

Steamed

By

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Log of the HIMA Tesla
Monday, February 15th
Forenoon Watch: Four Bells

“Cap’n Pye! Cap’n Pye!”

“The word is ‘captain,’ Dooley. We are not pirates, nor are we yokels who cannot expend the extra effort to pronounce words correctly, and judging by the non-stop chatter I hear from you in the mess, I am reassured you have the vocal capacities to do so. Yes, I see it now, Mr. Mowen. The valve to the left of the intake cylinder, isn’t it? It’s cracked, you think?”

“Aye, captain.”

I sat back on my heels after examining the valve in question. Cracked, my three-legged uncle. It was no more cracked than I was.

“Captain Pye, Mr. Piper, he says you’re to come to the forward hold immediately!” Young Dooley fairly danced with agitation as he spoke, but that was nothing new. Dooley was a quicksilver sort of lad, always moving or talking, apparently unable to sit still for even the shortest amount of time. In a way, he reminded me of a hummingbird I’d seen in the emperor’s aviary, for Dooley flitted and dove around the ship just as the hummingbird had done in the high-domed aviary.

“Can you fix the valve, Mr. Mowen?” I asked the chief engineer, fully confident of an affirmative answer. “Or will we need to land at Lyon?”

“An unauthorized landing?” Mr. Mowen looked scandalized at the thought. “That would put us off schedule, lass. Er...captain.”

“Captain Pye—” Dooley tugged at the sleeve of my new scarlet red Aerocorps jacket.

I quelled both the tugging and the excited dancing with a look, one I had honed on lesser crew members for a decade. “I will be with you in a moment, Dooley. Mr. Mowen has my attention now.”

“But, Mr. Piper said you must come quick—”

“Mr. Piper would never condone you interrupting an important discussion about the ability of the Telsa to fly, Dooley. You have delivered your message, and may return to your duties.” I spoke in what I hoped was an authoritative, yet kindly, tone. I didn’t want to be perceived as an ogre to the crew, not on this, my first assignment. Yet the seven other individuals on board must acknowledge my position of command, or it would all end badly. Firm but tempered, that was the key.

“But, Cap’n—”

Mr. Mowen watched me with interested, somewhat amused eyes. He was waiting to see how I handled the overexcited teen who was the bosun’s mate, no doubt curious to see whether or not I would let him ruffle me. Ah, but had he known I had long since lost that ability.

“You have duties, Dooley, do you not?”

“Aye, miss. Cap’n. *Captain*. I’m to be cleaning the galley, then tending to the boilers as Mr. Mowen likes.”

“You are excused to attend to your duties.”

Dooley responded to the voice of authority, reluctantly tugging on his smart black cap as he left the cramped quarters of the aft boiler room. “Aye aye, captain.”

“That wasn’t nearly so bad as you thought, now was it?” Mowen asked with the hint of a smile beneath his big salt and pepper walrus mustache.

“Not at all, and how did you guess?” I asked, a little surprised by the perspicacity in the older man’s eyes. “Is it that obvious that I was expecting such a test?” One of several that were laid all ready for me, no doubt.

“I’ve been sailing the skies betwixt Rome and London long enough to see a full score of captains come and go,” he answered, his eyes now twinkling with amusement. “The first run is always entertaining, with the crew watchful, waiting to see what sort man the company has saddled us with.”

I glanced at him, curious as to the meaning behind his words. “I can’t believe that no one from the Aerocorps told you anything about me. I received a dossier on the crew; surely you had something about me?”

“It wasn’t so much a dossier as it was a note telling us that you were taking command of the ship.”

I waited, sure there was more to come.

There was. “Mr. Francisco has a mate in the Corps offices, and he told us a bit more about you. He said you were a woman, which we’d guessed from your name, that you had red hair and brown eyes—not that it matters, you understand, but Mr. Francisco, as you might have noticed, has a bit of passion for red-headed ladies, so he was particularly overjoyed about that bit of information—that you joined the Corps when you were sixteen, and have been in it just as many years, and that you have some friends in high places.”

My brows rose just a smidgen. “The Aerocorps files say that?”

“Ah, well...” Mr. Mowen slid me a sidelong look. “Perhaps that was my own speculation.”

“Indeed.” I made my voice as neutral as possible. “On the whole, that is an accurate summation. I hope the crew will not be disappointed with me.”

