

“WILL you come up tonight?” says Darill, one hand toying with Setzer’s cravat, her eyes glinting in the darkness.

Maria wishes she could say yes. Going *up*, with all the connotations that signifies: rising into the air in a contraption that most people have never dreamt of, let alone built with their own hand; watching the buildings below slowly shrink away and lose all significance, until all she has to concentrate on is what really matters – these two grumpy, passionate geniuses. Maria loves it. She loves *them*.

But a new show is opening tomorrow, and she has lines to go over.

“We’re taking the Blackjack,” says Setzer. “So there’ll be space to move, at least.” He pauses, glances at Darill, and adds, slightly abashed, “We tossed for it.”

Darill rolls her eyes, and mouths towards Maria, *Men*. But she moves her hand up to cup Setzer’s chin, and brings her mouth to his for a swift kiss, to make it clear she holds no grudge.

Setzer’s gaze is fierce with devotion – he’s the youngest of them, and his utter loyalty to both his lovers has an intensity that Maria finds truly thrilling – and when he turns it on her, she briefly thinks, Maybe I know my lines enough? What harm could one evening off do?

But the responsibility of her role comes back to her, and she knows she has to decline. She’s only been the leading lady

for a short while, and she can't put a foot wrong; and these two know that. They know what it's like to have a dream, and to put everything into realising it. They've always taken her aspirations just as seriously as their own, even though theirs are forged from gears and grease, and hers are of an entirely different nature.

"I'm sorry," she says. "The new show starts tomorrow night – I have to make sure I'm ready."

"That Impresario works you too hard," says Darill. She steps forward, takes a lock of Maria's hair between her fingers, and kisses her softly; Maria feels Darill's eyelashes fluttering against her own. "You were wonderful tonight, darling," Darill murmurs. "As always."

Maria smiles, and brushes her hand against Darill's cheek, until Darill steps back and gives Setzer a jovial nudge. "Your turn," she says teasingly.

Setzer doesn't need telling twice; he stands before Maria, clasps both her hands in his, and meets her with his own kiss, stronger and less refined than Darill's, hungry with desire. Maria matches his passion, pressing her lips against his keenly, until Setzer breaks the connection, now noticeably red in the face, and says in a low voice, "We'll miss you up there."

"Come on," says Darill, before Maria can respond. "We'll leave the lady in peace. Don't get too distracted from your lines, darling" – and she winks at Maria and slips an arm

around Setzer's waist, and Maria grins, knowing her face is probably as flushed as Setzer's, and replies, "I'll try not to. Have fun."

"We will," says Darill, and the two of them walk off, hand in hand, Setzer gazing over at Darill with that devoted look on his face once again, and Maria pushes the thought of her lines aside for a moment so she can give the sight her full attention before it vanishes into the darkness.