

# Lucifugous by Elizabeth Bear

*Guten Abend, meinen Damen under Herren!* You are this chilly March evening aboard the zeppelin *Hans Glücker*, departing old Calais for the city of New Amsterdam, jewel of British North America. Among you is a celebrity: the famed Don Sebastien de Ulloa, known to the Continent as the Great Detective, along with his assistant Jack Priest.

Ah! I see your concern. Clearly you know of Don de Ulloa's reputation. Allow me to assure you, they are only passengers on this voyage, just part of our small and cozy coterie as we sail across the Atlantic. So, relax, ladies and gentlemen. After all, this is 1899, and this is a *zeppelin*. What could possibly go wrong?

The long novella *Lucifugous* chronicles this trip and the mysterious disappearance within, and opens Campbell award-winning writer Elizabeth Bear's hardcover debut, the mosaic novel, [New Amsterdam](#), due out from Subterranean Press in May.

## Chapter One

1

The zeppelin *Hans Glücker* left Calais at 9:15 in the evening on a cold night in March, 1899, bound for New Amsterdam, the jewel of British North America. Don Sebastien de Ulloa, known to the Continent as the great detective, passed his departure on the promenade, watching the city lights recede through blurring isinglass. He amused himself by taking inventory of his fellow passengers while enjoying the aroma of a fairly good cognac.

The *Hans Glücker* was nearly empty, aside from cargo. So empty, in fact, that Sebastien wondered if she would not have delayed her Atlantic voyage for want of passengers if she were not also a mail dispatch and carrying diplomatic papers. Her capacity was over sixty, but this trip she bore only fourteen.

The longest-term travelers were a couple who had been with the airship since Shanghai, Mr. Cui Jioahua and his wife, Zhang Xiaoming. They had passage as far as the Spanish settlement of San Diego, on the west coast of North America, where they intended to join family—if the intersection of their limited Arabic and German and Sebastien's equally flawed Cantonese could be trusted.

It seemed a tremendous journey, but the trans-Siberian and then trans-Atlantic route by airship was actually faster and more secure than the month one might expect to spend on a steamer east across the Pacific. Mr. Cui was willing to risk his household furnishings to the pirates infesting the Windward Isles, but, being of a practical bent, he was not willing to risk his own life or that of his lovely wife.

Another six comprised a touring group of five Colonials and one European that had been with the *Hans Glücker* since Ukraine. The touring group, which had boarded in Kyiv after traveling by rail from Moscow, were all plainly well-acquainted already, and what with one casually overheard conversation and another, Sebastien had pieced together a good deal about them. The eldest passenger, though by a few years only, was Madame Pontchartrain, a stout, gray-eyed matron enroute to her family's estate in French Mississippi by way of New Amsterdam. She accompanied a young Colonial relative of apparently impeccable breeding and small estate, a Mademoiselle LeClere, who said she was travelling

home to Nouvelle Orleans. The resemblance between them was strong enough that Sebastien thought Madame Pontchartrain must have been a very great beauty in her youth. He also thought them lucky that the *Hans Glücker's* route—new the previous September—spared them a trip by rail across the interior of the North American continent. Various treaties with the Native nations would have made it possible, but far more rigorous and perilous than a modern journey by air.

Next was Oczkar Korvin, an aristocratic Hungarian with hair as dark as Sebastien's and an equally patrician bearing. A platinum chain leashed his pocket watch, and though he had the sallow Habsburg coloring, he was undisfigured by the famous deformed jaw. A collateral branch, no doubt.

The loveliest of the group was also the most famous. She traveled with an entourage and claimed three cabins. Dressed outrageously in a man's suit and cravat, Lillian Meadows, the American moving picture star, crossed her ankle over her knee and smoked Virginia cigarettes in a long tortoiseshell-and-jet holder, gesturing extravagantly with fingers studded with sapphires and diamonds. She was returning to Atlanta—where the studios were—from a European junket. Her white-blonde hair had been arranged in delicate waves around jeweled pins, and the English couple—who like Sebastien had boarded at Calais—avoided her.

One of her traveling companions was a man nearly as beautiful as she was, and also blond. He wore his darker gold hair slicked back against his skull, a handlebar moustache accentuating planed cheekbones and a defined jaw. His name was Virgil Allen, and he was a wealthy farmer's son from South Carolina, and a playboy by reputation.

The other was a woman, the Boston authoress Phoebe Smith. She a fair-haired, bespectacled, sensible small woman with a stubborn tilt to her head, straight-spined in widow's black that did not suit her, her hands usually folded before her. She carried a little bag with a black paper-bound note-pad and fountain-pen, and every so often she would take them up and scribble a line.

A further six passengers had boarded at Calais. Two were Sebastien and his companion, Jack Priest, who presented every appearance of being a young man of excellent family. In truth, his breeding was no better than Sebastien's. But—also like Sebastien's—his education was unparalleled, and a work in constant progress. He was seventeen years old and looked fifteen, with delicate bones and tousled fair hair like a girl's.

Three and four were Michiel and Steven van Dijk, Dutch businessmen travelling only as far as New Amsterdam, where even under English colonial rule there was still a thriving Dutch community. Michiel was the elder, fortyish, round-cheeked under graying, wavy fair hair, and plump without seeming heavy—as light on his feet as if he was filled with the same hydrogen that bore up the dirigible. Steven—pronounced *stay-van*—was taller and younger and also plump, his dark hair cropped short, his cheeks usually flushed and his eyes glittering with good cheer. He kept a green miniature parrot in his cabin, or occasionally on his shoulder, and Jack was instantly enamored of them both.

And the final two—the ones who seemed determined to avoid all of the Colonials, both the British colonials and the Frenchwomen—were a couple in their twenties. Hollis and Beatrice Leatherby were Londoners moving house to take advantage of a political appointment in the Pennsylvania colony, where an ambitious young man could advance faster than in Albion. She was darkly lovely while he was a freckled redhead: a striking pair.

Sebastien learned those things easily enough. Observation was a long-honed habit, though he intended merely a minor distraction for the hours until he could decently be seen to retire. The journey overland had not been easy and Jack had been delayed, only joining him in Calais that afternoon. Sebastien could not afford to be seen in good light until they had had a few minutes alone.

And so, from his solitary post at the dark end of the promenade, away from the too-revealing electric lights, Sebastien observed the other passengers and watched Jack.

Jack held court forward along the promenade, his admirers a potential source of amusement or inconvenience. He was drinking champagne rather than liquor, but his laughter told Sebastien enough about his conversation with Steven van Dijk and the Leatherbys to swamp that raft of faint reassurance in a sea of potential tribulations. He would flirt. And right now he was flirting with Mrs. Leatherby, immediately under her husband's oblivious eye—and sparing a little charm for van Dijk, as well.

Sebastien cupped his glass before his face, and pretended to taste the cognac. The sharp, drowning scent was good. It blunted his hunger, which threatened to grow overwhelming, and the snifter gave him something to occupy hands that wanted to tremble with desire.

The social dance was not distracting him tonight. He could feel it in the cut-glass edge on his senses, the heaviness of limbs that would transform into mercurial quickness when he required it. Too much more and his restraint would fail. He'd waited too long.

Discipline was always a matter of degree to such as Sebastien, and it had required a certain subterfuge and sleight of hand to free himself of old friends and allies. That alone had consumed days. His court would be displeased when they came to understand that he had abandoned them. He would be missed, and their protests would have carried the day if he had paused to listen; Sebastien de Ulloa was notoriously too soft-hearted. But he could not remain in Europe. It held no savor for him now, and boredom and sorrow were ever more dangerous adversaries than any merely human agency.

There was some risk in travelling in secret, in shedding his court. He should have left Jack, too... but Jack would almost certainly leave *him*, soon enough (as his proteges always did) and he couldn't travel without an entourage. The rail journey from Helsinki to Calais alone had taxed his strength and ingenuity. But he had needed to be free of Europe, so full of secrets and history, and all of Evie's friends.

He closed his eyes. His restraint would hold through this endless, tiresome evening, and then he would have what he needed. Jack would take care of him. And once he came to the Colonies—well. If he could not make a new beginning in America, then he would find an end.

He opened his eyes again, watching Jack tease and flirt and please himself. Meanwhile, someone was slipping up on him, and Sebastien was meant not to notice. The warm scent of her skin carried over the cognac, though, even if he hadn't observed her movements or heard the scuff of her shoes on the deck. Still, he pretended oblivion, because it amused him to.

It was Mrs. Smith, the blonde American novelist, and he feigned startlement when she touched his arm.

“So intent,” she said. “What is it that you see, I wonder?”

Sebastien tipped his untasted glass at Hollis Leatherby. “More than he does, in any case.”

She bore a red wine cupped in her hand, the stem falling between her fingers, as if she meant to warm the contents with her palm the same way Sebastien could not manage to warm his cognac. She smiled, her glasses lifting as the bridge of her nose crinkled. “Are you certain?”

“My dear lady,” Sebastien said, “I am certain of nothing. But I will speculate. And my first speculation concerns a charming American, yes? And her agenda in approaching a sullen stranger at a remarkably boring cocktail party.”

“You're a striking man. A mysterious Continental stranger. With a certain notoriety. That's supposed to

be enough, isn't it?"

Sebastien shook his head, amused. It had been some time, admittedly, but when last he'd consulted a looking glass, he had been of slightly better than average height (for a modern man) and somewhat swarthy complexion—convenient, as it concealed his frequent pallor—with dark hair, thin lips, and a hooked nose. He had no reason to believe much had changed since then. Passable, certainly; his court had never complained of his ugliness. But *striking* was quite plainly in the eye of the beholder.

"At least you didn't call me *handsome*," he replied. "Jack would never let me hear the end of it. But come, now—don't we both prefer honesty, Mrs. Smith?"

She sipped, then swirled the fluid in her glass to release the aromas, and considered him. "Will you treat a lady novelist to a demonstration of your storied powers?"

Ah. Well, that neatly explained why she had sought his darkened, solitary corner. He was *material*.

And Jack had noticed that Sebastien had company. He caught Sebastien's eye over Beatrice Leatherby's head, offering a little smile that whispered *you'll pay later*, then turned back to Steven van Dijk and the five-inch-long grass-green bird who perched on Steven's forefinger, eyeing Jack as if his nose might be some sort of undiscovered delicacy.

Well, Sebastien would cheerfully abet anyone's quest for a continuing education, especially a smart young woman's. He reminded himself to breathe and said, "On whom shall I inform? And are you in the mood for gossip, dear lady, or for parlor games?"

"At all costs, gossip."

He turned from her quirk of smile and cast his eye over the other passengers. During Sebastien's brief distraction, the Captain—Konrad Hoak—had extricated himself from conversation with Oczkar Korvin and Michiel van Dijk and joined Jack's group, pretending a fascination with the parrot to cover a fascination with Beatrice Leatherby. Curiously, Hollis Leatherby seemed far more cognizant of the Captain's flirtation than of Jack's—or perhaps there was simply more of concern in a grown man's attentions to one's wife than those of a fresh-faced lad, no matter how pretty.

In any case, a frown tugged the corners of Leatherby's mouth as he excused himself, added his wife's empty glass to his own, and made his way down the promenade stairs toward the rolling bar in the dining room. He brushed past Mme. Pontchartrain stiffly, flinching from her effusive greeting while handing over both glasses.

Perhaps Mrs. Leatherby was the jealous one. She certainly glowered sharply enough when she took note of the conversation, though Sebastien did not think Mme. Pontchartrain was the sort of woman who would drive most wives to jealous rages.

Meanwhile, Mr. Leatherby waited as the bartender, a strapping fair-haired Hun of the sort epidemic among the *Hans Glücker's* crew, mixed martinis and added olives and onions. But Leatherby too couldn't resist a glance over his shoulder while he waited, or a wince when his wife dimpled prettily at the captain.

So Leatherby was also jealous. But not the type to cause a scene.

And any fool could see it, so it would hardly serve to impress an intelligent woman. And Sebastien did feel the urge to impress her, though he mocked himself for it. *Haven't you left all this behind, Sebastien? Haven't you sworn it off, the flirtations and seductions? A clean start, wasn't it?*

Ridiculous, of course. He was what he was, and had been far longer than this enjoyable young woman had been alive.

And there was Jack. So not a clean start, exactly. But Sebastien could no more leave Jack behind than his grief and his memories. And like those memories, Jack was perfectly capable of chasing him all the way to New Amsterdam.

It was the hazard in taking apprentices.

“Well?” Mrs. Smith said, shifting close enough that he could feel her warmth on his arm. “I’m still waiting to be amazed.”

He wanted to impress her, but he had hidden in his dark corner for a reason; he was in no mood to perform for anyone. Perhaps he could distract her. “Your impoverished Frenchwoman,” he said, with a smile. “Do you suppose she plans to marry American money?”

He didn’t need to point. On their left was the outward-slanting wall of isinglass that showed the sea below and the fading lights of the French coast. On their right was the dining room and the bar, from which Leatherby was emerging with his offering to his wife. Meanwhile, Mme. Pontchartrain, perhaps one or two sherrys over her limit, was engaged in a conversation with Zhang Xiaoming that involved a good deal of handwaving and laughter on both sides. She was, however, keeping one drooping eye on the same thing that had drawn Sebastien’s attention: Mlle. LeClere, who perched on the bench of the airship’s ultra-light aluminum piano alongside Virgil Allen, playing the low notes while he played the high, and together producing a somewhat abused version of “The Lights o’ London.”

“She’ll be disappointed,” Mrs. Smith said. “Virgil’s a second son.”

“I’m surprised the girl’s guardian permits it either way,” Sebastien said. “Has she spent the entire trip at the bar?”

“She does tittle a little,” Mrs. Smith admitted. “Though one doesn’t like to judge. After my Benjamin died—” Her voice trailed off, and she sipped her wine. “Well, one copes as one can. And short of turning to necromancy or mediums, alcohol has its mercies.”

Her lingering sorrow was contagious, awakening his own. Sebastien wished, for a moment, that he could risk the cognac in his glass. “And Mlle. LeClere?”

“Ah,” Mrs. Smith said. “A beautiful, guileless, impoverished heiress. And all the men of good estate flock ’round....”

“My dear,” Sebastien answered gallantly, “I prefer a woman who knows her own mind.”

“Well, there’s enough of those on this tub.” The wine made her sparkle. Or perhaps the wine was an excuse to shed a little reserve; one could never be too sure. “You won’t go lonely.”

“Madame,” he said, sincerely, “if only it were so.”