“Time will show,” he said, nodding, idly rubbing a spot of grease on his cuff. “Good or bad, there’s naught we can do but accept.”

“Oh, I imagine there are all sorts of things a crew could do to make an unwanted captain feel less than welcome,” I answered, deliberately keeping my tone light. “Food that is oddly inedible when compared to the crew’s fare, unpleasant surprises of the insect and rodent nature to be found in the captain’s bed, repeated rousing during the sleeping hours to examine strangely malfunctioning equipment that was sound only a few hours before...yes, I have heard of such dealings, and imagine it would be quite easy for a dedicated crew to take care of an unpopular captain.”

Mr. Mowen gave me a long look. I allowed myself a little smile, at which he relaxed. “True enough, captain, true enough.”

“I trust that this valve, which strangely appears to have been wrenched to the side and thus is no longer seated properly rather than cracked, can be returned to its proper position without delay, Mr. Mowen.” A light of respect shown briefly in his eyes. I waved away his offer of help as I rose to my feet, dusting off my long navy wool skirt, and edges of my knee-length jacket. “I also expect there will be no further tests to determine if I am familiar with the workings of an airship steam engine and boilers. I assure you I am.”

The engineer saluted me. “And right glad I am to hear it, ma’am. It’s about time the Tesla had a captain who understood her.”

“Even one who is female, Mr. Mowen?” I couldn’t help but as I made my way along the narrow metal catwalk.

He replied after a few moments of silence. “I would be prevaricating if I was to say that, Mr. Francisco aside, we did not have concerns about having a lass as a captain.”

We reached the gangway. I gave the engineer a considering look. I had expected a token amount of resistance when I took over as captain, but surely in these enlightened times no one could protest the fact that I was a woman. "There are several female captains in the Southampton Aerocorps, Mr. Mowen. It is not at all uncommon."

"Aye, but those captains are limited to domestic routes. You are the first we've heard of taking command of an international route."

"An oversight on the part of the Aerocorps, I'm sure. I served for several years under Captain Robert Anstruther, and he, as you might know, commanded the largest passenger airship to travel the empire. I am quite familiar with both the routes and the duties of a captain, even those that fall under the domain of a small cargo transport, such as the Tesla."

"Captain Anstruther will be well missed," Mowen said, his face now somber. "Those damned Black Hand revolutionaries have much to answer for, killing as fine a captain as ever sailed the skies."

"Indeed they do," I answered, squaring my shoulders at the pain that always followed the memory of Robert Anstruther's last hours.

"You knew him well, did you?" Mowen asked, watching me closely.

I made an attempt to present a serene expression. "I did. He was my guardian, and a very great man. I consider him my father."

The engineer's eyebrows rose above the steel rims of his spectacles. "Then I am sorry for your loss, captain."

I acknowledged his sympathy, the pain that rose at the memory of Robert's sacrifice a familiar burden. "I was given into his care when I was very young, and both he and his wife treated me as if I was their own child. I miss them very much."

"The captain's lady—she died too, in the airship explosion?"

I closed my eyes for a moment as once again the vision of the burning aerodrome rose in my mind's eye, the figure of Robert Anstruther silhouetted against the flames licking the black sky stark and hard.

"There is no other way, Octavia," he had said, and I felt again the pain in his voice. "The emperor will not be appeased this time. If it was just myself, I could bear what would follow. I am old, and my time is almost run its course. But there is Jane and you to consider. I will not let my shame destroy your lives."

"I will go with you," I had begged at the time. "Let me go with you and Jane. I can help, I know I can."

He had merely smiled sadly, and cupped the side of my face. "I bless the day the old emperor brought you to me. Do you remember it, Octavia? You were just a wee little girl, lost and confused, talking of wild, impossible things, and trying so very hard to be brave and not cry. Jane called you our little miracle, coming as you did right after our son died."

My throat ached as I fought vainly against tears. Robert considered me for a long moment, ignoring the wetness that rolled down my face and over his hands. "You have a bright future ahead of you, my dear. If we are lost to the fire, nothing will taint that future."

"Am I to never see you again?" I asked, my voice cracked with pain.

"No. We cannot come back to England. We are too well known. But you will always be with us, in our hearts."

