



**ZEINA  
STARBORN**  
*and the* **SKY WHALE**

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# CHAPTER 1

The beams of two bright headlamps cut through the mist and shadows of that August afternoon and for once Zeina was glad of the smog. Had it not been so thick, she wouldn't have had time to hide. Gasping through her respirator mask, she ducked behind one of the crumbling statues that surrounded the imposing building and watched as the automobile came to a halt.

'Hurry up, Flora! There's no time for your dawdling today!'

The shrill voice of Mrs Hogwood made Zeina wince. She watched a frazzled maid scramble from the car, her arms sagging under a tower of boxes.

Mrs Hogwood waited for her door to be opened by the navy-capped chauffeur, before carefully adjusting her respirator mask and stepping out empty-handed into the haze. She dusted a smudge of soot from her crisp white gloves and straightened a particularly ugly hat. As always, she wore an

expression of disdain, her thin lips pinched and her beak-like nose raised in the air, as if there were a bad smell beneath it.

‘The smog is awful today,’ she snapped, as if it were somehow the chauffeur’s fault.

‘That it is, ma’am,’ coughed the old man behind his own mask.

She gestured angrily towards the two whirring fans secured above the entrance to Willoughby Towers.

‘I shall never get used to that infernal racket!’ Her piercing cry rose above the din. ‘What a mess! They completely ruin the facade!’

Zeina wasn’t sure exactly what a ‘facade’ was but agreed that the deafening fans – each easily the size of an airship propeller – were quite unbearable. They must have been working at full capacity.

Every building in Ravenport had fans which worked day and night in an attempt to clear the streets of the thick pollution that covered the city. Despite this, it had been many years since anyone had been able to step outside without their respirator mask.

Willoughby Towers was certainly the grandest building in all of Ravenport. Zeina had seen drawings of when it was first built – fifty floors of gleaming golden stone, with high, arched windows separated by ornately carved columns and surrounded on all sides by immaculate gardens. Even now,

with its towering exterior blackened from ore fumes, cracked stone cherubs leering down through gap-toothed smiles, and lobby windows boarded shut against the noxious fumes, Zeina had to agree it was still pretty impressive. You couldn't see all the way to the top any more, of course; looking up from the street outside, most of the building was completely obscured by thick, grey clouds.

For the people living inside Willoughby Towers, and the hundreds of tower blocks just like it across the Eastern Continent, life was a tale of two halves. *Belows* lived in the cramped, gloomy apartments below the city smog-line. Belows couldn't afford fine clothes or food or airship travel. Belows worked hard to survive. But for the other half, life was full of perks. Perks like the uniformed doorman who was now rushing to open the door for Mrs Hogwood. Unlike Zeina, *Aboves* were permitted to use the grand entrance lobby and its golden electric lift. Aboves could afford the luxurious apartments, safely above the smog, on floors thirty and above. Aboves even had windows – ones they could actually open to breathe in the bright, clear air above the smog-line. Zeina imagined Mrs Hogwood gazing out appreciatively from her window on floor forty-five, waving at the fine ladies and gentlemen of Ravenport travelling block to block in their airships. She also imagined how much Mrs Hogwood would enjoy thinking about all the Belows stuck in that eternal murky twilight beneath her.



Zeina breathed a sigh of relief when, after a torrent of barked orders and complaints, Mrs Hogwood finally bustled into the building. When Zeina was quite sure the awful woman was safely inside, she darted out from behind the stone leg of Sir Phineas Bartholomew (Innovator of the Upper Atmosphere Airship) – only to collide with someone else.

CRASH, BANG, THUD. Each dropped what they were carrying and fell to the ground with a yelping, cursing clatter.

‘Why don’t you look where you’re going?’ Zeina yelled as she disentangled her limbs from the boy’s.

‘What? I . . . But *you* ran into *me*!’ he replied. The boy was so covered in mud that Zeina couldn’t make out who it was straight away. While he lay there dazed, she scrambled to pick up the array of objects that had fallen from her backpack – a rusted kitchen pan, a moth-eaten book, a selection of cogs and wires, a broken pocket watch and a number of smashed monocles.

The boy attempted to get to his feet, sinking back to the ground when he noticed the drops of red on the cobblestones. Beneath the blood from a deep gash on his eyebrow and the mud on his face, Zeina suddenly noticed the distinctive copper hair, fine features, flushed cheeks and large eyes, steel-blue. Her heart sank.

‘Ah! It’s you! And you’re bleeding!’ she exclaimed, rooting around in her pocket for a handkerchief and pressing it against his brow.



‘Who . . . Who are you?’

This made Zeina bristle. He had seen her just as many times as she had seen him and yet *he* had no idea who *she* was. This was just like Aboves; people like Zeina were merely part of the scenery – completely forgettable.

‘Who am I? NOBODY, that’s who!’ She knew she could get into trouble for talking to him this way – after all, technically he was her father’s employer.