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Some time later, Mrs. Smith excused herself to visit the ladies’ washroom, leaving Sebastien to his own devices. Eventually, someone was bound to notice that he’d been standing in the same corner, swirling the same cognac in his glass for hours. Hunger wouldn’t make him wobbly or vague, but it would make him sharp-set, unnerving. And he did not care to leave his fellow passengers... unnerved. Attention now could lead to suspicion later.

Sebastien picked his way down the steps toward the bar, to relieve himself of his undesired burden. He would collect Jack (who had descended to the dining room) make his excuses to the captain, and retire.

The steward took Sebastien's full glass with a smile and slipped it under the bar. Sebastien winked at him; he found he could generally rely on the international conspiracy of bartenders for discretion. Especially as Sebastien was always well-behaved.

He turned away.

It was Jack leaning against the piano now, while Oczkar Korvin tried his hand at a little Bach. The result was generally superior to the English parlor tunes, not in the least because no-one attempted to sing. Korvin's hands were long and gaunt, knobby-fingered, and his hair fell over his eyes as he leaned forward, arms akimbo over the keyboard. He glanced up as Sebastien came over and settled in beside Jack. "Don Sebastien."

The effort to speak did not appear to affect his concentration. "Korvin úr," Sebastien answered, giving the other man's name the Hungarian honorific before continuing in the same language, "A pleasure to make your acquaintance. How *did* you come to be travelling with so many lovely women?"

Korvin laughed and let his hands fall silent on the keys as he answered in English, perhaps noticing Jack's furrowed brow—a patent fraud, as Jack spoke Hungarian like a native. "I noticed the notorious Mrs. Smith had cornered you. Beware of that one. She'll have your secrets out of you like a pocket handkerchief."

"Indeed?" Sebastien folded his arms and settled his weight on his heels. "You met her in Kyiv?"

"Moscow. With the other ladies, and Mr. Allen, ten days ago. The airship's route took us across most of the Baltic states. The *Hans Glücker* is not what you would call a—" He snapped his fingers as the English word eluded him.

"Express," Jack supplied.

"Thank you." The shared smile made Sebastien's neck hairs prickle. "Moscow," Sebastien prompted, more from curiosity than towards a purpose. Pretending he did not see Jack's smile, he said, "I am preternaturally nosy."

"That is why they call you the detective, I presume," Korvin said, with reasonably good humor. "Have you noticed the Leatherbys? I would not have expected them to be any more acquainted with either of the Colonial parties—American or *american*—than I was, but I would say that they have a quite developed aversion to Madame Pontchartrain. Although" —his fingers lifted from the keys to adjust his cravat— "they get on well enough to our Dutch friends."

"So not just English standoffishness, then?"

Jack stirred and cleared his throat before Korvin could answer. "Madame Pontchartrain," Jack said. "How good of you to join us."

She was carrying water now, not sherry, and walking quite steadily, though with a certain degree of care. She paused a few feet away and smiled. "I beg your pardon, gentlemen," she said, in French. "I had come to see if I could prevail upon you for a little more music."

Korvin lifted his fingers from his lap and stretched them. "For the right tithe," he said, "I might even sing. Master Jack, would you see if the bartender has a bottle of cognac back there?"

“Indeed he does,” Sebastien said, nodding permission to Jack. “Good evening, Madame—”

She rolled her shoulders over a corset that gave her the general appearance of the prow of a battleship, and curled one loose strand of her uptwisted hair around her finger in a gesture that would have been coquettish, were she young. “And good evening to you, Don Sebastien. I’ve spent a good deal of time in Spain, and you are the first of your family I’ve met. Might I inquire where you are from?”

He laughed and turned it aside, hiding his discomfort. “New Amsterdam, as of today. I am emigrating.”

“Along with your... pupil?”

“My ward,” he said. He lifted his chin to watch Jack’s negotiations with the steward, the jerk of his thumb over his shoulder as he said, no doubt, *the drink is for Mr. Korvin*.

“A likely lad.” Her voice purred a little, just this side of insinuating, and Sebastien drew himself up.

“Very likely,” he answered, and made himself scarce. It was late enough to permit a dignified escape. If Jack wanted to stay up and flirt with the ladies—and not just the ladies, apparently—he could perfectly well follow when he was ready. Sebastien would survive until he got there.

As it happened, he didn’t have to survive long. Jack arrived no more than ten minutes later, brushing aside with one hand the curtain that covered the doorway. He peered through and slipped inside, pausing just within. “You should have said something.”

Sebastien was sitting on the lower bunk, a gothic novel open upon his knees. He paused with one page delicately uplifted between his fingers, and looked up. “I hadn’t the wit left to divert Mme. Pontchartrain’s determined questioning. Fortunately, I had the wit to realize it, so I pled a cognac headache and fled. You seemed to enjoy yourself this evening.”

His voice went sharper than he’d intended, but Jack just smiled and turned to be certain the curtain was closed. “Put out the light, Sebastien.”

Sebastien stood and pulled the shade down. There were no windows in the cabin, but an electric porthole light—of all the futuristic contrivances—provided illumination. It was operated by excess power from the *Hans Glücker*’s six motors and easily darkened by a shade should the occupants desire. Electrical switches could cause a spark, considered undesirable in a hydrogen-filled vehicle. The dim rooms suited Sebastien very well. Much better than any sailing vessel might have.

The cabin seemed even closer with the lights out. Sebastien could see exceptionally well in the dark, but he closed his eyes to feel Jack moving. Sebastien heard him unbuttoning his collar, untucking his shirt, hanging his jacket in the dark, and sliding his braces down. He kicked his shoes off, and Sebastien heard his shirt and trousers fall, as well. “Jack?”

“Come here.”

Sebastien went to him, catfooted. He folded his arms around Jack and pressed his mouth to warm, uptilted lips. He breathed Jack’s scent; released from his clothes, it hung about him like the drapery on a Grecian statue. Jack’s fingers pressed Sebastien’s cheeks and he clucked, not liking what he found. “Don’t wait that long again.”

“I was alone.”

Jack’s hands slid across Sebastien’s face and knotted in his hair, pushing him to his knees, pressing Sebastien’s cold face against his skin. Jack leaned against the bedframe. “Well,” he said, “for Christ’s

sake, don't wait now."

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Early the next morning, when the *Hans Glücker* was well away over the Atlantic, Madame Pontchartrain was discovered missing from her cabin and, in fact, the entirety of the dirigible. Mademoiselle LeClere, sleeping in the top bunk, claimed to have heard nothing in the night.

## Chapter Two

2

Sebastien could no more travel unescorted than could a respectable woman, although in his case the difficulty was of well-being rather than social standing. They retired separately; Jack slept in the bottom bunk, closer to the curtained doorway. Sebastien did not sleep, but lay listening to the *Hans Glücker's* deep silences, the creak and strain of her superstructure, the muted breathing of the nearest passengers. Both men would have preferred a room with a door—even a door of spruce splints and doped cloth—but there was no such luxury to be had aboard the dirigible.

So when someone pounded with a nervous fist against the aluminum doorframe beside the curtain, the wall rattled against the bunk, waking Jack with a start. Sebastien was already sitting upright in the filtered gloom when his companion rolled out of bed. "Coming," Jack called.

Sebastien slipped from the top bunk and withdrew into the room's most shadowed corner, shrugging his dressing-gown over his nightshirt. Jack checked that he was halfway presentable before flicking the curtain aside.

"Detective! You are needed! Madame Pontchartrain is gone!" A crewman's voice, by the coarse German accent. Jack glanced over his own shoulder at Sebastien. "A mystery," Sebastien said, with an impatient turn of his hand. "How quaint."

Jack turned back to the crewman and let the curtain fall wide while Sebastien stepped forward to stand at his shoulder. Jack's German was better than the crewman's English, so he spoke in that language. "You wish to speak to the detective?"

"The captain does," the crewman said, his cap clutched to his breast. His eyes flicked around the dark cabin, taking in the blacked-out light, the two rumpled beds. He swallowed.

"Excellent." Sebastien drew his dressing gown closed across his chest, as if he felt a chill. "I'll meet him in the salon in half an hour."

He reached over Jack's shoulder and flipped the curtain shut in the surprised crewman's face. Jack waited until he heard footsteps and stepped back, pressing his shoulder to Sebastien's arm. "No holiday for you," he said.

Sebastien, turning away, paused to tousle Jack's hair. "Pull your trousers on, there's a good lad, and go and check the salon for me, would you?"

"Already done," Jack said, crouching by his trunk. "Use the center stair. I looked last night. It's away from any windows."

Sebastien flipped his valet case open and searched compartments for his cufflinks. "And get yourself some breakfast," he said without raising his chin. "You're pale."

#

The cabins, lounge, and dining room were on the main deck, in the belly of the seven-hundred-foot-long airship. The promenades lined that same deck, their isinglass windows angled down, following the curve of the dirigible's body, and showed the passing earth and sea below; direct sunlight would not be a problem except at sunset and dawn.

There was a second promenade one flight up, and the lower deck, while mostly crew quarters, also contained the galley, the washrooms, the smoking room—with its asbestos ceiling and tin floor—and the salon.

Which was empty but for Mrs. Smith when they entered. Barely twenty minutes had elapsed; Sebastien could be ready very quickly when he chose.

The salon was a pleasant room, windowless and in the center of the lower deck as a courtesy to passengers of delicate disposition who might find the *Hans Glücker's* altitude or motion unsettling, and thus it was very well suited to Sebastien's needs. The steady drone of the zeppelin's motors was a constant accompaniment as he collected a china cup of tea from the small banquet laid along one wall, then chose a leather wing-backed chair beside the door. Meanwhile, Jack piled jam on scones to suit an adolescent's appetite.

Mrs. Smith was already seated on the divan, applying a silver fork to the pastry on her canary-yellow Meissen cake plate. She had acknowledged Sebastien earlier. Now, he touched the teacup to his lips before he set it, and its saucer, on the side table. "Mrs. Smith," he said. "You seem very calm."

Her eyebrows rose over the frame of her spectacles. "I'm screaming inside," she said, and laid the fork down beside her plate. "But that's no reason not to eat."

"Did you hear anything last night?"

"I thought you'd ask how I learned of the mystery."

"Actually," he said, "I'm curious how you knew to be in this room. As my message was for the captain alone, I believe."

She sipped her own tea. "I eavesdropped." She smiled. "My German is excellent."

The door at the base of the stair swung open. It was a fragile thing, fabric stretched over a wooden frame, closed by a wooden latch for lightness of structure. Sebastien and Jack stood as Captain Hoak entered the salon alone, his hat pinned against his side by his left elbow. Mrs. Smith remained seated, as was proper, but set her teacup down.

"Mrs. Smith," the Captain said, in English. "Good morning. And *guten Morgen*, Don Sebastien, Master Jack. Is Mrs. Smith—" He wavered, uncertain as to whom he should be addressing.

"Mrs. Smith is just leaving," the authoress said. She abandoned her cup and plate and made sure of her reticule before standing. "I shall be in the observation lounge if I am required. Thank you for the excellence of your company, Don Sebastien." She offered her gloved hand. He took it and bowed over it lightly. "Master Jack," she concluded, with a teasing smile that sent high color across the young man's face, and swept past the Captain with a little gracious nod.

The Captain turned to watch her go. He was a tall man, blond hair graying, and he carried the beginnings of a small, hard paunch. He sighed lightly as the door latch clicked and went to fetch his own coffee. "How much have you been informed, Don Sebastien?"

Sebastien reclaimed his chair as the Captain sat. He lifted his cooling tea and blew across the saucer. Jack, who had already finished two scones and was toying with the crumbs on his plate, sat as well. Sebastien expected a steward would be along to tidy when their conference was done. "Only that Madame Pontchartrain is... gone, I believe the word was. Not dead, I take it then?"

"Vanished," the Captain said. "Dead, perhaps. If she fell, certainly, but there's no evidence she did. No breach in the hull, and the passenger doors are sealed—and she did not enter the control cabin."

"Have you searched the lifting body?" Sebastien's hand rose, an extended finger indicating the ceiling and the giant framework of aluminum beyond it. Within the streamlined lifting body were thirteen donut-shaped gas containers filled with hydrogen and harnessed by netting within the dirigible's frame.

"We are searching it now," Captain Hoak said. "But there has been no sign of her there. And of course, even if a woman of her... dignity could be expected to be clambering up ladders, the hatchways are kept locked."

Sebastien picked up his cup and saucer and stood smoothly, without reliance upon the arms of the chair. "By all means," he said. "Let us examine the lady's cabin."

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Madame Pontchartrain's cabin was no different from Sebastien's, except in that women's clothing—a dozen or so dresses, half of them rich with velvet and silk, and cut for a more generous figure than the plainer muslins and wools—and two nightgowns—hung from the bar at the foot of the bunks, and the upper bunk had been tidied. Sebastien and Jack searched the cabin thoroughly, to the Captain's stiff-lipped dismay, and found little of note. The lower bed lay as it had been left, the covers smoothed roughly over a bottom sheet that was ruffled but not creased; hardly typical of what Sebastien had observed of the chambermaids' military efficiency. There was no blood, and no sign of a struggle, although Madame Pontchartrain's papers seemed to be in some disarray inside her portfolio, and her cabin bag was less neatly packed than one might expect.

"Dear boy," Sebastien said, while the Captain posed rigidly beyond the door, erect as a hungry hawk upon a glove, "do you suppose a woman of Madame Pontchartrain's age and breeding is inclined to creep from her bed at night—to any purpose—without smoothing the sheets respectably?"

"Perhaps if she were very ill," Jack said uncertainly. He stood a little closer to Sebastien than decorum warranted, but the Captain seemed disinclined to comment. "And very much in a hurry."

"Captain," Sebastien said. "I believe we must examine the ladies' washroom."

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The ladies' was innocent of any sign of violence, and like Mademoiselle LeClere, the attendant had heard nothing. After their inspection, Sebastien accompanied Jack to the dining room for an early luncheon, switching plates discreetly when Jack finished his own steak and salad and began eyeing Sebastien's poached salmon. He was halfway across the serving and eating methodically when his fork hesitated in midair and his chin came up, blue eyes catching the filtered light.

Sebastien, who was sitting with his back to the windows so he would not be dazzled by even indirect sunlight, saw their bright shapes reflected in Jack's irises.

"Ah," he said, observing the deepening furrow between Jack's eyebrows. "The nightgowns."

"Two nightgowns," Jack agreed. "Hanging, and one unruffled. Madame Pontchartrain never went to

bed last night.”

“Indeed she didn’t,” Sebastien said, holding his wine under his nose before tilting the glass, and flicking his tongue out to collect just a drop on the tip, for tasting’s sake. “So the question remains, who rumped her bunk?”

