

Castledeck and the Arabella

So far, it was the low point of his day.

James Castledeck found himself hanging by a length of rope beneath the expansive riveted hull of the *Arabella*, one of the Queen's own airships. He'd just slid down a few meters, the friction searing right through his leather gloves, but now was dangling precariously, having secured himself—at least momentarily—at a fortuitously placed knot. To make matters worse, a cold rain had started up, and with it a rather bitter wind that was both numbing his nose and causing his eyes to water.

Oddly enough, the wind helped, James decided, since it brought with it a kind of cold clarity that allayed the initial dizziness he had experienced from the precarious height. But as helpful as a clear mind was, there were other issues at hand. What tenuous grasp he had on the rope he was losing due to the continual downpour. Neither airman, shipman, nor athlete, James Castledeck was an alchemist—and sometime smuggler.

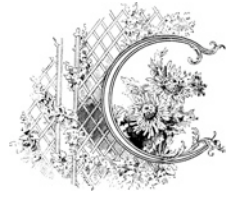
It was the latter occupation that had landed him in this mess.

As a particularly sharp wind burst of wind lashed his face, James took a deep breath and ventured a glance down below him. It was dusk, and hard to see in this smoky city even on a good day. But James needed only a cursory look to inform him that the odds were not in his favor.

Calculating quickly in his head, he figured at a conservative three hundred feet and gaining, taking into account the velocity at impact, the likelihood of a fatal fall was near ninety percent. And even if he managed to survive the initial fall, he would surely break both legs, his back, and quite possibly his neck. The word “break”, he reflected, was much too gentle a term—his bones would shatter on the iron-riveted wharf below or else be turned to a pulpy soup. He would have to be scraped off.

If the *Arabella* was heading to sea, he might have half a chance. But tonight Queen Maelys was holding a gala event to display some of her most prized technological collection, high above the city. Though tonight's visibility was slightly better than looking through a glass of barley beer, the pilots would still steer the airship herself delicately around Hartleigh City and Castle, around smokestacks and steeples, chimneys and towers, all to impress the guests aboard.

The steam engine high above him let out a long, whiny hiss, followed by a steep gain in altitude. James felt as if his stomach was left some hundred feet below him, and he was once again climbing into the sky, holding on with all the might he could muster. If he had half a chance of surviving, which at this moment was the most pressing matter in his mind, he had to maintain his grasp until he was in falling distance of something significantly more forgiving than iron, cobblestones, and brick.



Two figures huddled beneath an expansive black umbrella and watched the airship rise from a white marble balcony, high above the gaping crowd. One was a stout man of middling years in a top hat and white starched shirt. For all intents and purposes, he looked like a banker which, conveniently was his trade. His oval spectacles mirrored his round face, and beady eyes shifted about with nervous energy. He espied the airship with a kind bottled-up excitement, his curled mustache twitching as he chewed his lip.

“Gods,” he said, shuddering involuntarily. He was giving the woman next to him the better half of the umbrella, and as a result rain was dripping down his neck. “Do you expect he’s up there?”

“Must be,” said the woman. She wore a crimson dress in the highest fashion—a shockingly tight corset beneath a jacquard print silk—her black hair piled high atop her head in pristinely placed curls. Her face was beautiful more by virtue of the powder and lipstick she wore than by her own natural features; her eyes were wide-set and dark, and her front teeth gapped.

“Should be,” she corrected.

“And how many feet up there do you think the ship is? I mean, it just took off and I hear they can go higher than the tower at the castle, that true?”

“The Queen claims to have had one of her ships top out at over 2,000 meters; but this one is currently around a thousand or so, but once it hits the higher parts of the city it’ll have to compensate.”

The banker’s eyes widened at the airship. The last time the Queen had a public display of her ships, he was away on business, and had missed it.

“How’s it fly?” he asked. “I mean—it is one of the steam engines that does it?”

The woman raised an eyebrow. “It’s gas—a gas that’s lighter than air, that makes the ship lift. Now, below it, there are a few steam engines, that account for the actual movement of the ship.”

“How do you know so much about airships?”

She smiled. “I listen to my clientele.”

“I thought you only had time to—”

The woman hushed him with a flap of her gloved hand, and he reddened.

They both waited in silence as the airship shifted its course, the brass-plated rudders catching the light of the

waning dusk. Any of the Queen's airships were a sight to behold, but the *Arabella* in a class of her own. Her sails had been replaced by tremendous, paper thin metal balloons, almond shaped and emblazoned with the white hart of the royal crest.

The ship beneath was a vast network of decks and windows—more windows than could be counted at a glance—all lit from within by gas lamps and chandeliers. Figures danced by the windows, and soft, tinkling music could be heard every now and again from an open window above.

