

NEW AMSTERDAM

ELIZABETH BEAR



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Elizabeth Bear

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(March, 1899)

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 traveling 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 equal 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 movie 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 plane 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 notepad 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 Pries, 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 of 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 traveling 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 French women—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 and 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. To 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 traveling 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 could not 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 this remarkably boring cocktail party."

"You're a striking man. A mysterious Continentall 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 Oczko 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 and 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 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 sherries 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 tipple 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.”

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... unnerve. 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 traveling 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. 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 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... pupill?"

"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 ill umination. It was operated by excess power from the *Hans Glücker's* six motors and easily darkened by a shade should the occupant 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, 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 of 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."

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.

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 and 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 wingbacked 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 and 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 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 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."

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 rumpled 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."

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 unrumpled."

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 rumbled 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 line 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.

"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 traveling 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, 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 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 Holl 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 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 there, 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 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 on 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?”

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 Meadows’ presence was all that was preventing 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. Lingering 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 bureau 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 traveling 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 more 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. That 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 Mr. 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.”

Jack appeared fifteen minutes later. His color was recovering, though he looked entirely too bright-eyed to have slept the afternoon away. He arched 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 hand 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 I

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 ghull, 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, was time to beg the captain's assistance in the matter. There were only two days and a few hours more until the *Hans Glücker* 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 hanger.

“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. “She 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 rumped? 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. “A poor admirer.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” Jack muttered. He tossed the collar aside and reached out, knotting his hands through 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 *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.

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 disarranged 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 fixtures 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 disarranged 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 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 you 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 dope 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

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