“And why did Mademoiselle LeClere lie?” Chewing a last bite of salmon, Jack laid his fork across his plate—more yellow Meissen, with cabbage roses and gilt edges. The tablecloths were eyelet linen, white and fine. “Speaking of which, there’s the young lady herself. With Miss Lillian Meadows, no less.”

Sebastien lifted his knife and turned it so the silver blade reflected the dining room behind him. He saw two blonde heads bent close together as the ladies were seated, Miss Meadows tight-trousered and drawing sidelong glances—admiring or censorious—and Mlle. LeClere scandalous with her shawl wound about her neck like a scarf rather than covering the white expanse of her bosom. “While the duenna’s away—” Sebastien began, but then his eyes were drawn to the white cloth twisted around Mlle. LeClere’s long pale throat.

Jack cleared his throat. “I *know* where *you* were last night.”

“Indeed.” Sebastien laid the knife crisply across Jack’s plate, abruptly grateful that he could not blush. “So do I. And also I think it’s time for a stroll. Do you not agree?”

Silently, Jack rose, folding his napkin. And together they left the table.

## Chapter Three

3

“Do you think it’s Miss Meadows?” Jack asked, when they were safely away from the dining room, strolling the promenade. It was only a little past noon, so the sun was safely blocked from the long windows by the shadow of the airframe, and if anyone did harbor suspicions about Sebastien, it would do no harm for Sebastien to be seen by midday.

“One doesn’t find many of the blood in theatre.” Sebastien licked pale lips. “Matinees.”

“But she’s a motion picture actress—”

“And how might she explain an inability to shoot outdoor scenes in daylight?”

“Ah,” Jack said. He raked at his hair, pale curls stretching between his fingers and then springing back. “Besides, why would she turn to Mlle. LeClere when she has two travelling companions of her own?”

“Mrs. Smith was wearing an open-necked shirtwaist,” Sebastien pointed out.

In answer, Jack touched his own loosely-knotted cravat. He did not affect the London and Milan fashion of high collars, as Sebastien did. “Mrs. Smith may not be prone to bruising—”

“She is a *very* pale blonde.”

“—or she may be a more intimate friend of Miss Meadows’ than Mlle. LeClere, leaving the evidence... inobvious.” Jack finished, smugly.

“I am scandalized,” the great detective answered, a small smile warming his lips. They warmed further when Jack checked over his shoulder, and then brushed them with a quick peck.

“If not Miss Meadows...” Jack said, stepping back.

“You make assumptions,” Sebastien said. A cardinal sin, and Jack winced to be caught out. “*If* there is another of the blood aboard this ship... and *if* Mlle. LeClere is of her court” –the polite term, in preference to any of the myriad crass ones– “it would be the rankest sort of stupidity to murder an old woman.”

They turned at the wall, and began walking back.

“Because suspicion would naturally fall on any passenger discovered to be of the blood.”

“Prejudices die hard,” Sebastien said.

“I’ve known a few Jews,” Jack said. The dryness that informed his voice was no happenstance. He *was* one, blond curls and blue eyes and good plain English alias aside. “It’s the same everywhere. And it needn’t be your folk, Sebastien. A disappearance in the absence of any evidence suggests black magic to me. Teleportation, transmutation... what if someone turned her into a frog?”

“Or a green parrot? And us without a forensic sorcerer anywhere to be found.”

Jack cleared his throat. “We’ve seen the parrot and Madame Pontchartrain in the same place. So if it is one of yours, and not Miss Meadows, who?”

“Korvin úr,” Sebastien said, automatically. And then he checked himself. “At a guess.”

“Good guess,” Jack said. He lowered his voice; they were still alone on their side of the promenade, but below, in the dining room blurrily visible through the interior isinglass, Virgil Allen and Hollis Leatherby had entered and paused beside the drinks caddy. “I’m trying to remember if I’ve heard his name–”

“Have you?” The tone was sharper than Sebastien had intended. He did not care to be reminded of Jack’s past.

There were clubs in most cities, places where those who courted the blood congregated, and where those of the blood who were far from their courts and their courtesans could go, for sustenance and for companionship. Names were whispered in those places, and secrets traded.

It was in one such, in a basement in Budapest, that Sebastien had discovered Jack, a gamin child of eight or nine years, and where he—against his custom and better judgement, and in much the spirit with which one might haggle for a starved dog chained to a railing—had purchased the boy.

It was three hundred and fifty German marks Sebastien considered very well spent indeed.

Jack chewed his lip, and then shrugged. “It was a long time ago. I don’t recall.”

#

Jack was still tired from a difficult night, while Sebastien buzzed with energy. It had been unsafe attending to his needs aboard the *Hans Glücker*, but it would be more unsafe to spend three days and part of a fourth in human company with his skin cold and waxen and his hunger growing. Sebastien wondered if Korvin úr had found himself in similar straits. It was unusual for one of the blood to travel without a companion. Or three.

Or perhaps the handsome stranger to eye with suspicion wasn’t Lillian Meadows or Oczkar Korvin, but the pale and delicate Mrs. Phoebe Smith. Virgil Allen had a southerner’s bronzed glow, but that could be

counterfeited with cosmetics...

Sebastien paused in the passageway and shook his head, leaning one hand on a cornerpost of the corridor wall. Those, at least, were solid enough to hold his weight, unlike the cloth stretched between them. He was committing the same sin he'd accused Jack of, speculating on small and circumstantial evidence, looking for a monster to explain away what was most likely mere human veniality. Speculation, rather than deduction, and that was no way to solve a crime.

Assuming any crime had been committed. Which, admittedly, seemed like a fairly safe assumption—but one assumption tended to lead to another.

He straightened up and squared his shoulders under his coat. The next step must be to interview the witnesses. Particularly, he thought, Mlle. LeClere.

He was halfway down the spiral stair to the day parlor, following her scent, when something else occurred to him. Her scent. In particular. It had been present in the cabin she shared with Mme. Pontchartrain. As, indeed, had the scents of Mme. Pontchartrain—both her own bodily aroma, and the funereal bouf of roses and chrysanthemums she habitually wore. But there had been no third person's aroma, and, as Jack had noted, Mme. Pontchartrain did not appear to have even slipped on her nightdress.

So why *had* her bunk been rumpled? And not, he thought, rumpled as if someone had slept therein, but rather as if someone had stripped the covers back in hasty investigation, and then smoothed them carelessly.

That mystery distracted Sebastien to the bottom of the stairs, where he paused and cast left and right, sniffing delicately, for the aroma of lilies, powder, and warm girl that identified Mlle. LeClere.

Instead, he smelled lilacs and civet and a different warm girl entirely, the scent vanguarding a swish of sensible English wool. "My dear Mrs. Leatherby," he said, and turned.

She startled, which had been his intention, and drew herself up short, her skirts swinging heavily about the ankles of her button boots. Gray kid-gloved fingers tensed on the handle of her reticule; there was a tiny snag on her left thumb, a little hole she hadn't yet sewn up. "Don Sebastien," she stammered. "I beg your pardon—"

"I have excellent hearing," he said, stooping a little to offer her an arm. She accepted it, her fingers curling as convulsively on his sleeve as they had on her handbag.

"As it happens," Mrs. Leatherby said in a small voice, "so do I. Which is what I wished to speak with you about, if you do not find me too forward, Don Sebastien."

Her steps tarried so he must cut his own stride for fear of dragging her off her feet. He ducked his head to introduce the appearance of intimacy. "Do continue."

"I'm sorry," she said, shivering delicately. "I'm all aflutter. If there's a killer aboard..."

"Quite." He patted her arm, grateful of the long sleeves that would prevent her from noticing how his skin was chill.

"Last night—" She glanced over her shoulder, and he soothed her with a hand on her hand again. "Last night I heard voices. You must understand that Hollis is a very sound sleeper, Don Sebastien, and he snores quite dreadfully."

“Indeed,” he answered, letting her annoying overuse of his name pass unremarked, though it led him to unworthy speculation on whether Mr. Leatherby had perhaps been less oblivious than he seemed to Jack’s shameless flirtation with his wife that first night in the salon, or if the sighs he had breathed had been of relief rather than jealousy. “And this is significant because?...”

“We sleep away from the other passengers,” Mrs. Leatherby said. “Out of consideration.”

A benefit of the nearly-empty passenger quarters. “You heard something?” Sebastien asked, understanding dawning. His hair slid down his forehead, and he tossed it back, taking a moment as well to consider the particular hell of a nervous woman with acute hearing paired with a heavy snorer.

“A man and a woman,” she said, her chin jerking in small, sharp nods. “Speaking French. I recognized the man’s voice as Mister Korvin’s, and is he really a viscount?”

“Vikomt, in Hungarian,” Sebastien said. “And I have not heard Korvin úr make such a claim. If only this were a sailing vessel, one could examine the peerage in the ship’s library.”

“Silly me,” Mrs. Leatherby said. “I’m sure you think me a right fool, but it’s so exciting, being abroad and meeting exotic personages with their European manners.” Her hand flew to her mouth, releasing his somewhat crumpled sleeve. “Oh, Sebastien, I’m terribly sorry.”

“It’s quite all right,” he answered. “No offense taken.” Released of her grip, he took a half-step toward the salon. She tripped after.

“But I haven’t told you the worst,” she said. Her voice rose, but she had the art of the breathless shriek, like so many Englishwomen, and it wouldn’t carry. He wondered when the pocket handkerchief would emerge, or if she’d skip directly on to the fainting spell.

“Indeed, Señora,” he said. Perhaps he should resort to his own handkerchief; the lilac was about to make him sneeze. “What *did* you hear?”

“I didn’t understand the words, of course, but it had the sound of an argument,” she said. “And afterward... there were other things.” Her lips made a moue of distaste.

“Ah,” Sebastien said. “Say no more. Did you recognize the lady’s voice?”

“They were speaking *French*,” she repeated, insistently.

“Of course,” Sebastien answered. With a great and distancing show of gallantry, he stepped forward and opened the door to the salon for her, sweeping an outrageous bow. “That does narrow the field somewhat, now doesn’t it?”

\*\*\*

## Chapter Four

4

Unfortunately, his intention of speaking to Mlle. LeClere was foiled by the continuing presence of Miss Meadows. The ladies had been joined by Mr. Allen and Korvin úr, and judging by the way Mlle. LeClere was leaning on Oczkar Korvin’s arm, Miss Meadow’s presence was all that was preventing a scandal—an irony which Sebastien savored, briefly.

He understood the urge. A young woman rarely—perhaps never—found herself released on her own

recognizance. It must seem a heady interlude in such a constrained life, and he couldn't grudge her taking advantage of it, when it would be back to her ordained task of trapping a man when she made landfall. The *Hans Glücker* was, in any case, a relatively safe place to sow wild oats.

Or should have been, to all rights, if there had not been a potential murderer aboard.

As soon as Sebastien could decently extract himself from Mrs. Leatherby, he went in search of the infinitely preferable American lady, Mrs. Smith. At the very least, she could no doubt tell him a little something about Miss Lillian Meadows and Mr. Virgil Allen.

He found her on the promenade. Lingerin would become a tricky proposition as the sun slid down before the nose of the dirigible, but for now the long shadows kept him safe. Phoebe Smith stood at the forward-most reach of the promenade, under the nose of the airframe. She held her hard-backed black notebook left-handed and scribbled busily with the right, her ink-stained fingers embracing the grip of a tortoiseshell fountain pen.

She sniffed as he came up beside her, and said, with great satisfaction, "Did you know, Don Sebastien, that were we to ascend very much further, the drop in air pressure would cause the ink in my pen to expand, resulting in an oozing mess?" She turned to him, and held it up beside her face for inspection. The nib gleamed dully in the indirect light, a hairline of black demonstrating the split, but Sebastien focused past it. At her face, her pallor, the whiteness of her lips where they tightened over her teeth, the faintly visible capillaries warming her pale cheeks.

"You're staring, Don Sebastien."

He glanced quickly down so she would not see him fail to blush. "So it would appear. Is the material any good?"

"I beg your pardon?"

He gestured to the crawling sea below the isinglass. "You must be working on a novel."

"Only scribbling observations. It's what I do."

"Scribble?"

"Observe."

"And eavesdrop."

"That, too." And yes, she could blush, a delicate seashell glow across her cheeks. "Fortunately, I am discreet."

"And unshockable."

"Quite," she said, after a short pause. She capped the pen and clipped it to a cord around her neck, so that it slid out of sight between her breasts. She marked her place in the notebook with a ribbon and stowed that, as well, in her reticule. "Your young ward thinks highly of you."

Sebastien could no more blanch than he could blush, and this once he thanked Providence for it. They had been quiet—ferociously quiet, *fiercely* quiet—but Jack had not been able to stifle a gasp against his fist, or the sharp single flex of his hips that had shaken the aluminum frame of the bunk when Sebastien's fangs slipped in.

At that, he was quieter than Sebastien had been in his own time.

“He is very dear to me as well,” Sebastien answered. “And your travelling companions? Do you think highly of them?”

Her true smile dazzled. Gone was the contrived, ladylike lift of her mouth at the corners. This was honest mirth, and it included Sebastien rather than mocking him. “I find them a font of human detail,” she said. “A veritable education.”

“On what do they educate you?”

“On the unpleasant nature of seduction,” she said, in a softer tone. She leaned forward, hands braced on the promenade railing, to stare down at the sea below and the *Hans Glücker’s* attendant flock of gulls. The white birds did not seem to care that the ship they followed flew rather than floated. “I would not ever care to find myself on the sort of string upon which Miss Meadows keeps Mr. Allen.”

It struck home. Sebastien leaned against the railing beside her, and spoke in French. “Or upon which I keep Jack?”

She tilted her head, watching him from the corner of pale eyes. She didn’t shift away, and when she answered it was in the same language. “I didn’t say it.”

“Did you need to?”

“Don Sebastien,” she said. “Is it you who has the young Mr. Priest on a string? Or perhaps the other way around?”

“Ach.” He pushed himself straight against the railing. “Mutual dependency. How unflattering.”

“How very like a marriage.” She fiddled one pearl earring, refusing to meet his eyes. “No, perhaps you should look to Korvin úr and Mlle. LeClere, if you wish to see a troublesome partnership breeding.”

“Are they partners?”

“He makes her cry,” Mrs. Smith said, dropping into English again. “And while she seeks refuge and distraction with Lillian—with Miss Meadows—she does not return Korvin úr’s notes unread, either.”

“She encourages him.”

“She *breathes* for him, Don Sebastien,” Mrs. Smith said. “And Lillian thinks it’s funny.”

#

When Sebastien returned to the salon, he watched for it. Conveniently, Allen, Korvin, Mlle. LeClere, and Miss Meadows were still present, playing whist under an electric light. Ladies were partnered against gentlemen, and Mlle. LeClere and Miss Meadows were winning—on brass moreso than chivalry.