"What'd you say the ship was made of?" asked the banker.

"Yew," replied the woman, folding her arms across her chest. She was narrowing her dark eyes somewhat below the berth of the ship itself. "From Mor, imported over —"

But she cut herself off, gasping, and picked up her skirts. She retreated into the office behind her, muttering to herself.

The banker followed, calling after her: "Dinah?"

"Oh gods," she was saying, as she pulled out a key from between her breasts, and began trying the locks in a series of boxes hidden beneath the mahogany desk. It was James' desk, and only Dinah had access to these boxes, should she need them. James never entirely trusted Rudy—it wasn't that he was lacking in loyalty or honor, only that he was not, as the saying went, the smoothest gear in the clock.

"What is it?" Rudy asked the Walker.

Dinah found what she was looking for, and did not respond to the banker's continual queries. She shook her head and stomped past him, her heels clicking as they left the plush green carpet and returned to the marble balcony, purposeful and poised.

She slid the contraption out, a long double barreled spy-glass made of a brass and silver, engraved rather elegantly with a vine pattern; it was a piece James had smuggled out of the Queen's own collection. She spun it around in her hands, and adjusted the lenses at the end, then held it to her eyes. The metal was frigid against the delicate skin around her eyes, and rain was falling harder now, sending a shiver down her arms and making her scalp tingle. Rudy was trying, rather ineffectually, to keep the umbrella over her.

The airship had hardly moved, but there remained the black spot beneath it, swaying back and forth.

Dinah took a deep breath, and focused the lenses carefully. It was an expensive instrument, and one-of-a-kind; James only kept the best for himself. But he'd taught her how to use it, at least, if the need ever did arise.

The figure came into view.

It was James. His face was pale in the light of the gas lamps from above, marking the hull of the airship, and his dark hair was plastered to his face; he was badly bruise, and his lip was bleeding. Dinah saw that he had lost his monocle somewhere in the debacle—that would be hard to replace!—but was still dressed in the attire he'd left in a few hours earlier—a long-tailed coat and weskit, though torn up considerably. His timepiece was hanging down, having tumbled out of the pocket, dangling by a silver chain.

Rudy had given up on the umbrella and was now wiping his glasses, trying to peer over Dinah's shoulder.

"What—what is it?" he asked, his voice piping high now as the excitement mounted. He was hopping around like an irritated toad waiting for a fly.

Dinah took the spyglass down and hissed through her front teeth. "It's James. He's dangling in the air under the *Arabella*."

"But everyone will see him!"

"Not for long they won't," Dinah said, shoving the spy-glasses at him. "He's losing his grip."



Up until about an hour or so ago, everything James Castledeck had done to attain entrance to the Queen's gala even had gone impeccably smooth.

Truth be known, he was quite pleased with himself.

With his connections to the Queen's High Counselor—the woman who happened to be his mother—James had acquired an invitation to the gala and commissioned a most impressive facsimile from a colleague of his in the Printer's Quarter named Morice.

The guard at the door, one of the Queen's Rose Guard, hardly even glanced at the invitation before and saying, "Welcome Sir Elgar," and ushering the next of the three-hundred odd guests in.

So, for the evening anyway, he was enjoying a turn as the slightly foppish, roguishly handsome, Sir Elgar.

As he walked across the bridge onto the airship, James looked as impressive as any of the other men at the gala, in no small part due to his acquaintance Jeremy Venn, who was the tailor to a handful of well-known young gentlemen cousins to the Queen herself. Venn had been able to assemble a passing fair ensemble for the event in just a few days' notice.

The effect was altogether perfected with his black hair oiled and curled at his brow, a fashionable brass mono-

cle tinted green, and a three-piece suit, hat and cane. A last-minute application of a mustache from Eloise de Maurier of the Swann and Co. Theatre Company had finished the costume.

Though, as always, the female nobility were far outnumbered, not a few of them had turned their faces to him and smiled at James, or, as they imagined, Sir Elgar. He had to will himself to approach the bejeweled ladies with as much restraint and courtesy as he could muster; his patron was explicit about maintaining a strict level of decorum at all times.

James made his way through half a dozen casual introductions, making certain to say all the right “madames” and “messieurs” and “pleased to meet you” while kissing all the right hands. He’d even helped a few ladies with their cloaks, many of which had been dampened by the recent rain showers.