I bowed my head, overcome with the grief, wanting desperately to cast aside all my burdens and flee with the two people I loved best in the world.

"Fight for what is right, little Octavia. Do what Jane and I cannot."

Those were his last words. No more had been needed—I stayed behind to do my duty while Robert Anstruther, decorated three times by the emperor himself, and a hero to the entire empire, walked toward the burning aerodrome, and into the pages of history.

“I’m sorry, captain. I did not mean to distress you.”

The voice was softly spoken, but pulled me from my dark memories back to the present. Robert and Jane had been gone for almost a year. It had all come to pass as he predicted—the inquiries that had swirled around his activities had withered to nothing, and a nation mourned its lost hero.

I squared my shoulders and gave the engineer a little nod. “Thank you Mr. Mowen. If any other issues arise, I will be in the forward cargo hold seeing what it is that has Dooley in such a swivet.”

He touched his cap in a salute as I moved down the narrow gangway, past the two rear boilers that powered the steering engines. The low thrum of the engines as they turned the propellers sounded in time to the throb of movement felt in the metal framework structure that ran the length, breadth, and height of the ship. It was a familiar sensation, one I didn’t even think of now, and certainly not one I noticed until I was on land, and it was missing. Indeed, the feeling of the ship as it sailed through the air was as much a part of me as breathing was, and I could tell instantly—as could every man on board the Tesla—when something was awry with the engines. A slight change in tempo in the vibration, or a higher tone in the thrum was enough to have the crew looking to me with concerned eyes.

“You’re not going to have any problems, though, are you?” I asked the ship softly as I made my way down a small metal ladder to the lower gangway. “You know how important this trip is. You know how valuable the cargo is. You know what will happen should we fail.”

The ship didn’t answer, but I felt an odd sort of kinship with it. The engineer might find it remarkable that an international route be given to me, but I knew better—it was a payment for services rendered, nothing more. My silence had been bought with the most insignificant, smallest cargo supply route in all of the Aerocorps. The Tesla was a minnow when compared to the new airships that graced the skies, an outdated model that showed visible signs of her age, from the stained fabric that made up the envelope, to the forty-year-old engines that were far from the highly efficient machinery that ran the bigger, longer, sleeker airships.

I knew all this, and yet I was proud of the Tesla, proud to be commanding her. If only everything would go right. If there was the slightest delay or problem that kept us from landing the ship in the small aerodrome outside of Rome, all would be lost. I had argued with Etienne that such a tight timeline was tempting disaster, but he ignored my warnings and pleas, as he always did. “The man may be the leader of the Black Hand,” I murmured as I strode the gangway toward the forward hold, “but he’ll always be a presumptuous, stubborn idiot when it comes to listening to me.”

I pushed down the worry of what might happen should things go awry, and focused instead on ensuring they didn’t. “That includes unwanted problems,” I grumbled to myself as arrived at the hold, one of four compartments that filled the middle section of the gondola.

“Captain Pye.” An elderly, grizzled man who shuffled with a peculiar, almost-crablike walk, moved forward in his peculiar gait to greet me. I knew from perusing the crew dossiers that his odd method of movement was due to injuries sustained when he’d flung himself from a burning airship. “I was hopin’ you would come soon. We have a great hairy bollock of a problem, we do.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Mr. Piper. I assume the hairy bollock must be very great indeed if Mr. Christian is unable to deal with it.” I kept a mild expression on my face despite the urge to laugh at his colorful language, well aware that it could be another test or an attempt to rattle me.

At the sound of his name the tall, very thin blond man who was my new chief officer jumped, his pale blue eyes wide with distress as he stammered out an excuse. Amusement faded as I considered him. There was no denying I was a bit disappointed in my right hand man—thus far, he seemed ineffectual and totally unsuited for the job—but I reminded myself that everyone deserved a chance to prove himself, and that he might grow into the job. I certainly hoped that was so.

“...and I only just arrived here before you, captain. Didn’t I, Piper? I just arrived here? A matter of seconds, isn’t it? I couldn’t know what’s going on when I only just got here myself, could I?”

“Aye, that ye did, arse-backward and shittin’ coal.”

Aldous Christian looked almost panic-stricken, and I was quick to absolve him before he worked himself up any further. He looked on the verge of an apoplectic fit as it was. “My apologies for my false assumption. Since we are both here now, perhaps we could know the extent of the situation?”