Sebastien swirled a cognac in a balloon glass and lounged in the armchair he’d appropriated, back in the corner beside the door, pretending to read a four-day-old Times of London. He had a knack for vanishing into the shadows when he cared to, and as long as he didn’t snap the paper or rattle his cufflinks the card players in their armchairs seemed to have more or less forgotten him. Except for Oczkar Korvin, who never glanced over at all, as if he were consciously ignoring Sebastien’s presence.

The Hungarian was of a yellowish complexion, which could have been natural, but also made it more difficult to tell if he blanched where his hand pressed the cards. But then Mlle. LeClere stood between

tricks, laying her hand tidily face-down and fetched drinks for the table—sherry for herself, whisky for Miss Meadows and Mr. Allen, and a plum brandy for Korvin úr. Mademoiselle slipped the glass into his hand rather than set beside him so she had the excuse to brush her fingers across his palm. And then, Sebastien saw him lift the glass to his lips, his throat working as he swallowed.

Korvin murmured something in Mlle. LeClere's ear that made her blush. When he turned and saluted Sebastien, the level of the gold-tinged transparent fluid had fallen. Sebastien toasted him back and raised the cognac to his lips, heady fumes searing his nostrils. He tilted the glass, so the cognac touched his lips, and feigned drinking, watching Korvin's smile, and wondering what, exactly, he was up against.

Observing the dynamics at the table made an interesting pastime. The four played intently, without excess table talk. They were all subdued and prone to starting at small noises, but Sebastien judged that more likely the nervousness of the herd when it cannot place the predator than any effect of guilt.

Allen kept his eyes on Miss Meadows rather than on his partner, as Mrs. Smith had predicted. As a result, he gave away easy tricks, plainly displeasing Korvin. As for Mlle. LeClere, she made an interesting subject. She sat across from Miss Meadows, and kept her gaze almost exclusively on the actress' face in a manner that might have mimicked infatuation if it was not for the narrow line between her brows. The expression made her seem less like love's supplicant, and more like a dog eagerly seeking any clue to its master's mind.

Amidst this, however, she turned the rare fawning glance on Korvin, and seemed only to speak to Allen to apologize to him—peculiar, after her friendliness of the previous evening. Whatever had transpired, however, it wasn't sufficient to keep her away from the table, and there didn't seem to be any enmity between them. Just a sort of chariness like two cats ignoring one another's presence on the bed.

The impasse persisted unaltered until the door slipped open and Hollis Leatherby entered. Sebastien was the only one present who did not startle spectacularly. He had the advantage of having heard and identified Leatherby's step in the corridor, but he feigned a little rustle anyway.

The sound of the paper caught Leatherby's attention. He turned from the ladies and the gentlemen at the card table as if they did not exist—not quite a cut direct, but sharp enough—and took a place opposite Sebastien, in the second of three matching chairs. Across the salon, play continued uninterrupted after the first brief flurry of glances. “Don Sebastien,” he said.

“Mr. Leatherby,” Sebastien answered. He folded the paper in half and set his drink on the side table, centering it carefully on a cork and wicker coaster. “You seem refreshingly unaffected by the general air of nervousness.”

“Do I?” Leatherby leaned forward, elbows on the arms of the chair, and hunched between his shoulders. “I wonder, have you seen my wife?”

“Half an hour or so ago. I left her here, but when I returned—” Sebastien shrugged. “I have not seen her since.”

“Damn it,” Leatherby said, a flash of real temper roughening his voice. “She wasn't on the promenade.”

“Perhaps she went to lie down. She seemed rather peaked.”

“And what's that supposed to mean?” Leatherby's voice escalated enough that Korvin's head turned, though the other three kept their shoulders set and stared firmly at their cards, a reversal of earlier roles that Sebastien would once have found amusing.

Sebastien held up his hand, mildly, the palm open and facing Leatherby. “It was merely an observation. Really, sir, you are so quick to take offense. One might almost suppose a guilty conscience.”

It was provoking, and meant to be. He didn’t like Leatherby: didn’t like the way he’d dismissed Jack, for one thing, and furthermore didn’t like his sharp temper, now that he’d experienced it himself. *Careful, Sebastien.*

Leatherby drew himself out of the chair, his chest puffed up. “Are you accusing me of something, Don Sebastien?”

“Oh, not at all,” Sebastien said. “But I’m also not casting aspersions on the delightful Mrs. Leatherby. So please, there’s no need for hackles raised.” As he said it, he couldn’t remember if it was a common English expression. The languages would run together.

Judging by Leatherby’s eyebrow, it wasn’t. Ah, well. Quirks of speech were the least of Sebastien’s problems. Steadfastly, he refused to stand. “Really,” he said. “I imagine she went to lie down. You might look for her there.”

Leatherby gave him one more brow-crumpled look and headed for the door. Sebastien heaved a sigh of relief when it closed behind him, and looked up to meet the eyes of Virgil Allen, who was paused beside the caddy, pouring whisky into a still-damp glass. “My money’s on the Chinese. For what it’s worth.”

“I see.” Sebastien reached for his cognac, wishing he dared to drink it. “Any reason in particular?”

“Just a feeling,” Allen answered. “Could be nothing. Probably is,” he amended, when Sebastien’s arched eyebrow did not waver. “Still, you know those Chinese have got magicians we don’t know anything about in the West.”

“I’ve heard that,” Sebastien said. “I’ve also heard a lot about your American hexes and... gris gris, is it?”

“Voudou,” Allen supplied. “Mademoiselle LeClere could tell you more about it, I imagine. The Carolinas are civilized; that’s her country.”

\*\*\*

## Chapter Five

5

Jack appeared fifteen minutes later. His color was recovering, though he looked entirely too bright-eyed to have slept the afternoon away. He arrowed straight to Sebastien and plunked down beside him, lifting the cognac glass from his hand without so much as a greeting. His fingers stroked Sebastien’s and Sebastien flinched, but managed not to glance guiltily at Korvin úr.

“It makes you dizzy,” Sebastien said.

“Medicinal purposes,” Jack said, and sipped the amber liquor. “The sun’s under the bow.”

“Thank you. I’ve strolled enough for one day.”

“I think you’ll stroll more, when I tell you what I learned.”

“When you were supposed to be resting.”

Jack shrugged. “Ask me who the officer of the watch was last night,” he purred, waiting for Sebastien’s

eyebrows to rise before nodding. "Captain Hoak."

"You're entirely too smug for that to be all."

"The logbook," Jack said, and paused for a sip of cognac, his cheeks hollowing as he rolled it over his tongue. He flirted at Sebastien through lowered lashes, and Sebastien folded his newspaper with a snap that turned Virgil Allen's head. The American cleared his throat and glanced quickly back at his cards. "Shows some inconsistencies. It would appear that the Captain's pen ran dry of ink, and he refilled it, but the blacks do not match. One is a German black, and one is French, and greener. He must have bought ink in Calais."

"What was amended?"

"The time of the three a.m. tour was entered, I would guess, simultaneously with the data for the five a.m. tour. But rest of the entry was written earlier. And the pen was not skipping, which indicates that somewhere between entering the notes and entering the time, the captain did some other writing. Or perhaps changed pens."

The words were low, more shape than breath, for Sebastien's ears alone.

"Jack, you're a marvel," Sebastien said. And then he paused, amused pride replaced by an irrational spike of jealousy, as if he'd bought more of Jack than his freedom, that night in Budapest. And after years of work in making Jack understand that Sebastien didn't own him, and never meant to. "And how did you gain access?"

"Sebastien," Jack said, suddenly serious, his voice still soft, as Sebastien swallowed and sat back, his teeth cutting his gums and the inside of his lips in violent—and unwarranted—reaction. "All I did was flirt."

"One might almost say that all you *do* is flirt," Sebastien said, sourly, but then forced himself to sit back in his chair. "I'm sorry, Jack. That was unkind."

Jack only smiled, his delicate hands cupped around the bell of the glass. "One scandal draws attention from another," he said, and let one shoulder rise and fall, graceful as a girl. When he gestured with Sebastien's glass, he led with his wrist, as languidly as Miss Meadows could have managed.

"Terrible boy," Sebastien said, hiding his relief more successfully than he'd hidden his jealousy. *And what will you do, Sebastien, you old fool, when he's a grown man and wants more of a life than you can offer him?*

Not too much longer now. And Sebastien had no answer.

#

Sebastien's opportunistic stalking of Mlle. LeClere came to naught, as she left with Korvin úr—ostensibly to change for dinner, but in actuality trotting alongside him with quite pathetic focus—after the card game broke up. *Will the girl never be alone?* he thought, and settled behind his paper so Miss Meadows and Mr. Allen would not see him seem to rush out after, while Jack made a ceremony of dispensing with the dirtied glass and adjourning up the stairs. He'd keep an eye on Mlle. LeClere, and if Sebastien could not catch her alone, perhaps she'd be more amenable to Jack's pale beauty.

Mr. Allen packed up his cards and offered Miss Meadows his elbow and they too adjourned a moment later, nodding to Sebastien as they passed. As for Sebastien, he set the paper down and leaned his head back against the chair, closing his eyes, to wait out the day. So Korvin was not of the blood. Even that much liquor would have made him terribly sick, if he were. And—as Jack had noted—the sun was under

the bow. Sebastien himself would not risk wandering the airship—he checked his pocket watch, stroking the pad of his thumb over the cool, engraved surface—for at least another fifteen minutes.

He rose from his chair and began to pace. If Korvin were not of the blood, he could be so many other things—a ghul, a necromancer... a garden-variety rapist and murderer, for that matter. Sebastien did not fool himself that such men limited their predations to beautiful maidens, or even that a rapist's particular intent was lust, whatever the erotic fantasies expressed in tawdry paperbacks.

Sebastien, as it happened, knew a thing or two about predators.

And would Mlle. LeClere lie for such a man? As smitten as she was, Sebastien had no doubt at all. In addition, Korvin úr was at least trying to give the impression that he knew something about Sebastien.

Sebastien mused on that for a few moments, straightening pictures that did not need it, and shook his head. There were still pieces missing.

He checked his watch again, though he knew the time, and turned toward the door. He would dress in his evening clothes, and if he could not cut Mlle. LeClere out of the crowd for a word in private, it was time to beg the captain's assistance in the matter. There were only two days and a few hours more until the *Hans Glúcker* made landfall in New Amsterdam. And if Mme. Pontchartrain had not yet been discovered—in the passenger quarters or in the airframe—Sebastien did not believe she would be.

If that made him a cynic, well then, so be it.

As he was reaching for the doorlatch, however, he paused. Someone was on the other side. Someone male, and by his breathing, he was nerving himself to some action.

Sebastien paused and stepped back, waiting with his hands at his sides. The American, Allen, by his scent. And nervous rather than angry, praise God for small mercies.

If only it were that easy to identify another of the blood—but contrary to common myth, Sebastien's brothers and sisters in immortality smelled no different dead than they had alive. And his ears weren't *quite* acute enough to listen for the sound of a human heart. Alas. It would be nice to be more than mundanely supernatural.

Sebastien stood and waited, and at length the door slid open. Virgil Allen started to see him waiting there, hands at his sides, but recovered quickly. "Don Sebastien," he said. "May I enter?"

"This is a public space," Sebastien said, but made no move to surrender the center of the chamber.

Virgil Allen stepped inside, and shut the door behind himself. He coughed and cleared his throat. "Miss Meadows wishes to make an offer." He extended his right hand, staring resolutely at the floor between Sebastien's boots while blushing furiously. A folded sheet of cream-colored paper rested between his thumb and forefinger. Sebastien extracted it, broke the still-warm seal, and flipped it open while Allen twisted his boot against the rug.

The letter was brief.

*My dear Señor de Ulloa*

*I hope my note does not seem too forward, but it seems to me that I have heard your name—and that of the delightful Mr. Priest—before. It wasn't until this afternoon that it came to me; of course, we are mutual acquaintances of Mr. Iain MacDonald of Edinburgh, and I believe you and he are members of the same club.*

*While I myself do not have that honor, I would be very gratified if you would agree to join me for drinks and conversation after dinner tonight. My dear Virgil will be happy to bear your reply.*

*Yours truly,*

*Miss Lillian Meadows*

Iain MacDonald was a bookseller. And a bit more than that; he was also, as Miss Meadows suggested, an old friend of Sebastien's and the proprietor of one of the less shady of the underground meeting places. Casually, Sebastien folded the note and slipped it into his breast pocket. "Thank the lady, Mr. Allen, but I will be unable to join her tonight."

"She—" Allen hesitated, obviously both relieved by Sebastien's answer and concerned that the news would be unwelcome. "She said, if you were otherwise occupied, to inquire as to whether you understood her offer."

"I do," Sebastien said. "And I thank her, but no. I cannot oblige."

Mr. Allen nodded and stepped back, clearing Sebastien's path to the door.

"Gracias." Sebastien stepped forward. He paused with his hand on the latch, and said over his shoulder, "Mr. Allen?"

"Sir?"

"You shouldn't permit her to take such advantage of you, Mr. Allen. It's undignified." The American was still gaping after Sebastien as the detective took his leave with a nod, before stepping into the corridor.

#

Jack was fretting in their stateroom, or rather, the cubbyhole that passed for it, but he was dressed for dinner and had Sebastien's evening clothes laid out and brushed. Sebastien paused with the curtain in his hand, and said, "Are you my valet, now?"

"No," Jack replied, turning to the mirror to settle his bow tie, "he's following by steamer with our luggage. Unless you sacked him, too... Oh. You did, didn't you?"

"Sacking, in your colorful idiom, would indicate I found some flaw in his service."

Jack sighed, giving Sebastien his shoulder. "I just thought you'd appreciate it if your clothes were ready. Tomorrow, I'll crumple them in the corner."

"I'm sorry." Sebastien let the curtain fall closed behind him. "I didn't mean it that way." He hesitated, and went to pick up the suit on its hangar. "Did you discover anything about Korvin úr and Mademoiselle LeClere?"

"She's going to have some fast explaining to do on her wedding night," Jack said, in Greek. "It would tell us why she didn't hear anything last night, if she slipped out of the cabin. And what if it was her nightgown that wasn't rumpled? I suppose keeping Madame Pontchartrain silent about something like that would be as good a reason as any to kill her. You don't suppose Mademoiselle LeClere stands to inherit?"

Sebastien harrumphed. "We shall ask the captain for access to Madame's papers, again."

Jack raised a perceptive eyebrow. "What's upsetting you, Sebastien?"

“Is it so obvious?”