Once the guests were settled, mostly converging around the wine casks and cheese platters, James took the opportunity to enjoy the design of the airship itself. Having had the freedom to roam Hartleigh castle in his youth, James was no novice in the ways of architectural splendor—but the *Arabella* was a right marvel. She was part ethereal ballroom, part ship, with her high ceilings adorned with elaborate frescoes and gilded with gold and silver leaf by the Crown’s own Artist, the renowned Sir Gelvry Mandeville. To add to the aesthetic, the glass-paned windows reached, on most of the decks, from floor to ceiling, in order for guests to enjoy an uninterrupted view of the city below.

It looked quite like a floating glass cathedral.

And as much as James hated the black smokestacks and factories he viewed from his own balcony in the city, he had to admit that from this distance, anyway, the view was rather breathtaking.

The city spread out from the castle at its highest point, down into the various districts and winding streets below, all lined with street lamps. It looked, he thought, like a string of twinkling diamonds from this distance; the view was dreamlike, and he found himself enraptured.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” said a voice to his side.

James glanced over at the figure—a tall woman with nut brown hair. She wore a long yellow dress embroidered with canaries around the bust, and had three large ostrich plumes set into her hair. Her eyes were a dull shade of grey, and she held an ivory fan before her lips, making her full attractiveness a mystery to James. She did not make eye contact with him, but stared out at the expanse of Hartleigh before them.

The sun was setting in the sea to the West, but the clouds were dense and the light was dim.

“Quite,” James said.

“My father used to tell me stories about Hartleigh City,” she continued. Her voice had a slight accent to it, re-

mind James of the way Territories folks spoke, the twang only apparent when she said the name of the city itself. “I had imagined it to be a city of marble and silver, gleaming and bright—a centre of learning, of liveliness, of arts. You can imagine I was disappointed when I got here and saw how filthy it all was...”

“Ah,” said James with a smile, smoothing his fake mustache to cover it. “Well, but from this distance, you can hardly tell, madame. I was just thinking it still looks rather magical, in spite of it all.”

“*Milady*,” corrected the woman, indicating she was not a married woman. That was odd, considering James put her at no less than thirty years old. Most women her age had at least seen one marriage or two.

“Where are you from, if I may ask? Your accent is rather unusual,” James asked, moving his cane from one hand to another.

“You will excuse me, but someone is requesting my presence elsewhere.”

“Of course, *Milady*,” replied James.

She fluttered her fan and said: “Adieu, Mr. Castledeck,” before she was gone in a swirl of skirts, leaving James at the windows, stunned.

She had just called him by his proper name. She had recognized him.

He could only guess his patron was behind this somehow; it seemed a reasonable explanation. James Castledeck had never met his patron in person, which had suited him fine. He’d always worked through messages, codes, and ciphers—but these were always written explicitly, and broken with diligence and care. But a direct messenger—or the patron herself? After years of explicit anonymity, it seemed curious. Highly curious.

James Castledeck did not like surprises.

He’d always prided himself with his ability to navigate the tricky waters of smuggling without so much as a chase. He had never been summoned to court, nor implicated by one of the local papers. No, in three years, James Castledeck had walked the streets of Hartleigh City like a shadow, stealing that which he had been asked to—and often what he had not been asked—dare he say it, flawlessly.

And the smuggling was good. His fat coin purse attested to that.

He wished he had found a way to bring Dinah along; but her face was too well known among the gentry, and Walkers were not welcome at events such as this. But if Dinah had been here, she would have known what to do, or how to act in the event of a blown cover. She was the epitome of a performer, her demeanor and expressions as malleable as gold itself. Or like quicksilver, perhaps. Alchemy metaphors, he decided, would not do that woman justice.



Looking back, James realized should have taken his time after the run-in with the yellow woman. He should have smiled and gone about his business, casually making his way to the gallery, nonchalant and in control.

But instead, James moved quickly, his heartbeat a constant, pulsing cadence accompanying his footsteps. He had the distinct feeling that time was of the essence.

The yellow woman hadn't explicitly threatened him, but he couldn't shake the feeling that she was just as calculating as he was. And that, he reflected, was not something he wanted to be up against just now.

A passing butler offered James a flute of champagne as he made his way to the other side of the room, but he declined.

"Tell me sir," he asked the butler. "Do you know the name of the woman in the yellow dress?"

He waited a beat, and then elaborated, "It's got canaries—about here—" James gestured to his chest.

The butler raised his eyebrows. "I've seen no such woman; apologies, sir."

If he couldn't find her, James decided, he'd just have to get to the gallery, acquire the object he needed, and leave this floating mausoleum; he'd hide out in one of the cargo holds if he had to.

At very least, James knew where he had to go next. As he walked toward the back of the ballroom, he went over his plan to break into the gallery in his head, accounting for all his special instruments and vials under his jacket.

However, the most important aspect of his plan was the part rattling around in his head.