“But I don’t know!” he all but wailed, his face turning beet red.

“I was directing that comment to Mr. Piper,” I said in a soothing voice, giving the chief officer’s arm a reassuring squeeze. He stopped blushing, but looked as high strung as a race horse before the wire. “Proceed, Mr. Piper.”

“It’s bodies, captain,” the bosun answered with brevity.

“Bodies?”

“Oh, mercy,” Mr. Christian said, looking for a moment as if he was going to swoon. He clutched at the edge of the nearest stack of crates and weaved for a moment.

“What sort of bodies?” I asked, eyeing the chief officer lest he suddenly totter toward me.

“Bloody great bodies, that’s what sort,” Mr. Piper answered, scratching absently at his crotch. “Gettin’ in me way, they are.”

“There’s blood?” the chief officer wailed, his eyes filled with horror as he grabbed the bosun. “I...I...faint at blood.”

“Where exactly are these bodies?” I asked, almost positive that I was being tested again.

“Over yonder, behind the barrels of salted meat.” Piper nodded toward the far side of the hold, where stacked neatly were three dozen barrels of salted venison, pork, beef, and fish destined for the emperor’s troops in the south of Italy. “Neptune’s salty cods, man, let go of me arm! Ye’ll have me uniform wrinkled.”

“Dead or alive?” I asked.

“Alive, we think,” Piper answered, plucking Mr. Christian’s hands from his arm. “That is, there ain’t no great big pools o’ blood soakin’ in to everything.”

“Urk!” Mr. Christian said, swallowing hard.

“And no severed limbs that we could find, nor any entrails or guts spewed out everywhere.”

“Entrails,” Mr. Christian whispered, his voice hoarse with horror as he groped blindly for the stack of wine barrels. “Entrails would be the end of me.”

“Aye, and they’re a right shiv up the arse to clean up, too,” Mr. Piper agreed, sucking his tooth for a moment before he continued. “Ye need sawdust to proper clean up after entrails, ye do. An arseload of sawdust. And sodium carbonate, and we don’t be havin’ much of that on board.”

“It’s good, then, that we will have no need for it,” I said, finding it difficult to keep my lips from twitching.

“’Tis the truth ye’re speakin’,” he agreed, before adding, “It’s hard to tell if they be alive or dead, captain. Ye’ll just have to be lookin’ for yerself.”

“An excellent suggestion. Mr. Christian, you will come with me, please.”

I took three steps, but paused when the chief officer made an inarticulate noise of horror in his throat before falling over in a dead faint.

It was going to be a *very* long trip.

“Son of a whore’s left leg,” Mr. Piper swore, looking with interest at the chief officer’s prone form. “He’s light in the ballast, that one is, captain. Ye should have seen him carry on when Auld John—he were the steward two seasons ago, before Mr. Ho joined us—when Auld John had three toes drop off.”

I paused on my way toward the cargo in question. “His toes dropped off?”

“Aye.” He sucked his tooth for the count of three. “We’d been to Marseilles, and ye know how it can be there—lads’ll go out lookin’ for a good time, and get mixed up with a strumpet or two, and the next thing ye know, someone’s lopped off a few of their toes.”

I stared at him in growing horror. “I don’t believe I’ve ever heard of anyone losing their toes because of promiscuous activities, even in so rough a city as Marseilles. None of the crew I’ve sailed with have ever done so.”

“Aye, well,” he said shrugging, and poking at the inert form of Mr. Christian with the highly polished toes of his boot. “Could have been the pox, too. He had that right enough. He thought his rod was going to drop off one time, but it just turned out to be the clap.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but there was just nothing I could say to that, so instead I gestured toward the unconscious officer, and asked, “Would you see to him while I view these bodies of yours?”

“They ain’t me bodies, at any rate,” he said, shuffling over to the door. “As if I’d leave them lyin’ about me hold. I’ve been on airships for the last forty years, and never once have I left a body in the hold where anyone can trip arse over ears on it. Dooley! Where are ye, ye useless sod? Mr. Christian’s taken one of his fits again.”