“To me,” Jack said. He took the evening coat out of Sebastien’s hands, set it aside, and began untying Sebastien’s necktie and unbuttoning his collar. “You’ll want a fresh shirt.”

“Yes, dear,” Sebastien said, and suffered himself to be dressed like a girl’s paper doll. “Miss Meadows knows, Jack.”

Jack paused in his work and looked up. He would never be a tall man, but he *was* a man, and Sebastien was never more disinclined to forget it than when Jack primped into his fey, adolescent persona. “Isn’t that the point of all this?” A fluid, dismissive wave. “I’m of age, if anyone asks. And don’t I remember you making me wait until I was. How many times did I offer before I turned sixteen?”

“One hundred and thirty-one,” Sebastien said. “And no. I mean she’s in the club.”

“What about the matinees?” Jack stepped back, Sebastien’s collar draped limp as a dead snake over his hand.

“Not of the blood.” He let it hang until Jack’s frown deepened from a pin scratch to a furrow. “An admirer.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” Jack muttered. He tossed the collar aside and reached out, knotting his hands in Sebastien’s hair. “Just because I’ve got to give you back to whatever court you assemble in New Amsterdam, Sebastien, doesn’t mean this trip isn’t mine. You *promised*.”

And what would his blood brothers think, Sebastien wondered, if they could see him now, pinned down and soundly kissed by a courtesan two-thirds his size?

They would think he was eccentric, of course, and too lenient with his pets.

But Sebastien was old enough to be excused a certain measure of eccentricity. And he’d long ago realized he preferred the mayfly society of humans to that of the blood. The blood took everything so *seriously*, as if they passed into that stage of human aging when mortals realized that the world turned like a wheel, and then through it, to a place where the natural cycles of success and catastrophe must be arrested. Before they could inconvenience—or worse, *annoy*—anyone.

Jack stopped kissing him before he’d ruffled his evening clothes, but after Sebastien’s teeth-sharpening in reaction—had furthered their earlier damage to his own lips and gums. Fortunately, he healed fast.

Jack wouldn’t have. And it was mad of him to tempt Sebastien so soon after a feeding; Sebastien could control himself, and—barring disaster—he wouldn’t need more until they were well grounded in New Amsterdam. But Sebastien also needed far more than Jack had to give. Which was why those of the blood who did not care to hunt for their suppers had courts and courtesans, and not simply a favorite or two. A pint a month, any healthy adult could spare. The same twice a week was slow death—even though the blood, in Sebastien’s considered opinion, was merely a metaphor for something more... exalted.

It warmed Sebastien as thoroughly as that mouthful of blood would have, though, to see Jack’s jealousy.

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## Chapter Six

Dinner passed uneventfully. Jack demonstrated a certain hesitancy in circumventing the pork roast, but—given two lunches—he extemporized around the fish and salad courses and, with the addition of Sebastien’s dessert to his own, made a satisfactory supper. Sebastien disarrayed his food artfully to produce the illusion of dining, a sleight of hand that had served him well over the years.

After dining, the ladies excused themselves before the men adjourned to the smoking room. Sebastien took advantage of the exodus to plead a headache and an aversion to cigars and make his own escape. If Sebastien ventured into the smoking room, he’d be smelling stale tobacco for days. Jack, who numbered cigars among his bad habits as well as brandy—quite the young rakehell, he was growing into, and Sebastien had no-one to blame but himself—would report if anything interesting transpired.

Sebastien had fairer prey.

The passenger room at the head of the stairs was the least desirable, and on an airship as unpeopled as the *Hans Glücker*, it was understandably deserted. Sebastien slipped inside, leaving the light fixture shrouded, and settled on the lower bunk to wait.

A human—or even a younger blood—might have brought reading material, something with which to while away the hours. Sebastien simply closed his eyes in the dark, leaned his shoulder on the bedpost, and listened to the Hans Glücker drift.

An airship was no more silent in her passage than a sailing vessel. Through the deck, Sebastien could feel the thrum of engines, the almost-subliminal vibration of the cables containing the gas bags within the lifting body, the way the giant aircraft moved in response to the wind plucking at its control cabin and fabric skin. He listened to the ship in the night, and let his mind wander. It was a kind of meditation, and sometimes it helped him uncover surprising truths.

Now, it led him back to Mme. Pontchartrain’s cabin, and the disarrayed papers, and the amended logbook. But those items refused to resolve into a pattern, no matter how many angles he turned them to or stared at them from. He found himself instead musing on Mrs. Leatherby, and her blatant attempt to feed him information. Probably accurate information, as it happened. But he was not blind to the manipulation.

A step on the stair and the swish of a woman’s skirt brought him from his reverie. A small woman, by the weight of her footfall, and so either Mrs. Smith or Mlle. LeClere. And while he would have been happier to see Mrs. Smith—he was beginning to give some serious thought to wooing her; he would need friends and courtesans in America—he hoped it was, at last, Mlle. LeClere.

Alone.

He smoothed his hair with both hands, the mirror no use to him, and stepped into the corridor. And almost into the young Frenchwoman’s arms.

She gave a startled squeak and might have toppled down the stairs if he hadn’t caught her wrist and landed her. Instead she tottered and collapsed forward into his arms; he took two quick steps back to set her at arm’s length. “Mademoiselle,” he said. “Forgive me. Are you all right?”

“Fine,” she said, and shrugged his hands off. “I’ll just—”

“Not at all.” He stepped aside, and then fell in beside her when she advanced. “I’ve been meaning to speak to you alone.”

“That’s hardly seemly, monsieur.” She stepped faster, but he kept up with ease.

“I did not think you the sort of young lady who concerned herself with appearances,” he countered. The reached the cabin she had until recently shared with Mme. Pontchartrain, and Mlle. LeClere moved as if to push Sebastien aside. He caught her elbow and turned her.

“Monsieur,” she said. “I will shout.”

“And I will tell the Captain that you lied about where you were last night.”

She held herself stiff for a moment, her chin lifted, her lips pressed suddenly thin. And then, abruptly, she deflated, sagging inside the confines of her corset. “Damn you,” she whispered. “What do you want?”

“Mademoiselle,” Sebastien answered, “we all have secrets. I wish only to discover what became of your chaperone. Will you tell me where you were last night?”

“With Oczkar,” she said, hopelessly. “I knew Mme. Pontchartrain had a taste for laudanum, you see, and sometimes she did not even remove her clothes of an evening, when she had indulged—”

“And your absence would not wake her from her dreams.”

“Indeed,” she said, hopelessly. “But I did not kill her. I did not even provide the drug—”

“Hush,” Sebastien said. He brushed her cheek with cool fingers. “You do not need to justify yourself to me.”

#

“Was she lying?” Jack asked, in the darkness.

“I don’t believe so.” Sebastien did not sleep. But he occupied his pajamas nonetheless, and lay on Jack’s bunk beside him, listening to Jack breathe, inches away in the quiet darkness. “So what do we know, then?”

“That we can cross Korvin and LeClere off our list of suspects.” Jack spoke very softly, just for Sebastien’s ears, both of them aware of Mrs. Smith sleeping peacefully on the other side of the doped fabric wall. Faintly, distantly, Sebastien could hear Hollis Leatherby snoring.

“Unless they did it together.”

“Then no-one has an alibi.”

“Not even you.”

“Alas,” Jack said. He shifted under the covers, leaning his head on Sebastien’s shoulder. “We know Mrs. Smith is an inveterate eavesdropper. We know Captain Hoak—or somebody feigning his handwriting—made an inconsistent entry in the logbook. We know Mme. Pontchartrain disappeared between drinks and breakfast. We can speculate that Korvin and Meadows had some sort of prior arrangement to travel together, or that Corvin and LeClere did—aside from the tour group, I mean. Five colonials and one European, that’s a bit odd, isn’t it? Is that something you can inquire after with Mrs. Smith?”

“I thought you didn’t approve of Mrs. Smith.”

“She’s just your type,” Jack said, feigning placidity. “And I know very well that we can’t get along in America, just the two of us, without friends.”

“You are a practical soul, dear boy,” Sebastien said, and turned to kiss Jack’s forehead. “We also know that Beatrice Leatherby has some agenda that involves incriminating Korvin.”

“Or Mademoiselle LeClere.”

“Just so. Extending that last point, we know that there is some mysterious tension between the Leatherbys and the other passengers. We know Korvin úr may very well be something other than he seems, but that he is not of the blood.”

“We know Miss Meadows knows that you are.” Sebastien could hear Jack’s frown in his voice.

“And we know that this dirigible is currently host to any number of unsavory relationships.”

“Is that so?” Jack asked, propping himself on his elbows, his silhouette barely visible in the dim light that slipped around the edges of the lampshade.

“Unfortunately,” Sebastien answered, sitting up, “it appears to be a motif. You should sleep, Jack.”

Jack caught his wrist. “Madame’s papers appeared to have been riffled. Hurriedly. But you said no one but she and Mlle. LeClere had been in the cabin.”

Sebastien nodded. “I did, didn’t I? I wonder if I could have been mistaken.”

“Anise oil confuses bloodhounds,” Jack said, slyly.

Sebastien snorted.

“We also now know that Madame Pontchartrain was an opium addict.”

“Such harsh terms for a little genteel laudanum use.” And then Sebastien stopped, freed his right hand, and used it to stroke Jack’s curls, thoughtfully. “Jack, when we searched Madame Pontchartrain’s room—”

Jack stiffened. “No laudanum bottle.”

“Indeed,” Sebastien answered. “And isn’t that a curious thing?”

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## Chapter Seven

7

Long before first light, when Jack was sleeping soundly, Sebastien dressed and slipped from the cabin. This time, the lack of doors that locked and fastened abetted him. He paused in the corridor, listening for activity, and heard only even breathing and faint snores. Slowly, he descended the stairs, which neither creaked nor settled under his weight, and paused at the bottom landing.

*Pretend you are a murderer*, Sebastien thought, and permitted himself a smile he would never have worn around a mortal, friend or foe. It even *felt* unpleasant on his face.

*If I wanted to murder someone, though—*

No. He turned back, and regarded the stairs, lit green by emergency lights. Sebastien was considerably stronger and more agile than a human man, and he could not have maneuvered even a small unconscious

woman down those stairs without waking the ship. The forward stairs were no better—and closer to the occupied sleeping chambers. If she had come this way, she had not been dragged.

Which meant that if Mme. Pontchartrain had not gone *up*, into the airframe—and the search there had revealed no sign—then, barring sorcery, she had come down under her own power.

And, also barring sorcery, Mlle. LeClere had lied again, because if she had left Mme. Pontchartrain drugged insensate, then there was no way Mme. Pontchartrain could have gotten down these stairs.

In the absence of a Crown Investigator or a Zaubererdetektiv, Sebastien found he must reluctantly shelve the idea of sorcery—at least until they made landfall in New Amsterdam. Where, it happened, there was a Detective Crown Investigator, the most notorious of the scant three the British-American colonies boasted.

Under German law, while he was no more welcome in most men's houses than... than Mrs. Zhang and Mr. Cui, he was not proscribed. In British America, however, the blood were outlawed. Those Crown rules had not been generally enforced since the seventeenth century, but were kept on the books for convenience's sake in *troublesome* cases.

And so, it would be entirely best for Sebastien to have this mystery resolved by the time DCI Garrett arrived on the scene—or the scene, as the case might be, arrived in her jurisdiction.

So it had better not be sorcery, hadn't it?

He paused. Of course, there was one very easy way to tell if it potentially *could* be sorcery. And that could be addressed in the morning. In the meantime, however—

Sebastien heard crisply military footsteps, and started forward. A few steps took him around the corner, and into the path of the watch officer. Tonight, it was the first mate, who tipped his hat and kept on walking, obviously accustomed to sleepless passengers.

“Guten Morgen,” he said, the first mate echoing his words. As he passed, Sebastien checked his watch. Three oh eight. “Herr Pfrommer?”

The first mate checked his stride and turned back. “Ja, mein Herr?”

Briefly, Sebastien outlined what he proposed, and when it seemed as if the officer would protest, held up his hand. “Please check with the captain,” he said. “I will abide by his decision.”

Herr Pfrommer clicked his heels, a tradition Sebastien had considered happily buried until that moment, and carried on with his rounds. And Sebastien sighed and took himself down to the control cabin before the officer returned, or the sun came up.

The *Hans Glücker* didn't have a hanging gondola, as a smaller dirigible might. Most of its passenger and crew facilities were inside the airframe, with only a small control cabin protruding underneath the nose of the ship. Sebastien walked forward past the salon and smoking room, down the white-walled corridor which provided access to the washrooms, crew quarters, and the galley by means of German-labeled doors. The hum of the engines was louder, here. They extended from either side of the ship on sets of pontoons, and one of the main struts ran through behind the forward door that would have brought him into the control cabin.

It was locked, of course.

Fortunately, among all his other skills, Jack could pick a lock. And it was Sebastien who taught him.

Sebastien unpinned his cravat—the jewel was set in gold, but the stick pin itself was steel—and with its offices and those of a bit of wire, he managed the lock by touch in seconds. He opened the door and let himself through, and proceeded down a short flight of stairs.

The pilot didn't turn. He spoke, though—in German, of course. “You're back very soon, Herr Pfrommer.”

“I am not Herr Pfrommer,” Sebastien said, and when the pilot started and turned, producing a weapon, Sebastien stood with both hands raised and open, having dropped wire and pin into his pocket. “I am sorry. The door was open, and I—”

“You are *investigating*?”

“Yes.” Sebastien smiled. “How many pilots are on this ship, sir?”

“Two,” he answered. He checked his controls and locked them in position, and then turned back to Sebastien.

“Heel and toe watches?” Twelve hours on and twelve off, that meant. A grueling schedule.

“Yes, mein Herr.”

“So it was not you to whom my ward spoke this afternoon.”

“I went to my bunk at six—” the pilot began, and then pressed his lips together. “What did your young man tell you about Franz?”

“Just that he was charming,” Sebastien lied, taking the opportunity to survey the control cabin. It was small, and while there was an exit door, it was clearly visible from the pilot's position. “And that he gave Jack a tour of the control cabin. Tell me, mein Herr, did you leave your post at all last night?”

“Only to visit the washroom,” the pilot said. “And for my coffee and dinner breaks. The officer of the watch takes control during that time.” He checked his watch—a wristwatch, favored by aviators, rather than a pocket watch. “I'll take my second break as soon as the first mate returns from his rounds, in fact. My relief arrives at six hundred hours.”

“Your dinner break is at three hundred.”

“Three twenty,” the pilot corrected.

“Thank you,” Sebastien said. It was perhaps three twelve. “I can show myself out. Oh—” He paused with his hand on the latch. “Can you tell me where rubbish is disposed of, please?”