As it was, the *Arabella* was one of thirty similar ships in the Queen's air fleet, all designed by the Queen's chief engineer some twenty years ago. The engineer herself had never seen the ships to completion, having either died or been banished, but her plans had been left behind. These, James had acquired, but at no small cost. It had taken three months to gain the friendship of the shipman's guild, and another two weeks to figure out how to break into their vault.

The plans were safe in his desk at his office, but he had memorized them with painstaking detail; one of James's most impressive godly gifts was a near-perfect eidetic memory. If he could get to the lavatory section and, at least somewhat inconspicuously, he could reach the mechanic's access, built in for easy movement between the

floors without disturbing potential passengers. From there, he could disable the alarm in the gallery, and get what he needed.

As the music was just getting into full swing, most of the guests were occupied by the balcony. Dipping through a set of double-doors, gilded with a pattern of serpents and alder leaves, James Castledeck proceeded to the lavatory section of the ship—one wing for the men, and another for the women. The hallway was carpeted in deep crimson red, checked with diamonds and stars interspersed with bright blue mandalas every now and again. The ceiling was mirrored, as were every third panel. He did not bother to glance at his reflection.

James counted to himself under his breath, a habit he had since childhood, until he reached the right panel. Just to the left of the fifth panel was a small rondel, different in composition than the others around it. The rose was not complete; in the very center was a button.

He pressed the button and, with a quick glance down the hallway, slid behind the door.

He'd known it would be dark in the mechanic's access, but he hadn't been prepared for the chill. The engineer had been more interested about keeping the guests warm, it seemed, and had diverted some of the steam engine's excess to piping throughout the ship itself.

Regardless, James's hands were going numb as he counted down the ladder rungs. A faint glow from above was all the light he would have, even in the gallery itself.

When he reached the landing for the next floor, he pulled on his leather gloves. His monocle was fogging up, too, and this he put back into his breast pocket. It didn't help him seen in the dark, anyway.

James silently slid open the access to the second floor, and proceeded into the dimly lit hallway. Toward the very end was the faint light, most likely from the stair that led down to the kitchens. He could smell roasted capon and garlic sauce from where he stood, and his stomach churned; he should have taken the time to eat. Even a few hors d'oeuvres would have made all the difference.

Regardless, felt a surge of panic and excitement course through him as it always did with more high-profile acquisitions. It wasn't quite fear, but it was close.

He preferred the term acquisition to "theft" because it inferred a certain nobility to his cause. The truth was, the Queen was building up a most impressive monopoly of technology, and James's patron—and James himself—believed that this was not, in any way, a benefit to the People. The Queen was obsessed with machines, and had worked her engineers to the bone; she employed nearly two-hundred of them. If she held all the secrets, who could stand against her?

His patron chose wisely, for James was, most days, to be found in his office or his laboratory, as an alchemist, a most unlikely accomplice in the smuggling of technol-

ogy. He had many underclass customers in the city who came to him with a variety of ailments, and he did his best to treat them as he could with various tinctures, salves, and balms. But his true passion lay in the more mysterious elements, of which he had to be very careful to divulge. The practice of alchemy was considered, along with any religious practice, grounds for persecution for seidcraft.

The knowledge of alchemy, however, had been a most clever companion in his smuggling and acquisition endeavors.

As he approached the door to the gallery, he retrieved a vial and a dropper from his jacket pocket, wrapped in a leather case. The hallway was silent, and he quickly squeezed a few drops of the red liquid into the lock, and backed away. The corrosive acid sizzled and smoked a moment, and then was silent. When James approached the door, and turned the knob, the piece fell apart in his hands altogether.

"There we are," he said to himself, softly. He pressed open the door, and entered the gallery.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the even darker room, but it was helped by the presence of the exhibit itself. At least two hundred gadgets were on display, many of which glowed with their own luminescence, some due to phosphorescent ores or diodes inside. Though he would have certainly enjoyed a walk through the gallery with more time on his hands, to explore the more complex of the machines, he could not. He knew what he was looking for, and time was wasting.

Before he approached the center of the room, he deftly disarmed the anti-theft bell which was placed to the left of the door in the guise of a dumbwaiter. This required no more than engineer's scissors to cut the wire to the bell mechanism.

The glass case he was looking for was in the middle of the room, fashioned to look much like lily bud. The panes of glass were soldered together with what, James had learned, was a brass composite. It would be significantly more difficult than the latch at the door.

In the eerie glow of the room, he could only see the outline of the object in the case—somewhere between a gun and a sword, with circular etchings on the side that emitted a low blue light. It was this material that James had come to the gallery for.