The old man bellowed as I moved off, carefully picking my way around the stacks of scientific equipment and supplies, wondering what on earth bodies were doing on my ship. If they were dead, I would have some explaining to do before the emperor’s men in Rome. If they weren’t... I gritted my teeth. Stowaways would spell disaster. Either it was someone Etienne had sent to watch me, or a spy for the emperor. The former I could deal with, but the latter? It didn’t bear thinking about.

A foot came into view as I hiked up my skirts and scrambled over a long packing crate. The crate had shifted slightly during the last day, and now rested a good yard from the wall of the hold. The foot lay in plain view, with the rest of the body assumedly wedged between the crate and wall.

I didn’t usually carry firearms, preferring instead the blade hidden inside of the walking stick that Robert Anstruther had given me on the occasion of my thirtieth birthday, but that was unfortunately in the tiny captain’s cabin, whereas the standard issue Emyrean Disruptor that was given to all captains was strapped to my hip. I pulled out the small weapon, turning a switch that would allow the galvanic charge to be released upon firing.

“I am armed,” I told the foot in what I hoped was a calm voice. “If you intend on attacking me, please be aware that I will defend myself.”

The foot didn't move, nor did its owner respond. I edged closer to it, frowning at the foot. It was clad in a strange sort of half-shoe, with only the front of the foot covered. The rest was bare, as was the ankle. I moved around the crate, leaning over it to peer behind, my grip firm on the Disruptor. "Are you injured?"

It was a man. He lay half propped up against the wall, half flung across another person, a woman. Both appeared to be asleep—or dead—although there was no blood to be seen, and no sign of injury.

"Has Mr. Christian been roused?" I called over my shoulder, straightening up.

"Aye, but he looks as pale as watered piss."

I counted to ten, then said, "Tell him there is no blood whatsoever, and ask him to come forward."

Both the chief officer and Dooley appeared, the former looking as if he was going to be sick.

"Are they...dead?" he asked in a thick voice, looking as if he was about to keel over again.

"No. Their chests are moving, and there is no sign of injury. I believe they are merely unconscious."

His eyes widened as he glanced around wildly.

"Mr. Christian, please remember you are an officer in the Southampton Aerocorps," I said purely to brace him up. "Officers do not panic when faced with unconscious stowaways. Nor do they faint repeatedly, or vomit willy-nilly." That last bit was added due in reference to the green cast to his face.

He swallowed hard, his pronounced Adam's apple bobbing a bit wildly, but in the end he squared his shoulders and gave a nod. "Aye, captain. I'm ready."

Oh, I had my doubts as to whether or not he was ready for the stresses and strains of life aboard a Corps airship, but that was something I would have to deal with at a later time. Right now I had to figure out who the stowaways were, and what it would mean to me. Etienne would kill me if anything happened to mess up the Black Hand's plans. "Help me move them out from behind the crate. Perhaps they swooned due to lack of air."

It wasn't a horribly good theory, but I didn't dwell on that as we pulled out first the man, then the woman, laying them tidily on the two long crates near the door Piper indicated as suitable resting spots.

"Where's their velocipedes?" Mr. Christian asked as we stood back to gaze down on the inert man and woman.

I stared at my chief officer. "Their velocipedes?"

"Aye." He gestured toward the woman. "She's wearing bloomers, so she must have been riding a velocipede."

I glanced at the woman, wanting to point out the obvious. But I was captain now, and I had a duty to my crew. "Those are trousers, Mr. Christian, not cycling bloomers."

"But...she's a lady." A puzzled frown pulled his eyebrows together.

"There's more to a lady than a pair of titties," Mr. Piper offered as he eyed the woman.

"Mr. Piper," I said, goaded into admonishing him.

He gave an odd little half shrug. "I'm just sayin' that a woman ain't necessarily a lady."

"I do not have argument with your sentiment, just your method of expressing it." I moved around him to consider the man lying on the crate.

"I've heard tell that some ladies wear trousers," the erstwhile Dooley offered. "In America. Before the war. I don't know that they do now, but I did see pictures of ladies in trousers walking in a parade."

“You aren’t old enough to remember the time before the war,” Mr. Christian scoffed. “It’s only been over for four years, and it was on for eighteen before that.”

“I’ve seen pictures!” Dooley said stubbornly, and I knew the two would get into what I feared were perpetual arguments about trivial matters.

“Dooley, please ask Mr. Ho to join us. Perhaps she can ascertain if there is any injury to the stowaways.”