“There are receptacles in the washrooms—”

“No, I mean once it is collected. Is it hauled on to New Amsterdam?”

“That would be a waste of the weight allowance,” the pilot said. “It's cast overboard. It helps to counterbalance any hydrogen leakage that occurs via diffusion through the gas bags.”

“And it's dumped from where?”

“The side corridor outside the galley,” the pilot said. “There are rolling bins to collect the trash, and a chute.”

*“Thank you,”* Sebastien said, and took himself outside again.

#

When Jack awoke, Sebastien was waiting. He leaned against the wall beside the porthole light. The cabin’s sole piece of furniture besides the bed was a luggage stool for the cabin bags. That stool stood on Sebastien’s left hand, under the light, and a white tented shape occupied its flat top. “Sebastien?”

“Cover your eyes,” Sebastien said. Jack obeyed, and Sebastien flipped up the shade on the light. Jack lowered his hands, blinking, and pushed himself upright on the bed, tousled and puffy-cheeked as a child.

“What did you find?”

“Laudanum,” Sebastien answered, and uncovered the glinting, pale blue rectangular bottle, still full almost to the bottom of its long neck. “And barely a mouthful gone.”

There were new technologies that might be used to recover latent fingerprints from smooth, imporous objects, such as the surface of a glass bottle. The materials—lamp black, fine brushes, adhesive cellophane tape—which Sebastien would need to carry out such research would be available in New Amsterdam. As would the infamous—and, by reputation, formidable—DCI Abigail Irene Garrett. The Crown Investigator would wield an arsenal of forensic sorcery, and numbered among its functions would be spells capable of linking the murder weapon to the murderer. Assuming the laudanum was the murder weapon, and not a middle-aged widow’s comfort, as Mlle. LeClere had suggested.

“Boss!” Jack exclaimed, bounding out of bed.

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## **Chapter Eight**

8

In the morning, they strip-searched the passengers.

The process required some orchestration, as of course neither Sebastien nor Jack could examine the female passengers. This inconvenience was surmounted by sending Mlle. LeClere, Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Zhang, Miss Meadows, and Mrs. Leatherby aside as a group to examine each other, with the airship’s two chambermaids and one female washroom attendant acting as matrons in the smoking room, while the men occupied the larger lounge. From the giggling that ensued, either all eight of them were in collusion, or all eight of them were agreed that men, in general, were a ridiculous species though perhaps best humored.

Meanwhile, Sebastien and Captain Hoak examined the unclothed chest of each of the men.

It was not an absolute test, of course, but if any of them were a university-trained sorcerer (as opposed to a hedge-wizard or conjurer) he would have borne on his chest the ineradicable mark of his training, a sigil tattooed over the sternum. The mark would be red for the great universities at Oxford, Wittenberg, Paris, Rome, and Kyiv, black for lesser colleges.

There were no schools for sorcerers in Spain.

The sigil would be an outline for a wizard who had matriculated, fully inked for a graduate. But it would be there.

It came as little surprise to Sebastien that Oczkar Korvin, who had maneuvered to be last in line, said softly “I believe this is what you are looking for,” and unbuttoned the breast of his shirt to reveal a black-inked design the size of a cigarette case. “Prague,” he said. “Eighteen seventy-nine. Are you going to arrest me?”

“Not only on the strength of that,” Sebastien said. “Mademoiselle LeClere, however, has twice lied—and claimed you as her alibi. Tell me—did she hope to inherit, when Madame Pontchartrain was gone?”

“Neither Mademoiselle LeClere nor I had anything to do with Madame’s disappearance,” Korvin said. “Nor do I expect you have anything but circumstantial evidence to suggest it.”

Sebastien smiled, his shoulders and chest tightening as he considered the probable course of events. “Circumstantial evidence is enough to hold you and your young lady for questioning, however. And Mademoiselle LeClere hardly exhibits the marks of a clean conscience.”

“It’s no crime to study sorcery.” Korvin úr calmly rebuttoned his shirt. “If we’re condemning on history and circumstances, Don Sebastien, what about yourself?”

It had been inevitable. If Miss Meadows knew, then likely so did her entire coterie. Sebastien opened his mouth to respond—

Oczkar Korvin raised his right hand, fingers and palms bent around a hollow concavity, and Sebastien’s world went white.

He folded reflexively against the light, shielding his face, his face scorched and the flesh on his hands and wrists searing. He groaned, or perhaps screamed; his ears were full of the roaring of that terrible light, and he couldn’t hear anything except, suddenly, Jack’s voice shouting.

The pain fell away. The white brilliance darkened, a shadow protecting him: Jack had lunged between Sebastien and the light and then the light was gone, whisked away, as Korvin slipped the enchanted lens into which he had summoned sunlight back inside his waistcoat pocket.

Jack turned, still covering Sebastien with his body, and reached out tentatively to touch his hair. “Are you—”

“I’ll live,” Sebastien answered, and Jack managed a cramped little laugh as Mr. Cui said something quite unintelligible.

Whatever it was, the captain answered with a quick shake of his head.

The skin on Sebastien’s hands was peeled, scorched, pulling back from the flesh in thick curls like a two-day-old sunburn. It ached and itched abominably, already healing now that the affront was ended. Sebastien drew his arms against his chest like a dog protecting an injured paw.

“So,” Korvin said. “Shall we hold the wampyr for questioning, too?”

Sebastien forced his fists to loosen, and disciplined himself into standing straight, to face the silent room without rubbing at his peeling face. The connecting door to the smoking lounge swung open and the blurred face of Mrs. Smith appeared around it. Sebastien, still dazzled, recognized her chiefly by the flash of light off her spectacles and the startling paleness of her hair. She shoved the door wide and stepped through, the other women following behind her.

Mrs. Leatherby came last, still hastily rebuttoning her collar. Sebastien heard her gasping. Her bosom must be heaving over the top of her corset as if the brief run had winded her. She tugged some blurred

object—a comb?—from her disordered hair, releasing a wave of perfume as locks fell over her shoulders. The scent sharpened his teeth—a room, full of warm humans, and with his scalded flesh sapping his strength—

The injury would heal, but it would cost Sebastien, cost him resources... and Jack, understanding, would inevitably offer. Sebastien was anticipating that conversation with even less pleasure than the one he was about to have.

Captain Hoak reached out left-handed and grabbed Jack's wrist, almost hauling him off his feet as he yanked him away from Sebastien. Jack squawked and struggled free, tearing his shirt-cuff in the process, and shied away from Captain Hoak, towards the women. Beatrice Leatherby detached herself from that little group and stepped toward her husband. Sebastien thought she clutched Leatherby's elbow; in any case, she slid her hand through the crook.

"Don Sebastien," Mrs. Smith said. She started forward, her quick steps arrested when Korvin caught her arm. She must have glared over her glasses, or shaken him off, because he stepped back abruptly, his raised hands white against the dark suit coat.

"Don't interfere," Korvin said.

"Merci à Dieu," Mlle. LeClere said, pressing her fists to her bosom. "He earlier accosted me on the stairs, Captain. If I had known my danger—"

The captain spared her a glance before turning to keep an eye on Jack. "Lad, no one's going to make you stay with him. You may think you've nowhere to go, but we can make arrangements—"

Sebastien, still blinking tears from his eyes, couldn't see it. But he could imagine quite plainly that Jack paused, turned—slowly—and balled his hands into fists before pursing his lips into the most condescending consideration imaginable. He would stare the captain in the eye until Hoak flushed and dropped his gaze, and then he would drawl—

"Oh, I think not."

It was as well that Sebastien's face hurt too much for smiling, as he heard the hesitancy in the captain's voice as he said, "Lad?"

"I'm of age," Jack said. "Eighteen in December, before you ask, and also before you ask, I know everything I need to know about Sebastien de Ulloa. He saved my life, and you'll have to kill me to take me away from him." He lifted his chin, arms crossed, the smallest man in the room—shorter than two of the women, in fact—and though Sebastien couldn't see it, he knew Jack glowered.

Sebastien swallowed a ridiculous, hurtful pride, feeling like a man watching his terrier stare down a room full of mastiffs. "Jack—"

"Shut up, Sebastien," Jack said. "Let me handle this. Captain, Germany's laws against vampirism were repealed in the eighteenth century, along with the witchcraft laws. Sebastien has done nothing wrong."

"Nothing besides child slavery and—" the captain glanced over his shoulder, at the ladies clustered like hens by the door to the corridor, and did not say the words *rape* or *prostitution*.

Into his embarrassed silence, Miss Meadows stepped, slim and elegant in her men's clothing as she sidled between the corseted ladies. She posted herself a little to Captain Hoak's left, making quite a contrast to the stout, graying captain. She seemed cut more from the same fragile white-gold cloth as Jack. "Jack, darling. How old were you when he bought you?"

Several flinched at the word, and now Sebastien's vision was clearing enough to tell who. Mrs. Smith was one of them, though Sebastien was wishing he was still dazzled enough to pretend he didn't see her face. Instead, he focused on Miss Meadows—and was surprised to see that her furrowed brow was an expression of concern, not reproach.

“Seven,” Jack said, folding his arms. “My parents couldn't afford to feed me; they indentured me at five. There would have been three years left to run on my bill of service by now.”

And that, finally, brought a look of dawning uncertainty to the captain's face. “Would have been?”

“Yes,” Jack said. “Sebastien emancipated me when I turned fourteen. And settled a considerable trust on me, as well. I'm quite independent, and no more in need of rescuing than Miss Meadows, here.” And then he smiled at the captain and tilted his head, more like the dove he played at than the falcon as which he stood revealed. “And I also know precisely where Sebastien was the night before last, and I assure you, it wasn't with Madame Pontchartrain. Now, may I see to my patron's injuries, Captain, or are you going to make me force your hand?”

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## Chapter Nine

9

The last time Sebastien had been so eager to absent himself from the public eye, it had involved an angry Parisian mob with pitchforks and torches, and that was leaving aside all hyperbole. This, at least, was less physically hazardous. But just as humiliating, as Jack guided him up the stairs—while Sebastien's eyes had recovered enough that he had been able to see fairly well in the bright salon, the dimness here defeated him, and his fingers were numb under the throbbing pain of the burns—and brought him to their chamber. Once Sebastien was settled, Jack went for water and bandages himself rather than trusting an attendant.

Sebastien sat in the dark with his eyes closed, healing. The flash had been brief, intended to injure and mortify rather than maim or kill. And it had been effective, indeed. He was quite thoroughly humiliated—and quite thoroughly defanged, at the risk of a terrible pun. In one dramatic gesture, Korvin had rendered it impossible for Sebastien to continue investigating any crime aboard the *Hans Glücker*. And, Sebastien thought, listening to the footsteps of the crewman who was now wearing a path in the decking outside the cabin, he'd also neatly distracted attention from himself and Mlle. LeClere as suspects.

Sebastien sat forward and opened his eyes. The dazzle was fading, and even in the dim room, he saw plainly now. In particular, he saw the upholstery cabin-bag that he had left beside the door when he and Jack went downstairs to conduct the search. The cabin-bag which had held the bottle of laudanum he'd fished from *behind* the carts beside the trash chute.

The bottle would not have fallen there, he thought, unless someone was stretching *over* the carts to dispose of something in the chute. Straining, struggling with something heavy. Sebastien was now reasonably certain that chute had been Mme. Pontchartrain's route to a final resting place at sea.

The bag was not where Sebastien had left it.

He crossed the cabin in one and a half quick steps, crouched beside the bag, and pulled it open. The contents were in no disarray. But the bottle, which should have been slipped between his shirt-collars and underthings, was nowhere to be found.

And there was no scent of anyone on the air, other than Jack and himself, the crewman in the hall, and the chambermaid.

Sebastien was abruptly reminded of his burned face as his eyebrows crept up his forehead. Standing dizzied him. He needed to feed, to recoup the strength he was expending regenerating his face and hands. And Jack—

Jack's voice in the hallway, cheerily greeting their watcher in German. The watcher's embarrassed mumble. Jack's footsteps, and the scent of clear water. "Sebastien?" Jack said, from beyond the curtain. "My hands are full."

Sebastien kicked his bag back against the wall and pulled the curtain aside, frowning at Jack's wince when Jack saw his face. "That bad?"

"Get the light, would you? And you mean you don't know?"

Having raised the lampshade with his aching hands, Sebastien silently tilted his head at the tiny mirror.

Jack choked out a laugh. "Stupid question. Yes. It looks bad." Jack set the basin on the stool and crouched beside it, unfolding a clean muslin towel over his knee. He glanced at the half-open curtain and switched from Spanish to Greek. "I thought these would do for bandages. The ship's medic was significantly absent from the surgery. If you still need bandages, after—how much do you need?"

"No, Jack."

"It's not open for discussion. I'll be fine—"

"Jack," Sebastien said, softly, "you were beautiful down there. You were fierce and wonderful and I in no wise deserve you" —Jack snorted, in that inelegant manner he reserved for Sebastien alone— "and I *will not* risk you that way. Two days is too soon."

"You haven't another option," Jack said. He tore a strip of toweling and folded it in a pad. Leptodactylous fingers broke the surface of the water in the basin as he wet it. "Come here into the light, so I can see what I'm doing."

Sebastien came forward and dropped a knee beside the stool. Jack tilted his face up left-handed and dabbed with the cloth held in the right. The cool water was soothing, though Sebastien winced as ruined flesh rubbed free of raw new skin. "I do have."

"Have what?"

"An option," Sebastien said. He paused, too long. Jack was already tensing in protest when he finished, "Will you take a message to Miss Meadows for me, Jack my love?"

Silence.

"Jack?"

"Damn you," Jack said, and wet the cloth again.

#

Perhaps Sebastien had been foolish in expecting Miss Meadows to meet him alone. Instead, she came to his rooms attended not just by Jack-as-guide, but also in the company of Virgil Allen.

Sebastien was warned of their arrival by brief, firm words exchanged with the ludicrous corridor guard. He didn't catch what was said, but the tone in Miss Meadows' voice was enough to coerce her way through, Jack and Mr. Allen beside her.

Allen entered the cabin without knocking and took a post in the corner by the foot of the bunks, stern and glowering under his moustaches. Sebastien was cognizant of the bulky weight in the South Carolinian's coat pocket. A revolver, no doubt, suitable for a well-armed American gentleman.

The advisability of carrying firearms on a hydrogen-filled airship aside, Sebastien could muster no more than an inward shrug for the weapon. If Allen felt the need to shoot him, it would sting less than Korvin's sun-charged lens.