First, he needed to get into the case without triggering much noise. Shattering glass would only bring unwanted attention, after all.

To do this, James retrieved a small tank from his jacket, no longer than the measurement from his thumb to forefinger, and a long length of copper tubing. He attached the end of the copper tubing to the tank, and then fitted another piece of tubing, tapering to a sharp end, to it. This, he expertly wedged in between the brass and glass of the display case. He then turned a small spigot at the

bottom of the tanks, which let out a hiss and a burst of gas into the glass case.

The case had hardly moved, but James was cautious nonetheless. He removed his instruments and put them back into his pocket, then put one hand on either side of the glass case. The gas should have worked its way to the brass, and he pressed. Sure enough, one of the panels was loose, and he gently worked it loose enough to put his fingers through. But he would have to wait; the gas inside was already leaking out of a crack on the side, its odor pungent and sour. He didn't want to suffer the after effects breathing in ammonia in such close proximity.

It was nerve-wracking work, and he could feel sweat gathering on his brow under his top hat. Too much disturbance and someone might hear...

"Stop. That's enough."

James turned around to see where the voice had come from.

It was the yellow woman, and two men; they were standing by the opposite wall, obscured in the shadows while James had done his work. He chided himself internally for being so soft headed to have neglected to make a sweep of the room.

They were waiting for him, and he'd fallen handily into their laps.

"My pardon, milady," James said. "I believe there has been some sort of a mixup."

"Not at all, Mr. Castledeck," the yellow woman said, flicking her fingers toward him. She looked ghostly in the dim light, until one of her men lit a lantern.

James noticed the men were dressed in the garb of the Order of the Rose, their dark blue uniforms rimmed in red piping and pinned with gold rose insignia on the shoulders and lapel. But they wore masks on their faces, obscuring any chance James might have to recognize them later on. The brutes all looked the same to him anyway.

The yellow woman, too, was wearing a mask, but hers only covered her eyes.

"I wasn't aware this was a masquerade," James said.

"Says the man with the peeling mustache," replied the yellow woman.

"Precautions have to be taken."

"Of course," she said, with a chilly smile. Her teeth were very white and very straight. "But I thank you, Mr. Castledeck. You've performed quite well." She sniffed the air. "Ammonia, I see—a high burst of it, with something else, too, to crack the brass. Impressive."

James squinted toward the yellow woman, wondering how in hells they'd managed to beat him down to the gallery; they must have found plans, too.

“So the Queen’s sent you after me, then?” he asked, nonchalantly as he could manage.

He found himself increasingly intimidated by the masked knights who, by James’s numbers, had to outweigh him by at least fifty pounds of pure muscle. That was not even counting their combined experience in martial arts and combat, of which James knew little to nothing. James was not a melee fighter, or even a dueler; no, if given the time and the resources, he fought best from the shadows.

“Not exactly,” said the woman. “I believe you’ve been working for me all along.”

He didn’t respond immediately. He realized he’d let his cane down to access the case, so the knife was not an option. He still had his pistol, but brandishing a weapon like that in the presence of a lady—regardless of her repute—was hardly his style.

“All this beautiful technology,” she said, sweeping her hand over the display cases. “All in the hands of the Crown. All so conveniently bequeathed to a line of royals intent on keeping their lines pure, and their consciences at ease. We share a common calling, Mr. Castledeck—to restore the balance of power, no?”

James looked at the guards, who were flanking her as she approached him, trying to gauge their level of aggression; it was unusually high.

“So you’d be my patron.”

“Yes,” she said. “I commissioned the theft of the great clock at Dubmin, which you managed most elegantly I must say. You managed stole Queen’s own spectacles, once, and the gun that Archibald Riveter used to slay his brother Jasper, as well as more than a hundred various implements and instruments over the last three years.”

“I could take some level of credit for those spectacular acquisitions, yes,” James said. “But why come to me now, if I may ask? And why the need for the—er, bodyguards?”

“Precautions have to be taken,” she repeated with a smirk. “You see, this is the last of your assignments for me, Mr. Castledeck. I’m allowing you to walk away, without pursuit. So, if you would...”

The Roseguard stiffened on either side of her, awaiting James’s response.

There were two things James Castledeck was very aware of at the moment. One was the certainty that this woman was not his patron. Papers had just arrived yesterday for another acquisition, this time in the neighboring city of Byleigh, with his patron’s seal and sign. The other was that the Roseguard to the left was twitching his fingers, upon which were two signet rings. He couldn’t make out the crests, but he tried to commit the color of the metal and cabochons to memory. Such details might be useful later.

“And why the sudden decision to terminate my employment?” asked the smuggler.