“You think they really are stowaways?” Mr. Christian asked, looking both scandalized and thrilled. “Will we have to throw them in the brig?”

“Considering we don’t have a brig on board the Tesla, that might be a little difficult. Let us first find out who they are and what they were doing in the hold. Perhaps they had some sort of an attack while the cargo was being loaded, and are here by mistake.”

I didn’t believe that for one minute, but I couldn’t bear to contemplate the repercussions of the pair being spies.

Mr. Piper gave me a long look, but said nothing, just cocked his hip up on a nearby barrel and watched silently as I made a cursory examination of the two.

“Well, they don’t seem to have any weapons upon them,” I noted as I finished my examination of their pockets. The man was wearing an undershirt, and dark grey trousers. The woman was clad in a long blue tunic made of silk, and matching trousers. It was beautiful material, and I couldn’t help but touch the hem of the tunic with longing. Reality returned quickly, however, and I surreptitiously brushed down the heavy wool of my uniform jacket and skirt before turning to the bosun. “I wonder why the man is wearing nothing but an undershirt?”

“And a black one at that,” Mr. Piper said, squinting at it. “Black as the devil’s cods, it is. Ain’t never seen one that color.”

“Could be he’s a thuggee,” Mr. Christian piped up.

I looked at him in surprise. “A thuggee? The Indian thuggees, do you mean?”

“Aye,” he nodded, his expression earnest. “My mum used to tell me tales of the thuggees. Before the Moghul imperator took it over, the whole of India used to be ruled by these thuggees. They were dangerous men, very deadly and skilled in the ways of murder. My mum said that they all ran around in naught but their underthings, on account it made them silent and stealthy.”

We all looked at the prone man. “He certainly is silent, but I don’t know how stealthy he is,” I commented. “He doesn’t look particularly Indian, either.”

“That’s probably part of his clever plan,” Mr. Christian said, nodding as if it all made sense. “He wouldn’t want to look like a thuggee, now would he? That would warn you to beware of him. They’re cunning, those thuggees. My mum always said they were as cunning as a cat.”

“What would a thuggee be doing in the hold of my ship?” I asked, making another quick search of the man for weapons. I found none.

“Well,” Mr. Christian said, making himself comfortable on a wine barrel. “What if he was a master thuggee, and had a job to do in Rome to kill someone important, say one of the Emperor’s representatives. There’s a lot of them there now, what with the wedding and all.”

“That is true,” I said slowly. The very reason Etienne had chosen my ship to hide his cargo in was because of the opportunity it presented to strike a blow against the number of imperial representatives who were in Rome. “I’ve heard that there is a large delegation in Rome to work out the terms of the treaty with the King of Italy.”

“So the thuggee needs to get there, but with everyone watching all the passenger ships, he can’t take one of those,” Mr. Christian continued, clearly warming up to his theme. “So he stows away on an insignificant cargo ship, intending on catching the crew—that’s all of us—by

surprise one night, and killing us all in our beds. That way he can land in Rome without anyone knowing he was there. His plan is no doubt to slip away once he lands, and conduct his nefarious affairs.”

“God’s bollocks!” Mr. Piper said, looking askance at the still unconscious man. “The brig’s too good for him! Let’s toss the murdering son of a scabby whore over the side, captain.”

“The Southampton Aerocorps frowns heavily on tossing people out of airships,” I said mildly, adding, “And even if they didn’t, I would not suggest that as a course of action in this case. There are two flaws in your reasoning, Mr. Christian.”

“Oh? What’s that, captain?”

“One,” I said, ticking the item off on my finger, “you did not account for the woman’s presence. If this thuggee was sent to kill one or more of the emperor’s men, then why is the woman with him?”

The young man’s face fell while he eyed the woman. “Well...mayhap she’s his accomplice?”

“Doubtful,” I said, shaking my head. “Not knowing any assassins—or thuggees—personally, I am forced to rely on the testimony given by those who have, and never have I heard of assassins roaming the countryside in packs. They are solitary folk by nature, I believe, especially those who strive to achieve an unsurpassed level of stealth.”

“What’s the second flaw?” Mr. Christian asked, a touch acidly, I thought.

“He’s not armed. Not only would that make it impossible for a man to single-handedly kill the nine people on the Tesla, it also leaves him at a distinct disadvantage when trying to assassinate an imperial official.”

