engine room.

Pistons pumped, and crankshafts turned at full power, while the cabin juddered and shook. In the centre of the floor, a metal egg-shaped pod sat among a tangle of pipes. John threw open its door. "No room for both of us," he said. "You go, Malkin."

The fox gave a whimper of disapproval. "No. It should be you, John. Humans over mechanicals. It's the law." John shook his head.

"I can't leave my ship; I need to try and guide her down safely – and you've no opposable thumbs!" He gave a half-hearted laugh and withdrew a battered envelope from his pocket. Crouching down, he stuffed it into a leather pouch around Malkin's neck. "This is for my Lily. See that she gets it."

"What's in there?" John smiled. "Secrets. Tell her to keep them safe. She mustn't tell anyone about them, not ever. Can you remember that?"

"I think so." Malkin prodded the pouch, sniffing at it with his nose.

"Good," John said. "Make for Brackenbridge, that's where she'll be. If I get out of this alive, I'll come find her."

"Is there anything else?"

“And tell her I love her.” John ruffled the mechanimal’s ears one last time. “It’s at least a day’s journey from here, have you enough clicks?”

Malkin nodded. “Take your winder anyway.”

John produced a tarnished key on a chain and hung it round the fox’s neck, next to the pouch. “Though heaven knows who’ll wind you if I’m not there.”

“Thank you, John.” Malkin stepped into the escape pod and curled up on the seat. “By all that ticks, I hope to see you again.”

“And I you, old friend.” John shut the door. With a clatter and hum the pod bay doors opened and in a jolt, the pod was free. As John watched it through the open hatch, shrinking away in the sky, an image of his daughter, Lily, flashed into his mind. If only he could see her one last time. Tell her the truth about the past. He should’ve done it long ago, but he’d not been brave enough. Now Malkin would have to take care of things. Everything was in the letter. Another harpoon smashed through Dragonfly’s hull, and whirring saw blades cut through the steel ribs, ripping cracks in the ship’s tin chest. In a jagged screech, the cracks were wrenched into a doorway, and two silhouetted figures appeared. Their silver eyes glinted in the light. The thinner of the figures raised a stick with a skull handle, then John felt a blinding shaft of pain, and everything went black