James noted that silk on the yellow woman’s dress was an particular Northern Ardesian print; he could tell by the particular filigree by the canaries—more angular than a pattern from the Continent, or any other part of Ardesia. The only merchant in town that dared deal with the notoriously deceptive Ardesians was Kells Michel, and he’d know if anyone had made a recent purchase; James would have to ask him tomorrow... if tomorrow came at all.

The woman sighed like a school mistress very disappointed in the recent test results of her student. “Need we really get into the details, Mr. Castledeck? It seems your own collection has grown rather impressive through your own acquisitions... my colleagues and I feel as if your penchant for smuggling has become a rather personal endeavor, and we can’t have that, now can we?”

True, James had lifted a few superfluous objects during his acquisitions, but these were in the name of science and its truest art, Alchemy. Explicitly banned from the Royal Library, and excommunicated—for lack of a better term—from the Argent Academy, he had to use his own talents and resort to somewhat unusual research methodologies.

“I see,” said James.

“I knew you would,” replied the yellow woman.

“Just one thing, though, if you would?”

The yellow woman paused mid-stride, her silken dress shuffling against the crinoline beneath. “What is it?”

“You mentioned something about quintessence?”

She stopped, her lips twitching from a smile to a frown.

It was all the hesitation he needed. The one thing his patron would know would be the code response to that question; if there had been any doubt at all, it was now eradicated.

James had been calculating his odds against the two brutes. He had enough of the red acid mixture to incapacitate at least one of them for a few moments—but he wasn’t figuring the woman was a non-combatant. On the contrary, he knew how easy it was to hide guns in a skirt, he’d seen Dinah do it a hundred times. And, as scarce as women were on the Continent, most of them had extensive training; as high prized as virginity was these days, it was no surprise fathers went to the lengths they did.

Quickly, before he even let his smile fade, he withdrew the remainder of the acid from the vial in his pocket and uncorked it; a stream of ruby red fluid sprayed out in an arc, hitting the knight with the rings on his hands. The burly knight let out a high-pitched screech, and fell to the ground, flailing his fingers about as if they were on

fire. The acid would, if the metals were what James hoped they were, react most painfully.

James used the distraction to retrieve the length of copper tubing, which he brandished now as a dagger; it was far from formidable, but it was thankfully connected to a small tank of ammonia. He was about to turn the spigot when the second knight knocked him in the chest, and his head cracked against the floor.

Spots blossomed in his line of vision, and a long hiss emitted from his side; the ammonia had burst from the tank, making his eyes water. He coughed and sputtered to a stand, the effect the same on his would-be pursuer.

The yellow woman had the mechanism in her hands, and deftly removed the blue glowing jewel, placing it into her purse.

“There,” she said. The first knight was still moaning on the ground, but the took no notice of him. “Now—throw him over the side.”

James didn’t have time to protest, as the knight was upon him in a split second, smacking him across the face with the butt end of his pistol. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the yellow woman leave.

Speed was James’s immediate advantage; the brute of a knight was slow, and his breath reeked of wine. He wondered if the knight’s mistress knew of his dalliances. Regardless, James knew he couldn’t stave off the assault for too long—he had no access to his pistol.

He rolled to the side, the knight’s fist just clipping the side of his head, but causing enough of an impact to both stun and confuse him. He felt the entirety of the ship pitch sharply—or was it just his head?—and he gasped as the knight’s knee barely missed his groin and instead knocked him in the ribs and stomach.

James’s hand hit something hard and dented, and he realized through the blood fury of the fight, that it was the ammonia tank. The tank itself was silver, but covered with a skin of leather for easier handling. James was able to get his grip on it just in time, and smash the canister over the knight’s head; the impact vibrated up James’s arm, and the knight growled, falling off of James and onto his back.

It was all the time he needed. In his mind’s eye he could see the engineer’s drawings, the secret passageways and accesses, the pipework and the guts of the place. He darted for the door, and down the hallway, his breath searing his lungs as he went. Blood was dripping into one of his eyes, stinging and blurring his vision. He found the right door, a panel to the left—gods, he hoped he remembered right! Never forget an exit strategy, he always said.

Except there wasn’t supposed to be a hole there, he was *sure* of it. The plans indicated that there was a platform, where he could safely escape to the cargo hatch.

But, alas, there was no refusing the hole’s existence as he tumbled down the access, landing at the bottom in a pile

of rope, twisting his ankle, and busting his leg straight through the bottom of the ship. He felt the material of his pants give way and tear, wood scraping against his bare skin, and his leg was suddenly met with a blast of cold air from outside.

The wood beneath him groaned. Quickly as he could, he wrapped one end of the rope around a iron-riveted pipe, and the other...