“The captain has a point,” Mr. Piper said slowly, nodding his grizzled head. “I’m not saying the lad isn’t a murderin’ bastard, but it’s a damned sight harder to throttle people by hand than it is to stick a shiv in their heart, or blast their brains out the back of their head with a Disruptor, or shove a red hot poker—”

“Thank you, Mr. Piper,” I said, quickly cutting off his gruesome catalog.

“Course, there’s nothin’ to say he couldn’t be gettin’ a knife from the galley, and spillin’ all our guts on the floor. Nothin’ is easier than a quick disembowelin’, says I, though it takes ye a bit to die—”

“*Thank* you,” I said louder, giving him a gimlet look.

He pursed his lips and said nothing.

“Mayhap we should toss him over the side, just to be sure,” Mr. Christian said, clutching his abdomen.

“I don’t think such an extreme action will be necessary. The simple fact is that we have no proof that this man and woman are thuggees.”

“Then who are they?” Mr. Christian asked, and I had to admit that there he had me.

“We will have to wait for them to wake up to ask them,” I said calmly.

“Could be the murderin’ sod is from the Corps, sent out to watch you,” Mr. Piper said, absently picking his ear. “But he’s not wearin’ a uniform, so I don’t think that’s likely.”

“I know!” Mr. Christian said, raising his hand as if he was in the schoolroom. “He’s from the emperor, and he’s in *disguise* as a thuggee.”

I ignored him, my eyes once again on the strange man. “It is a very curious thing, no matter who he is. As for his companion...I wonder what Mr. Mowen would make of this?”

I held up a small rectangular white and black object. It was made of some sort of chrome, smooth and rounded at the corners, with dangling black wires.

“What is it?” Mr. Christian asked, craning his head to peer at it.

“I don’t know,” I answered, turning the object over. It was about the size of my hand, and cool to the touch. “There is a maker’s mark here. iPod. How very odd. I have never heard of such a company.”

“Do you think it’s a bomb, then, miss?” Mr. Christian’s eyes came close to popping right out of his head.

“It’s not ticking, and doesn’t appear to be active, but it does have wires, and everyone knows bombs must have wires. However, I’ve never seen one like this. It’s quite dainty.”

Mr. Piper leaned over my shoulder to examine it. “I wouldn’t be thinkin’ a thuggee would carry a dainty bomb. A wicked-sharp shiv, now, that I could see. But a wee little bomb like that?” He shook his head. “Don’t make sense.”

“I’m inclined to agree, but despite it appearing to be inactive, I believe we should get it off the ship. Since we are almost to Marseilles, we will drop it over the side into the Etang de Berre where it will not harm anyone should it explode.”

Mr. Christian’s gaze swiveled to the couple still draped over the crates. “A petite bomb! That must mean...captain, do you think they’re...” His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. “Revolutionaries?”

Mr. Piper sat up a bit straighter, but his eyes were on me not the strangers. I didn’t mind him looking to me for direction, but the speculation in his eyes was a bit daunting.

“I doubt that,” I said slowly, looking back at the man and woman, picking my words carefully. “I did not find the Black Hand insignia on them, nor do they have any weapons. It’s been my experience that revolutionaries always carry weapons.”

“Oh. I suppose that’s so,” Mr. Christian said, his face falling. “Still, would have been exciting to have caught some revolutionaries, wouldn’t it? I’ve heard that the emperor himself rewards those who turn them in. I’d love to see him, just once.”

“I’ve seen him,” Dooley said as he re-entered the hold, his chest puffing out with self-importance. “He rode by when I was on leave in London. He was in a beautiful black carriage, made of glass it was, and there was a lady next to him, a glorious princess all dressed in gold, glittering and sparkling in the sun just like my brass buttons.”

“Your buttons are a disgrace to the Corps,” Mr. Christian answered, his lip curling as he gestured toward Dooley’s jacket. “And that wasn’t a princess next to the emperor—it was the Duchess of Prussia, the one he’s marrying in ten day’s time.”

I ignored their banter as I chewed over a possibility that had just struck me—could it be that Etienne had sent the couple to assist me? It wasn’t unknown for him to send assistance when he thought it necessary, but he knew me well. A memory rose of him pulling on his clothes as I lay tangled in the sheets, exhausted and sated, his grey eyes warm with amusement as he said that he could always count on me to be proficient in all that I did.