"Señor de Ulloa," Miss Meadows said. She paused with the curtain in one hand, Jack behind her in the hall, and framed herself in the doorway with an actress's trained unconscious grace. "I am sorry for your injury." She eyed his face. "Although it seems much improved."

"Not without cost," he said. He swayed when he stood, and steadied himself against the bedframe. He was lightheaded, his stomach cramping. Behind Miss Meadows, Jack shifted from foot to foot, barely restraining himself. "Miss Meadows," Sebastien continued, "I am uncomfortable in bringing this up again, especially in the wake of my earlier refusal. . . ."

She stepped into the cabin, holding the curtain until Jack relieved her of it, while appearing not to notice him at all. Sebastien swallowed on a growl, but made a point of meeting Jack's eyes over her shoulder. Jack bit his lip and turned away.

As for Miss Meadows, she stripped her gloves off with a negligent gesture and shrugged under her jacket. Gracious in victory, she smiled. "I understand," she said. "Our needs may change unexpectedly."

She turned to the left and Allen was there, waiting to take her gloves from her hand. She laid them across his palm, and began unbuttoning her collar as Jack stepped into the cabin and let the curtain fall.

It was crowded and close, four people in the tiny room, and Sebastien considered himself fortunate that he did not *require* breath except for speech, or to detect scents.

"Would you prefer privacy?" Sebastien asked.

Again, Miss Meadows deployed that studied shrug. "Señor, as long as the cameras are not rolling, this *is* privacy."

She slid her jacket off and gave that to Allen as well. His face might have been a plaster mask; his expression was frozen in lines stretching from the corners of his nose to the corners of his mouth. Even Jack's irritated frown was more mobile.

"And you are not new to this?"

Jack made a small noise of protest and folded his arms, turning to face the door like a eunuch guarding a harem. The set of his shoulders said everything he bit his tongue on.

"Quite accomplished." Miss Meadows pushed her hair aside, disarraying carefully coiled lovelocks, and turned her head.

The scars were small, delicate dimples in her skim-milk skin, only visible where the light hit them at an angle. "Yes," Sebastien said, "I see."

He reached out as she closed her eyes, Allen's glower searing his neck, and took her by the shoulders. With one hand, he steadied her head as she drew her hair further aside. He was enough taller that he had to stoop to kiss her throat, despite the advantage of her heeled boots.

She shivered in anticipation, her right hand flexing rhythmically where it curved around his wrist. He wondered whose courtesan she had been, and how she had come to leave that relationship.

Her scars were old.

He kissed soft flesh, breathed her scent and her perfume, felt his teeth sharp in response. His stomach knotted. "Yes?" he asked, requiring consent, and she moaned her answer.

"Yes."

Sebastien could barely remember the name he had been born to. He had forgotten the name of the village he had been born *in*—it had changed since—or the year in which that birth had occurred. He no longer recalled his own age, except in the vaguest of terms.

But he remembered how it had been, when he became a wampyr's courtesan, and he remembered her name very well.

Eudeline—Evie—had been young, new to the blood, lonesome as only the newly turned can be. Sebastien had loved her with a passion he had sworn was eternal, and she had been inexperienced enough to believe him.

He had been wrong, so it happened. Mortal love was never meant to last forever. Fifty years. Perhaps even a century was possible, though Sebastien could not attest it. But not forever.

Their romance had not outlasted the Christian millennium. But he still recalled her kiss.

First there had been the cool touch of a wet mouth on warm skin, the press of tongue seeking the pulse. The expert courtesan knew how vital it was to remain motionless for the kiss, as Miss Meadows now remained motionless for him, though her outward appearance of calm was belied by trembling hands and a racing heart.

Sebastien found the pulse and unsheathed his fangs, letting the tips indent her skin. She whimpered through closed lips, and Sebastien heard the rustle of cloth as Allen halted himself half a step into intervening.

Sebastien's memory was perfect, in this. First the prickle of the fangs, and then the pain, tremendous, *scathing*, all out of proportion to the injury, the two swift stabs that merely nudged the skin aside. The vein must only be punctured, never severed or torn. And the punctures must be tidy and straight, to heal properly.

Sebastien's fangs were triangular in cross-section, designed to pierce flesh and leave no lasting injury. It was of no more benefit to the blood to kill their prey than it was to a milkmaid to slaughter her dairy cows.

And after the pain—so impatiently endured—the pleasure. Transporting, incomparable. He knew when she felt it, because the measured breaths she had used to ride the pain faltered, replaced by a great, rattling intake of air. Her body melted against his, her hips rocking against his thigh, the grasp of her clutching hands both desperate and fragile, her head lolling against his supporting hand. The blood was rich and warm, a salty-metallic froth that pulsed over his tongue, surged down his tightened gullet, and flushed his skin with heat. Her heartbeat rang in his ears, world-filling, and he forced himself to sip delicately,

gently... and then to pull against her clutching, surrendered hands, unsheathe his fangs from her flesh long before either of them was sated, and seal the wound with his closed lips while she trembled against him, silently pleading for more.

He almost liked her, a little, for that moment.

Virgil Allen had leaned away from the bedpost, his hand in his pocket, his impassivity cracked into a scowl. The set of Jack's shoulders hadn't changed.

Sebastien lifted his lips from Miss Meadows' neck, kissed her slack mouth quickly, a formal thank you, and set her back at arm's length. Jack, his motions impersonal and brisk, stepped between them and pressed to her throat a clean pad folded from the same torn muslin that he'd used to doctor Sebastien.

"Thank you, Miss Meadows," Sebastien said, and bowed over the hand she hadn't pressed against Jack's.

"Thank *you*," she answered, and let Jack catch her as she wobbled against his shoulder.

"Mr. Allen," Sebastien said, "the stool, if you will."

\*\*\*

## Chapter Ten

10

"Eugenie LeClere is a quite reprehensible person," Miss Meadows said, when she returned to herself. She was paler and more lovely than ever, a testament to the reasoning behind certain wampyrs' legendary preference for blondes. Sebastien, seated on the bottom bunk beside a stiff-shouldered Jack while Allen hovered over her like an anxious mother, reserved his sarcasm.

What had a wampyr to say about morality?

He didn't blame Jack his anger. But either Jack would allow Sebastien to make it up to him, or Jack would leave him—as Jack eventually must, because *Sebastien* was old enough to understand that there was no such creature as eternal loyalty, nor was it fair to ask—and in either case, Sebastien had done no more than he needed to.

"If you're going to attempt to direct my investigation to Mademoiselle LeClere, Miss Meadows, rest assured, it needs no further guidance."

"Call me Lillian, if I may call you Sebastien," she said, adjusting a pin-curl in its diamond barrette without benefit of the mirror. "And I don't think Eugenie killed her. I think she was trying to get *away* from her. There's very little I would put past Eugenie. But not murder."

"Miss—Lillian, forgive me." Sebastien stood, moving fluidly again, his strength restored as hers was lessened. "But I think the information you're hinting around would be better plainly expressed."

"Ah." Lillian glanced at Allen, who shrugged. He handed her a silver flask—taken from the pocket which did not hold the revolver—and she sipped, winced, and recapped it before shaking her head—very slightly, so as not to disturb her bandages. "Eugenie loves Oczkar."

"So Mrs. Smith said. I am drawn to the inescapable conclusion that you all were acquainted before this flight commenced. Am I incorrect in that?"

She could, of course, be drawing him out, playing the game of misleading and misdirection that tended to permeate any murder investigation. But he had something to bargain. Something she wanted.

If only the captain were here to make his ever-so-delicately phrased charge of whoredom now. “We met in Moscow,” she said. “I had lost someone, and was grateful for the company. You know how strangers can make you bear yourself up as you could not manage, in the company only of friends?”

He didn’t answer. She pressed her fingertips to her bandage.

“Sebastien?”

“Yes, I know it well. And the Leatherbys?”

“I had not met them before. Although they appeared to know Madame, and did not seem to care for her. Or perhaps it was simply a matter of her reputation preceding her. If you take my meaning?”

He did not, and beckoned her to continue.

“Eugenie and Madame Pontchartrain–Leonelle–well,” Lillian said. “They were not what they pretended. Either of them. Their grand tour of England and Europe was a . . . fishing expedition. You see, Madame Pontchartrain never married. And Eugenie was not merely her travelling companion; she was her bastard daughter. They had no family, and no estates. And their means of making their way in the world. . . .” she permitted her voice to trail off suggestively, and gave the flask a regretful glance before handing it to Allen.

“Entrapment,” Sebastien said, understanding, on the same breath that Jack said, “Blackmail.”

“Eugenie wanted free of her.”

“And yet you insist she did not kill her?”

“How Shakespearean,” Lillian said. “And how unnatural, don’t you think? For a child to murder her mother, no matter how opportunistic or unloving?”

“And she refused to turn Korvin úr over to her mother?”

“She was not supposed to approach Oczkar at all. He is unmarried, a sorcerer–what more could an affair do to his reputation? No, she was meant to accuse my darling Virgil of rape.” She turned her head and smiled at Allen, experiencing no such difficulty with the word as the captain had. Allen’s lip quirked under his moustache, and he tipped an imaginary hat. “Virgil is not well-off, of course, but Madame Pontchartrain believed I would pay to silence them.”

“But Mademoiselle LeClere came to you with her story instead.”

“Is it so hard to believe I pitied her?”

Jack, from the recesses of the bottom bunk, said, “I wouldn’t have thought you had pity in your makeup.” He stood, shouldering past Sebastien in the strained silence that followed, and edged around Virgil Allen. He paused by the curtained door and turned back, as if wavering on the edge of another unpleasantness. Gratitude–or manners–won over jealousy, and he swallowed hard and continued, “Miss Meadows, Mr. Allen, would you join us for lunch? It’s nearly the hour, and Miss Meadows should certainly eat.”

She stared him down for a moment, but gave the ground, obviously aware that this was a competition she

could not win. “But surely,” she said, as Allen helped her wavering to her feet, “Sebastien—”

“Oh,” he said, straightening his collar, “I wouldn’t keep my public waiting. Besides, I think I need a word or two with Mademoiselle LeClere and Korvin úr. Don’t you?”

#

The crewman pacing in the hallway didn’t try to stop them from descending, but he did follow at a discreet distance. Sebastien made a little ceremony of seating Lillian, and he was sure every eye in the place was trained on the four of them, side by side at a round table meant for six. Already seated elsewhere were the Chinese couple—most skilled at looking without seeming to be looking—and the Dutch brothers, who dined with their heads bent together conspiratorially and stared with perfect frankness when Sebastien’s party entered. Steven actually essayed a small smile, however, and Michiel spared Jack a nod, which was more than Sebastien would have predicted. Meanwhile, Lillian smiled with bright falseness across the dining room, her bandages a small bulge under her high-collared blouse that everyone avoided staring at, their gazes veering away as precipitously as if she had strolled in naked.

Sebastien, at least, was spared the annoyance of pretending to dine. The maitre d’ himself came and cleared Sebastien’s place setting, providing a goblet of clear ice water, then brought the bread and butter for the other diners with his own hands. Sebastien thanked him, and offered that—if the burly crewman now lingering inside the door, at attention like a footman, should require a meal and a rest—Sebastien had no plans to leave the dining room for at least an hour.

The maitre d’, Sebastien noticed, blushed most appetizingly.

Sebastien hated this, the mingled obsequiousness and fear. And Jack’s sly sideways smile told him that Jack was enjoying a small, Schadenfreude-soaked revenge in Sebastien’s discomfiture.

Sebastien sighed, and fiddled with his water glass. The service of the soup was notably slow. Lillian chattered gaily with Virgil and Jack, who was putting forth even more of an effort than usual to be his best, most charming self. Sebastien found Jack’s knee under the table and gave it a grateful pat, and Jack’s answering smile was a touch less sly. Had Sebastien had a heart to beat, it would have accelerated in relief.

He would be forgiven after all.

Virgil was pouring a second round of wine—the waiter having exhibited a curious hesitancy to approach their table except when forced to deliver dishes—when Mrs. Smith entered unaccompanied. She cast her eye over the room, tucked an errant strand of hair behind the earpiece of her spectacles, and beelined for their table, barely acknowledging the other diners. “May I join you?”

Without glancing at her tablemates for approval, Lillian gestured Mrs. Smith to a chair. “My dear Phoebe, if you can stand the stench of scandal.”

“Is that scandal?” Mrs. Smith set her notebook beside her plate. “I was afraid it was the soup.” She snapped her napkin open and spread it across her lap. “Don’t worry, Don Sebastien. My good opinion of you is unchanged. Although you may find yourself the victim of a barrage of correspondence should I come to write a novel featuring one of—is the polite term *the blood*?”

“The polite term is whatever you say with a smile,” he answered, gratified. “I am pleased not to be pre-judged. I had thought you might avoid my company after this morning’s unpleasantness.”

Mrs. Smith accepted a wine glass from Virgil, who remained thoughtfully silent. “Am I supposed to

sprain myself avoiding being seen dining with the wampyr, or with the adventuress?"

"What about the sorcerer?" Jack said, gesturing to the door as Oczkar Korvin entered. "That should liven up the place."

"Jack," Sebastien said. Korvin úr, he noticed, left a stout-thewed crewman by the entry, too. Sebastien wasn't the only one under close observation. "We needn't be unpleasant."

One could *see* Jack assembling the persona, if one caught him at it, like a knight girding on his armor. Sebastien had never asked Jack about his childhood—he rather, in fact, hoped Jack didn't recollect overmuch of it—but it had taken three or four years of taming before the fey speechless child Jack had been was willing to relax that armor at all.

Without looking at her, Sebastien heard Lillian's taken breath. An actress recognized the signs of a character falling into place. "Oh, very well," Jack said, then, casually. "If you insist." He raised his voice. "Korvin úr, aren't you going to join us?"

The parade of expressions across Oczkar Korvin's face would have been humorous under other circumstances. But to his credit, he mastered them, and came to take the chair remaining between Virgil and Mrs. Smith. He seated himself, collected and precise, with his posture folded in onto itself. "Señor de Ulloa," he said, "I owe you a rather abject apology."

"You made your point," Sebastien said. Now he rather wished he had a plate; utensils to manage would make a welcome distraction. "Won't Mademoiselle LeClere be dining with you?"

"She is unlikely to be down to lunch," Korvin said. "Judging by the hysterics that consummated our recent conversation."

"Your remorse does not extend to her?"

Korvin turned his water goblet with his fingertips. "A man doesn't like to be manipulated into doing a woman's dirty work for her," he said. "I made an unfortunate choice in listening to Eugenie—to Mademoiselle LeClere."

"She suggested your trick with the burning glass?" Sebastien asked, leaning forward.