He didn’t have time. The wood gave way beneath him, and he turned head over feet, plunging into the rainy darkness below. His arms flailed, reaching, grasping desperately for a hold, and at last latched upon the rope. His leather gloves saved his hands from much of the rope-burn, but still he was unable to stop. Finally, a knotted section in the rope gave him enough pause to right himself.



It wouldn’t be long now, until his arms gave out. James groaned, closing his eyes tight, fighting the tightening of panic in his chest. It was not a welcome or a familiar feeling, and he feared it would be the last tangible emotion he knew for a very long time. At this height, there was no escaping through clever passageways or hidden vials.

No, James Castledeck was firmly, and quite unavoidably, screwed.

His shoulder sockets were afire from the strain. He saw himself, suddenly, as a worm on the end of hook. But what, he wondered, would an alchemist catch?

The answer came sooner than he had expected. It was the sound that garnered his attention; at first he mistook it for the grinding of the airship above him. He doubted anyone would notice him down here, an infinitely small shape against the darkening sky. Chances were the ship would simply dash him inadvertently on the side of a building in a few moments.

But then, the sound came again, this time nearer by. It was a low buzzing, a sound uniquely mechanic and whirring.

“Down here!” called a voice.

James had had his eyes shut.

He glanced down to see a small mechanized glider with a single pilot with a shock of brilliant red hair, visible even in the dark, and tinted goggles. But the machine itself was far more impressive than the pilot; it glider flapped its own wings, very like a bird, and yet managed to stay surprisingly still. From James’s vantage point it appeared to be made of a combination of wood, brass,

and tempered glass—but he didn't have time take notes, though he would have liked to.

There was enough space behind the cockpit for him to fit, and with a quick prayer to the Forces of Nature, he leg go of the rope and tumbled into the flyer. It pitched steeply, but the pilot managed to right it quickly enough, drop altitude, and zoom away.

"Are you alright?" asked the pilot, yelling over the buzzing engines.

"More or less!" responded the smuggler.

The pilot said something more, but it was impossible to catch with all the noise. And the pilot seemed hells-bent on making James retch, taking a zig-zagging course between buildings and twice nearly colliding with smokestacks.

Finally, the pilot let down the flyer in an abandoned street north of town; it had once been the textile district, but Hartleigh officially stopped production twenty years ago in favor of importing cheaper cloth, and the area was left to rot. It was like one of the ghost towns he'd seen in his travels in the Territories, yet somehow eerier for its proximity the bustling cosmopolitan center of Hartleigh City.

The pilot jumped out of the flyer, and opened the door to James's right.

She, for that was now apparent, lifted up her goggles and grinned at him; there were round circles of dirt around her eyes where the goggles had been.

"You look pretty awful," she said. Her voice was young, boyish.

"Thanks," he retorted, his legs wobbling as he made contact with the ground again.

"Here, take this." She handed him a pink handkerchief and then directed him to his own forehead. "Dab it anywhere and you'll likely find a cut."

James pressed the cloth to his forehead, squinting in the dark of the abandoned street. The gas lamps were still lit, but not as uniformly as other places in the city. The pilot's face was cast in a greenish tinge.

"Who are you?" he asked, at last.

"No thanks for saving your sorry hide?" she asked.

"Well, of course there's that. It's only that I've been a little taken aback this evening, you see, and I believe those men—and that woman—wanted me dead."

"I see how it is," she replied. "Do you think you broke anything? I've got a med kit in the cockpit if you need."

James looked at the pink handkerchief, now dotted with his blood. "No, I think I'll manage. Mostly scrapes and bruises, thank you."

The pilot took a step closer to him, and he got a better look at her. She was wearing a red scarf, he noticed now,

embroidered with surprisingly delicate daisies which seemed a contrast to her considerably prickly countenance. Her knee-high leather boots were extremely tight and led to, of all things, a pair of men's trousers. Atop that she wore a canvas flight jacket and the aforementioned red daisy scarf.

"So," she said, wiping her face with her hand. "Did you—er, did you manage to get the object from the gallery, then?"

"Excuse me? The object?"

"The thing you were *stealing*," she elaborated.

"Well, I was just assaulted, and you'll forgive me if I'm not exactly tripping over myself to divulge the details of my acquisition, now."

The pilot laughed, shaking her head at him. "Did you even *read* my flyer? Don't you know who I am?"

James glanced at the side of the flyer. It read "Q. Jonas."

"Quintessa Vanessa Jonas, at your service, Mr. Castledeck." She bowed with a very unladylike flourish.

"*Quintessa*, not *quintessence*?"

"Exactly."

