

TAD WILLIAMS MONSIEUR VERGALANT'S CANARD He placed the burnished rosewood box on the table, then went to all the windows in turn, pulling the drapes together, tugging at the edges to make sure no gap remained. After he had started a fire and set the kettle on the blackened stove, he returned to the table. He opened the box and paused, a smile flickering across his face. The contents of the box gleamed in the candlelight. "It was a triumph, Henri," he said loudly. "All Paris will be talking about it tomorrow. The best yet. I wish you could have seen their faces -- they were amazed!" "You are quite a showman," his brother called back, his voice muffled by the intervening wall. "And the pretty Comtesse? The one I saw the painting of?" Gerard laughed, a deliberately casual sound. "Ah, yes, the Comtesse de Buise. Her eyes were as wide as a little girl's. She loved it so much, she wanted to take it home with her and keep it as a pet." He laughed again. "So beautiful, that one, and so likely to be disappointed -- at least in this." He reached into the box and teased free the velvet ties. "No one will ever make a pet of my wonderful canard." With the care of a priest handling the sacrament, Gerard Vergalant lifted out the gilded metal duck and set it upright on the table. Eyes narrowed, he took his kerchief from the pocket of his well-cut but ever so slightly threadbare coat and dusted the duck's feathers and buffed its gleaming bill. He paid particular attention to polishing the glass eyes, which seemed almost more real than those of a living bird. The duck was indeed a magnificent thing, a little smaller than life-size, shaped with an intricacy of detail that made every golden feather a sculpture unto itself. The teapot chuffed faintly. Vergalant repocketed his kerchief and went to it. "Indeed, you should have seen them, Henri," he called. "Old Guineau, the Marquis, he was most dismissive at first -- the doddering fool. 'In my youth, I saw the bronze nightingales of Constantinople,' he says, and waves his hand in that if-you-must-bore-me way he has. Hah! In his youth he saw them build the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, I'll wager." He poured the water into a teacup with a small chip in the handle, then a little more in a bowl which he set on the table. "The old bastard went on and on, telling everyone about clockwork movement, how the Emperor's nightingales would lift their wings up and down, and swivel their heads. But when my duck walked, they all sat up." He grinned at the memory of triumph. "None of them expected it to look so real! When it swam, one of the ladies became faint and had to be taken out into the garden. And when it devoured the pile of oats I set on the table before it, even Guineau could not keep the astonishment from his face!" "I am always sorry I cannot see your performances, Gerard," his brother called, straining slightly to make himself heard. "I am sure that you were very elegant and clever. You always are." "It's true that no matter how splendid the object is," Vergalant said thoughtfully, "it is always more respected when presented in an attractive manner. Especially by the ladies. They do not like their entertainment rough." He paused. "The Comtesse de Buise, for instance. There is a woman of beauty and pretty sentiment . . ." The duck's head rotated slightly and the bill opened. There was a near-silent ticking of small gears and the fiat gilded feet took a juddering step, then another. "If you please." Henri was apologetic. "Oh my brother, I am so sorry," Gerard replied, but his tone was still distant, as though he resented having his memories of the countess sullied by mundane things. He went to the table and fumbled at the duck's neck for a moment, then found the catch and clicked it. "The tail seems to move a little slowly," he said. "Several times tonight I thought I saw it moving out of step with the legs." The head and neck vibrated for a moment, then the entire upper structure tipped sideways on its hinge. Glassy-eyed, the shining duck head lolled as though its neck had been chopped through with an axe. "If it was my fault, I apologize, Gerard. I do my best, but this duck, it is a very complicated piece of work. More stops than an organ, and every little bit crafted like the world's costliest pocketwatch. It is hard to make something that is both beautiful and lifelike." Vergalant nodded

emphatically. "True. Only the good Lord can be credited with consistency in that area." He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and seemed to like what he saw, for he repeated the head movement with careful gravity. "And the Lord achieved that with the Comtesse de Buise. She has such lovely eyes, Henri. Like deep wells. A man could drown in them. You should have seen her. "I wish I had." The gilded duck shuddered again, ever so slightly, and then a tiny head appeared in the hollow of the throat. Although it was only a little larger than the ball of Gerard Vergalant's thumb, the facial resemblance was notable. "But I cannot make a seeing-glass that will allow me to look out properly without interfering with the articulation of the throat," said the little head. Hair was plastered against its forehead in minute ringlets. "One cannot have everything." "Still," Gerard replied with magnificent condescension, "you have done wonderfully well. I could never hope to make such an impression without you." The rest of the tiny figure emerged, clothed in sweat-stained garments of gray felt. The little man sat for a moment atop the decapitated duck, then climbed down its back, seeking footholds in the intricate metalwork of the pinfeathers before dropping to the tabletop. "It was a good night's work, then." Shivering, Henri hurried across the table toward the bowl of hot water. "Yes, but we cannot yet allow ourselves to rest." Gerard looked on his brother fondly as Henri pulled off his loose clothing and clambered into the bowl. "No, do not be alarmed! Take your bath-- you have earned it. But we do need to develop some new tricks. Perhaps since it takes in food at one end . . . ? Yes, that might do it. These people are jaded, and we will need all my most sophisticated ideas -- and your careful work, which is of course indispensable -- to keep them interested. That old fop Guineau is very well connected. If we play our hand correctly, we may soon be demonstrating our magnificent canard for the King himself!" Henri lowered himself beneath the surface to wet his hair, then rose again, spluttering and wiping water from his face. "The King?" He opened his eyes wide. Gerard smiled, then reached into his pocket and produced a tooth brush. Henri stood and took it, although it was almost too large for his hands to grasp. As he scrubbed his back, water splashed from the bowl onto the table top. A few drops landed near the gilded duck. Gerard blotted them with his sleeve. "Yes, little brother -- the king! Mother always said I would go far, with my quick wits and good looks. But I knew that one needs more in life than simply to be liked. If a man of humble origins wishes to make an impression in this world, if he wishes to be more than merely comfortable, he must know powerful people -- and he must show them wonders." He nodded toward the table. "Like the duck, our lovely golden duck. People desire to be . . . astonished." Henri stepped from the bowl. He accepted his brother's kerchief and began to dry himself, almost disappearing in its folds. "Ah, Gerard," he said admiringly. "You always were the clever one."

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