"She said that you were going to accuse her—and me—of murder. That Madame Pontchartrain had disappeared while she and I were together, and—" an eloquent shrug. "Even sorcerers who are under a crown's control are viewed with a certain amount of suspicion."

"I'm acquainted with prejudice," Sebastien said. "What's changed to bring you to me now?"

"I had a word with Mr. Leatherby," Korvin said. "Mademoiselle LeClere and he had some unhappy history, it appears, and he was kind enough to warn me—"

"She was blackmailing him." Lillian set down her spoon and picked up her wine glass, slouching against the chair-back in a manner which she never could have managed in a corset. Mrs. Smith gave her an envious glance.

"Or her guardian was, with her assistance." Korvin said. He lowered his voice as the waiter came to take the soup away.

"Miss Meadows seemed to think Mademoiselle LeClere might attempt reform for your sake," Sebastien said.

“Who could ever trust her? Fortunately, I was not overfond of the girl.”

*Just willing to use her affection for you.* Sebastien bit his tongue. Korvin wasn't the first or last of his kind. Not that Sebastien was any better, he thought, with a sidelong glance at Jack, who fiddled his cuffs, seemingly oblivious.

But, that piece in place, Sebastien abruptly remembered Mrs. Leatherby hurrying into the salon behind the others, her blouse still unbuttoned at the collar. He remembered her pulling the comb from her hair, and the scent of her perfume filling the room as her hair tumbled over her neck.

He put his water goblet down sharply enough to slop fluid on his hand. “Mrs. Smith,” he said. “Or Lillian... I don't suppose either of you recalls *when* Beatrice Leatherby arrived in the lady's washroom to be inspected for a tattoo?”

“Late,” Lillian said. “Out of breath.”

And Sebastien nodded, the completed understanding filling him with lazy satisfaction. Jack was looking at him, smiling, and Sebastien wondered if the triumph were so transparent on his face. “Summon the Captain,” he said. “She and her husband are the murderers.”

\*\*\*

## Chapter Eleven

11

The Leatherbys walked into quite a different luncheon than they must have been anticipating. Captain Hoak was waiting for them, flanked by the burly crewmen—alike as a brace of hounds—who had been guarding Korvin and Sebastien. “Your bags will be searched for a bottle of laudanum and for a magical hair-comb, which Korvin úr will inspect for enchantments related to concealing the presence of the wearer.” he said. “You are accused of the murder of Leonelle Pontchartrain, and as master of this ship, I am placing you both under arrest.”

“*Konrad*,” Beatrice Leatherby said, and laid a hand on his arm. “Surely—in front of all these people—”

The captain flushed red to the roots of his hair. In the corner by the piano, Mr. Cui bent down to whisper something in his wife's ear, and she covered her mouth with both hands. Michiel van Dijk laid down his silver fork, but did not stand. “We'll not speak of it now.”

Hollis Leatherby retained his composure, and bulled forward, pulling his wife away from Captain Hoak. “On what evidence?” His gaze swept scornfully over the assemblage, hot enough that Sebastien almost felt it curl the fine hairs on his skin. “I suppose the vampire and the sorcerer have joined forces to save their necks?”

“That's the tone I object to,” Sebastien murmured in Mrs. Smith's ear, drawing a short sharp laugh before stepping forward, around her and away from Korvin and Jack. “Mr. Leatherby,” he said, “would you like a *list*?”

“By all means, Mr. de Ulloa,” Leatherby said. He stepped away from his wife and the captain, but there was nowhere for him to run on a dirigible, and Sebastien wasn't worried. “List away.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets, frowning intently.

“You snore,” Sebastien said, lifting his finger to tick off the first point. “Abominably. And yet I do not

recall hearing your snores, even muffled by distance, the first night of the voyage. I have abnormally acute hearing, Mr. Leatherby. Interestingly, I would have thought nothing of it if your wife hadn't commented that your snoring had kept her awake, so that she happened to notice an argument between Korvin úr and Mlle. LeClere. Which was Mrs. Leatherby's first attempt to cast suspicion on them." He drew a breath. "Additionally, someone was able to come and go, both in my cabin and in Madame Pontchartrain's, without leaving any evidence—and your wife has a hair comb that masks her scent and prevents trace evidence—fibers and fingerprints and such—from being left behind. A pretty toy, and one I hadn't seen before, though Korvin úr assures me that they are not uncommon in Prague and Moscow, where certain of the security forces are staffed by wampyr and lycanthropes. And last, but not least, Mrs. Leatherby was the only passenger unaccounted for when my bags were rifled and evidence stolen."

Mr. Leatherby glanced at his wife and swallowed. "That implicates Beatrice, sir. Not me."

"*Hollis*," she said, in exactly the tone in which she'd said Konrad. "Hollis, you can't—"

"Oh, but I can," he said.

"Never fear, Mrs. Leatherby. We know your husband disposed of the body."

"You can't know that either," said Leatherby.

"But I can," Sebastien said. *Nothing* gave the sense of satisfaction this did: watching a murderer scramble to avoid justice—and failing—was a most fulfilling side effect of his avocation. "Because I know that your wife met Captain Hoak on his three a.m. rounds, promised to come to the control cabin to meet with him while the pilot was on his dinner break, and there distracted him so thoroughly that he forgot to enter the time of his three a.m. rounds until much later, when he also entered the data of the five a.m. rounds. Between those times, he filled out other paperwork, or perhaps he wrote a letter to his wife, and in the course of those tasks he emptied and refilled his fountain pen. I know that you, Mr. Leatherby, had arranged to meet with Madame Pontchartrain by the washrooms a little after three, ostensibly to deliver the next installment of her blackmail demands. After having arranged to take this particular flight solely to encounter her. In any case, it would be the least conspicuous place to meet, as you'd both have ample excuse to visit them on midnight errands. Your wife had already poisoned Mme. Pontchartrain's supply of laudanum, and when, after a stressful conversation, Madame slipped into the ladies' washroom to refresh her nerves, you remained waiting outside. Disposing of the body was easy, but unfortunately, when the bottle of laudanum fell from Madame Pontchartrain's clothes and was lost behind the rubbish bins you did not notice.

"Afterwards, when your wife left the Captain, she crept up to Mme. Pontchartrain's cabin and liberated her blackmail papers, and also the remaining poisoned opium. Because what opium eater would travel with only one bottle of her drug? I imagine those joined Madame Pontchartrain in her journey down the garbage chute?"

Hollis Leatherby stared at Sebastien with white-rimmed eyes.

Sebastien shrugged. "It must have been very difficult for you to meet her payments—and such a tragic result to a brief dalliance, wasn't it, and perhaps an ill-considered note or two to Mademoiselle LeClere. Your wife's gloves need mending, and your collars are worn. And no doubt, your new position in the Puritan atmosphere of the Colonies would place you in an even more fragile position. Were the blackmailers increasing their demands?"

When Beatrice Leatherby fainted dramatically, sliding out of Captain Hoak's arms, Sebastien was ready. Hollis Leatherby backpedaled under cover of the flurry of activity surrounding his wife, and Sebastien was half a step behind him—but when his hand emerged from his pocket clutching the requisite gun,

Sebastien hesitated.

He would let the criminal withdraw into the hallway, he decided, and then intervene. Gunfire on a dirigible in mid-ocean was an unacceptable risk.

Unfortunately, Virgil Allen responded like a frontiersman. His revolver was in his hand far faster and more smoothly than Hollis Leatherby's had been, and he cleared his field of fire with a quick crabwise sidestep. "Put it down, Hollis."

Leatherby's hand tightened convulsively on the pistol, his other hand groping behind him for the door latch. "You won't fire."

Sebastien was just calculating his angle of attack when Jack slipped past him. Jack *did* know how fast he could be, and dodged his grab as slickly as the guttersnipe he had been. Sebastien's fingers brushed Jack's wool suitcoat, and before he could grab again Jack had walked between the men with the guns, his arms spread wide.

"Neither of you is going to fire," he said. He faced Leatherby, his back to Allen, and Sebastien saw Allen's hand tremble. And he also heard the soft, near-silent scrape of chair legs on the carpet's pile, and knew that Michiel van Dijk was standing, cautiously.

*Please don't*, Sebastien thought, wondering if he was fast enough to intercept a bullet, if that was what it took.

"Dammit," Allen said. "Get to one *side*, boy."

And how ridiculous was it for a vampire to pray? He did, anyway; if he'd been a breathing man, he would have held his breath. And beside him, all but forgotten, Lillian gave a little squeak.

"Mr. Allen," Jack said, "put up your weapon. There's nowhere for Mr. Leatherby to run."

"He could sabotage the airship," Allen argued, and Jack shrugged.

"So he could. And you could set us all on fire over the North Atlantic. Let him go for now. He's got nowhere to run to, until we reach New Amsterdam."

Allen shuddered, shook his head, and leveled the revolver again. He closed one eye, the revolver at arm's length, and squinted at the iron sight.

He was going to try to shoot past Jack, Sebastien saw, and he almost turned aside. Almost. Instead, he drove his nails into his palms and forced himself to watch.

"Your logic is impeccable," Virgil Allen said, and with a single crisp motion, elevated the muzzle of his gun.

No one intervened as Leatherby coughed out a labored breath and fumbled with the door. He slipped through it, back first and gun following.

Sebastien heard him moving on the far side of the doped fabric the way a cat hears rustling mice. Sebastien was much stronger than a cat, and much faster than a man, though Allen and van Dijk were both lunging for the door by now, along with one of the brawny crewmen. He simply moved through lathe and fabric, shredding it like crepe.

And on the other side, he broke Hollis Leatherby's right arm in two places in the process of relieving him

of his gun. A spiral fracture, a nasty one.

It would likely never heal quite right.

#

Jack came to find him after dark. Sebastien stood on the promenade, his hands laced behind his back, and stared out at the air. The vast curve of the airship blocked any chance of stars, but the night was soothing, and there was moonlight in the east. They stood silently for a little, shoulder to shoulder, and Sebastien sneaked a sideways glance.

Jack stared straight ahead, his spine stiff. "I've been thinking," he said.

Sebastien winced. "What you said to Captain Hoak is true, you know."

"That I'm a free man? I know it." Jack sighed, and let his hands fall to his sides. "They'll take the Leatherbys and Mademoiselle LeClere back to Germany for trial on their charges of murder and blackmail, respectively. And I don't think any of the passengers for America will spread tales about you. I had a word with Miss Meadows and with Korvin úr."

"Thank you, Jack. Actually, we've been invited to visit Boston."

"We?"

"Oh, yes," Sebastien answered, letting his teeth show when he smiled. "You know, I think our Mrs. Smith quite fancies you."

They fell silent again. For a little while, Sebastien listened to Jack breathing, and considered what to say, to let Jack know it was all right, that Sebastien wouldn't hold a grudge. Jack frowned sideways at him, and Sebastien shrugged, and smiled slightly. But Jack spoke first. "Forgive me?"

"What's there to forgive?" Honestly startled, Sebastien turned and looked at Jack. And—at last—Jack was looking back.

"I was unreasonable about Lillian."

"You are never unreasonable," Sebastien answered.

"Will you visit her again?"

"Atlanta is far from New Amsterdam."

"Actresses and wampyr both tend to travel."

Sebastien shrugged. "I won't, if you forbid it."

They stood for a little while, becalmed in silence, until Jack spoke. "I talked to her a little. Her patron... she burned."

Sebastien winced. Vampires only passed one way: by violence, either at their own hand or that of another. Suicide was far more common than angry mobs, these days. And Sebastien knew very well that there were mornings when it would be far too easy to walk into the sun.

*She burned.*

“Whose was she?” he asked, because he had been avoiding asking.

“Jayne Fortescue,” Jack answered, quickly. He’d been prepared with the name.

Sebastien sighed—a human habit he had never quite lost. He’d never heard of her. “An American?”

“I don’t know.” Jack licked his lips. “There aren’t supposed to be any of the blood in America. It wasn’t Evie, Sebastien.”

“Of course not.” Evie Péletier was the name she had burned under, but he had met her as Eudeline la Noire.

Names changed; the woman never.

Sebastien continued, “Evie burned years ago.”

Almost five years, and Sebastien had only just learned of it, hadn’t he? Five years of silence, not so much as a letter, and he’d thought nothing of it. They’d encounter one other by chance sooner or later, he reasoned, in Paris or in Bonn. Europe was small, and unlife was long.

And there would always be time.

Burned, this Jayne Fortescue. As his Evie had burned, all alone in tiny, crowded Europe with its clubs and lineages and complicated alliances and agreements and rules. All alone, and empty with it.

“Lillian’s scars are old,” Jack said. “The casually visible ones, anyway. You might have thought—”

He *had* thought, though he silently thanked Jack for permitting his dignity the lie. It would have explained too easily how she knew his name, and on some level, he had *wanted* to believe.

He shrugged and said, “That must be very hard for Lillian.”

It didn’t fool Jack. He caught Sebastien’s sleeve and forced him to turn, to look Jack in the eye.

“Promise me you won’t.”

“Jack—”

“Promise, Sebastien.”

“You didn’t know Evie.” *What shall I tell you, Jack Priest? That it’s very odd realizing that you are the oldest person that you are ever likely to know? That it is also very lonely?*

*At least in America, I shall be able to pretend I have a reason to feel so alone.*

“No,” Jack said. “But I know how I feel about you. Don’t think I don’t know what this sudden emigration is about. You’ve left everything. Sold your house, lied to your court. You’re never going back to Spain.”

“And what of it?”

“Nothing.” Jack turned and pressed a warm hand to Sebastien’s cheek. “But you’re not going to shake me that easily. That emancipation means you don’t get to tell me to go away any more than you get to tell me to stay.”

Mulishly, Sebastien plowed ahead. “I can’t give you a life. Life is for the *living*, not the undead.”

Jack dropped his hand and stared at Sebastien, chin tilted up. “Don’t be an idiot.”

“Jack?”

Shaking his head, Jack lifted himself up on tiptoe and kissed Sebastien quickly on the mouth. Sebastien closed his eyes for a moment, to savor the passing warmth, and so happened not to see when Jack turned on the balls of his feet and strode away. He’d gone three steps by the time Sebastien stirred himself to movement and caught up. Without looking at him, Jack coughed and ran one frail-seeming hand through his hair. “I don’t need you to *give* me a life, you old fool. Or haven’t you noticed that I’ve got my own?”

Sebastien blinked. Slowed his steps, so that Jack slowed to stay alongside him. “There’s no such thing as forever.”

“That’s all right. I haven’t got forever. So if you leave me like Lillian got left, I shall be quite cross. *Promise.*”

It was harder than it should have been, so he knew he wasn’t lying.

Sebastien touched Jack’s arm, and said, “I promise.”

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