"*You're* the password?"

"I am. My father leaves his secret with very few. But you can just call me Tess."

"And your father is—my patron?"

"Precisely. Be careful not to think too much there, you might singe your hair." Tess grinned, a dimple appearing on her left cheek as she did so. James thought her rather fetching but, reasoned, his patron would be even less happy that his daughter had to risk her life to save his scruff if he were to approach her in any uncivil manner.

James rubbed his jaw; a few of his teeth felt rather loose. He surmised he'd have one hells of a headache tomorrow, even with his own prescriptions. He was an alchemist, not a dentist.

"So, Tess," James said, then, straightening his posture. "The answer is no, I did not get the object I wanted from the gallery."

Tess sighed, and then kicked the wheel of her flyer. She looked a bit like a spoiled child. "How could you let her get it! Do you know what this means, Castledeck?"

"Let her get what?" James asked.

"The artifact, you git."

James smiled, feeling the cracks in his lips deepen. "The woman in yellow, whoever she is, did not walk away with anything but an old Re-appropriation Era gun with a slight amount of luminous aether embedded on the grips."

"What?" Tess asked.

"I was, admittedly, seeking to get the piece for myself. But she walked away with it, thinking it was the main focus of my visit to the gallery; its loss is of no large consequence. I can find another."

James grinned and reached into his lapel pocket. He pulled out a purse with a long silver chain, and then opened it up. Sneaking two of his fingers in, he produced a small inlaid coffer strung with a chain.

"This was around Lady Lenley's throat," he continued. "I recognized it as soon as I walked in. I helped her remove her cloak upon entering, and mysteriously the piece ended up back in my possession. You'll find the mechanism your patron was looking for, I believe, well in tact. It appears that Lord Lenley hadn't entrusted it to the Queen's collection after all."

"She'll figure it out, you know," Tess said, taking the coffer, and holding it in her hands as if it were a tiny, wounded bird. "Whoever it was chasing you—she'll know she nicked the wrong thing."

James Castledeck grinned. "Which will be in my favor; she'll realize if she lets slip that she was there at all, she'll be incriminated and questioned. You know how precious the Queen is about her tinkering, and I doubt Lord Lenley will take kindly to someone asking after his precious, recently acquired and stolen item."

"And what if she incriminates you?" Tess asked, tilting her head to the side. It was raining fine mist, and it had collected in the bright red curls of her hair, casting a sheen to it.

"She won't—not if she knows what's good for her. She had two of the Roseguard in her employ—one who is currently suffering the aftereffects of red acid all over his ringed fingers, and the other who most certainly has a throbbing black eye. It won't take me long to figure out who they are."

"And what about her?"

James grinned. "Give me two days, Miss Jonas, and you'll know her name, her birthplace, her rank, and the color of her petticoats."

"Well, maybe you've bought yourself some time, Mr. Castledeck—can I call you Mr. C?"

"Ah, I suppose—"

"If you want, I can drop you off at your apartment." She looked rather expectant.

"No, thanks. I think I'll walk. It'll be less conspicuous that way. I believe the papers will already have a field day, what with the flying antics and all."

Tess smirked impishly, her front teeth protruding slightly. "Oh, I doubt that. Father's got plenty of connections in the newspaper—it'll most likely be chalked up to something the Queen was up to."

"Right, well," James said. "Many thanks, again."

"Well—if you need a lift, anytime," she said, handing him a card. It was a metal punchcard, engraved with her name and rank:

Q. T. Jonas
Aeronaut, First Class
Captain of the *Silver Swallow*
645-23a-gh4-22c

"That's where to find me."

James looked down at the series of numbers and laughed. Another code. "Many thanks, Tess."

He had a feeling he'd see her again soon, as he watched her board her flyer, start the engines—which he had decided was run by some blend of alcohol from the stench—and rise into the sky.



Rudy had been sobbing uncontrollably ever since he'd spotted the strange flyer extricate James from beneath the *Arabella*. Dinah, on the other hand, had been cursing, and walking the floor as she was like to do in tense situations.

They both exclaimed when James nearly fell through the front door to his office, sopping wet, with his left eye swollen shut and his gentlemen's attire ripped and muddy beyond recognition.

"James!" Dinah said, rushing to his side.

"Castledeck!" cried Rudy, sobbing into his sleeve. "I thought you were dead for sure!"

"Not quite."

"Can I get you a towel?" asked the banker. "Some tea?"

"Brandy," James replied, walking to the balcony, shivering. He opened the double doors and watched the airship floating in its continued course around the castle, silent and undisturbed for the time being.

"And bring me my spyglasses, Dinah," he added. "We've got work to do."