A faint blush rose at the memory. The knowledge that I had given myself to a man who was using me for political reasons was not one of my finer moments, but I had survived it, just as I had survived everything else. No, Etienne would be confident in my ability to do my job. Besides, he would tell me if he was sending a couple of members incognito—and he hadn’t said anything of the sort the last time we’d met. Although it was true we hadn’t had more than a few snatched minutes, it not being at all the thing for a captain in the Aerocorps to be seen in the company of the head of the revolutionary force determined to overthrow the emperor.

I sheathed the Disruptor. “Dooley, did you find Mr. Ho?”

“Aye, captain. She’ll be along directly,” he answered, hovering around the bodies.

I directed a pointed glance at him. “Then please about your duties. Mr. Christian, would you be so kind as to ask Mr. Mowen if he could spare a moment to examine the device we found?”

“Aye, aye,” he answered, giving a brisk salute as he hurried out of the hold. I waited until the sound of their footsteps on the gangway faded into nothing before turning to my companion.

“Well, Mr. Piper?”

“Well, captain?” the old man said, his gaze skittering away from mine with cagey awareness.

“Do you think they’re revolutionaries?”

His eyes met mine again for a moment before turning to the two people. “What ye said about revolutionaries never bein’ found without weapons ain’t true, it ain’t true at all.”

“No, it isn’t, but it’s better if Mr. Christian thinks so.”

“Aye, the lad’s been dropped on his head once too often,” the old man agreed, idly scratching his rear end. “Could be they *are* revolutionaries. They have the look of strangers about them. But what would such as them be doin’ on the Tesla?”

“Doing what revolutionaries do best, I suppose,” I answered, contemplating a miserable future that started with the people in front of me, and ended in disaster, possibly death. Probably my own. Or, god help me, worse. “Sowing dissent, attempting to overthrow the emperor, and destroying all things imperial. It’s going to be a nightmare when we land.”

He slid me another odd look. “Perhaps.”

Before I could ask him just what he meant, the unconscious man moaned, and lifted his hand to his head. “What the hell hit me?”

His words were slurred slightly, but it wasn’t that which concerned me—it was his accent. An American accent.

“Ratsbane!” I swore, pulling out the Disruptor. “He’s American!”

“I ain’t never heard of an American revolutionary,” Mr. Piper said meditatively. “Is there such a thing as an American thuggee?”

“Sir,” I said, addressing the man with both words and the weapon. “You will regulate your movements. I am holding a firearm, and the setting is on sensitive.”

“What?” The man rubbed his face, then opened his eyes, squinting at me. “What’s sensitive? Ow. Other than my head. Would you mind me asking who you are, and just what you’re doing in my lab?”

“Could be he’s not so much a revolutionary as he is lackin’ in wits,” Mr. Piper murmured.

I couldn’t help but wonder if that was true. A lab? What was the stranger talking about? He certainly appeared befuddled, his face expressing a combination of pain and confusion. Perhaps he was just a poor soul who had wandered onto the ship by mistake? No. That was too much of a coincidence. He had to be there for a reason, a reason I was sure to dislike intensely.

“Jupiter, Mars, and all the little planets,” the man said in a manner that indicated he was swearing. He rubbed his head then turned to look at me. With a start, I realized his eyes didn’t match—one was brown, while the other was mossy green. Oddly enough, it was attractive on him, not discordant, as I would have supposed. In fact, his face was attractive, too.

What the devil was a handsome spy doing on my ship?

“Did I ask who you were?” he asked in a voice that was still a little thick.

“Yes. I am Octavia Emmaline Pye.” I bit back an oath at my words. What on earth was I doing giving him my full name with such casual disregard? Captains in the Aerocorps demanded and received respect; they did *not* engage in common chit-chat with suspected criminals. I strove to put the stowaway in his proper position, saying in a stern voice, “You may refer to me as Captain Pye.”

With a sudden move that had me scrambling backward, the man swung his legs over the edge of the crate and got to his feet. He wobbled for a few seconds, then straightened up to his full height. He blinked in surprise at me for a few moments, then a smile curled his lips. “Did I miss the memo about a masquerade party?”