‘Um, I’m Jackson. Jackson Willoughby.’ He held out his hand, which she ignored.

‘I know,’ she said, gesturing to the plaque above the steps where, in golden lettering, was carved ‘WILLOUGHBY TOWERS’.

‘I’m sorry. Have we . . . met before?’ he asked tentatively.

She laughed again. ‘Only about a hundred times.’

‘What? I’m sorry. Maybe I don’t recognise you because of all the, erm . . . slime.’

This enraged Zeina – it wasn’t her fault she’d fallen into the bog at the city dump. People like Jackson would never understand what it was like to have to go rummaging through the mountains of stuff Aboves threw away for the things you needed. Their cast-offs were her treasures. She swung her backpack on with a clank and removed her respirator mask, revealing a perfectly clean oval of nose, mouth, skin and freckles.



‘Oh, I see. First you don’t remember me and now you’re trying to say I’m dirty?’ She gave an exasperated snort. ‘You’re all the same. People like *you* never bother to remember people like *me*. Nope, you’re just not worth noticing unless you’re Queen-La-De-Da-this or Sir-whatsit-the-third, an owner of a fleet of airships, decked out in the latest fancy clothes . . .’ She halted, noticing the state of Jackson’s own clothes. As well as being completely covered in mud, the cuff of his jacket was torn and there were two missing silver buttons, not to mention the blood now dripping down from his eyebrow on to his collar. Zeina gulped, falling silent. No doubt she would be blamed for this too. Maybe it was for the best that he didn’t recognise her.

Jackson scrambled to his feet.

‘I . . . erm . . . had a little accident . . . on my velocycle,’ he said. He bent down to pick up his cycling machine where it lay in a twisted heap. It was covered in deep scratches down one side, the handlebars were scuffed and the front wheel was bent out of shape. ‘Came off trying to beat my speed record round the old athletics track. I’m getting ready for the try-outs for the Ravenport Racers. You a fan?’

Zeina rolled her eyes. Everyone in Ravenport – Aboves and Belows alike – supported the velocycle team. On match days, she and her father would take the packed cargo train right across the city, past the clanking, billowing factories,



the scrapyards and the abandoned ore mines, right to the very edge of town where the Ravenport Racers' stadium was. She assumed Jackson Willoughby travelled to matches in one of his many airships.

'Yeah,' she answered coolly. 'I've got a signed poster of Franklyn Beaumont.'

'Oh, really? He's my favourite too,' said Jackson brightly. 'I've got one of him holding the Eastern Continent Cup, and last year's Ravenport Racers team photo, and this really cool one to celebrate when he won Player of the Year three years running.'

Zeina scowled at him.

'Don't you lot have your own rooftop parks?' she asked. 'Why are you skulking around the abandoned athletics track? Surprised you could see a hand in front of your face down there!'

'Well, I was trying to avoid my housekeeper, Mrs Hogwood. You see, she—'

'Urgh, Hoggy.' Zeina pretended to throw up in a nearby bush. 'I was hoping for a ride home in your fancy lift but Hoggy ruined all that. Can't risk it now she's on the prowl.'

'Can't you just come in with me?'

Zeina stared at him, incredulous. Was Jackson making a cruel joke or was he just so ignorant that he didn't get it? She decided on the latter. The lift attendant, Maxwell, would

almost certainly lose his job if Mrs Hogwood caught her in the Above lift again. Now she was back, Zeina had no choice but to haul herself up all fifty floors in the rickety service lift, to her father's airship platform, right at the very top of Willoughby Towers.

'*Me? Go in there with you?* Don't be ridiculous,' she sighed, picking up the twisted velocyple and handing it to Jackson. 'S'pose you've got a servant or something that'll fix this for you.'

'Actually, I'll fix it myself,' said Jackson defensively.

Zeina raised one eyebrow. She doubted very much that that was true.

'It is beautiful,' she said, mesmerised, her hand outstretched towards the shining titanium frame. 'I'd do anything for my own velocyple.' She cursed herself – why had she said that out loud?

Zeina presumed Jackson had about ten velocyples; he could quite easily give her this one and probably wouldn't even notice it was gone.

'Well, you could have a go on this one, once it's fixed. If you want?' he added tentatively. 'We could meet up one day on the athletics track?'

For a moment she was taken aback by this gesture. Her heart lifted, but only for a second. He was making fun of her again, she was sure of it. And even if he wasn't, the thought of



her and Jackson Willoughby velocyling together around the athletics track was quite one of the most ridiculous things she had ever heard.

‘Nah, I don’t think so, rich boy. I’ve got better things to do than mess about on some fancy velocyycle. Some of us have work to do.’ And with that she turned away from Jackson’s confused, dirty face and ran – a clanking cloud of dust disappearing into the smog-filled gardens from which she had come.