

**Gallery Viewport of airship The Elephant, tethered at the New York City Sky Port, September 15, 1860**

Madame Elvira Starr stared out the viewing port in the Gallery of her pachyderm-shaped airship, *The Elephant*, as the sun set on Manhattan and the scurrying masses five stories below. The setting sun shone on brass accents against the walnut-stained Douglas fir and claret velvet of the wide deck that spanned the width of the airship, lighted from new ætheric chandeliers and the isinglass panes that comprised most of the back wall. Only the slightest vibrations of the boilers broke the silence before the cruise, despite the crew's frenetic activity below. In a couple of hours, handsome women and powerful men would mingle here - dancing, negotiating, and gathering information.

Though she hadn't donned her costume and persona, Elvira paced the Gallery in frustration. Her unbound black hair with its few silver strands fell to her shoulders over a crimson kimono that complimented her topaz complexion. The golden light on the reports didn't change the hard truth that everything she controlled rode on this one cruise to Charles Towne. In the next 20 hours, the colonial diplomats must be convinced to recognize the new Republic of Texas. Lining their pockets with trade deals would benefit them more than yet another skirmish over borders, trade routes, and whispers of revolt. A failed war would be bad for her business, but a successful one, even worse. The Texican's new technology would give them all access to the continent and the gold fields of California.

The ambassador from Liberia, Mpenzi Okoro, the reputed Queen of the Pirates of Savannah, would meet them in the air for her own safety and security. Zulie had made the arrangements, including a Liberian escort ship.

With Liberia and Texas as allies, Elvira would truly be the Empress of the Sky, raking in the money and pulling the strings of every business in the continent, a goal she had worked for over nearly 30 years.

The only other thing she could ask for would be for Zulie to be happy.

Captain Zulie Dahomey strode across the Gallery. Her mannish body towered over Elvira, her hands folded behind her back in military stance. Her mahogany face held no expression under the cap of the crew uniform, its ocher and aubergine wool the only elegance she permitted herself, and that for the benefit of the crew. Her dark stare meant she had something to say, and it might as well be dealt with now.

Elvira looked up at her best friend and lover. "What's the news?"

"Velvet says the Irish operative will be neutralized." Zulie slid into a chair beside Elvira. "Did you order it? Is she just protecting her cover?"

"I told her to use her judgment." Elvira searched her partner's face to ascertain what she thought, how she felt. "The Irishman asks a lot of nosy questions—he knows too much about our network. She had a lead from the Mauverton Detective Agency about some group financing a large operation, but didn't know if it affected us. Anything else?"

Zulie leaned forward, her expression softer, her eyes wide, with an upturn to the corners of her mouth, for a moment revealing a tender spot. "It's time you took a day off. Let's go to the White Point Garden when we get to Charles Towne and waste some of the gold you make on this trip."

There'd be precious little to waste after paying everyone, but Elvira smiled anyway. "I don't guess you'll take no for an answer?" She laid her hand on Zulie's arm.

"That's right." Zulie clasped her long fingers over Elvira's hand. "You owe me that, and you need some grounding and sunshine before you dry up and float away like a bit of gossamer." She even smiled, white teeth breaking up the dark expanse of her face and laugh lines erasing the scowl she wore when working. "It wouldn't hurt you to eat some soul food either."

"And lose my girlish figure?" Elvira lightly stroked her captain's cheek. "Let's just get the toffs down South in one piece first."

Zulie shook her head and pulled her hand away, the softness retreating behind her stern facade. "This cruise is a bad idea. You've got nothing to gain, and everything to lose."

Elvira crossed her arms. "I have everything to gain. I'll know every syllable of what goes on tonight, who aligns with whom, who wants what, and what they are willing to pay for it." She paused, pushing a loose strand of her long black hair behind her ear. "Insider information is always valuable, and skimming a percent or two off the top pays very well."

"Then you should stick to the planters and industrialists and leave the governments alone. They won't ever be paid off." Zulie leaned in. "They are not as honest as you are."

"If I can steer them into expending our network west," Elvira said, hands propped on hips, "how much do you think that is worth?"

Zulie stared for a moment, her head tilted, working scowl firmly in place. "Your neck, if any of it gets traced back to you."

"Then we have to be careful." Elvira reached out for Zulie's hand, hoping that would ease her lover's frown and bring some softness back to her face. "We've been playing this game a long time, and we know how it works. I can handle these ambassadors. "

"When is it going to be enough?" Zulie's face scrunched into a deeper scowl. "You will never be part of the old boys' network." She stood, crossing her arms, staring down at Elvira.

"If you can't join them, we beat them." Elvira stood beside Zulie, putting her arm around Zulie's waist. "If I can give them what they want and make them pay for it, then that will be enough." Elvira smiled, without warmth, her whore smile. "I know what I am, and delivering the happy ending has always been the mission. This time I choose what the happy ending will be."

Zulie looked away, her body rigid. "They don't listen to you."

"Actually, they do listen," Elvira gave her lover a squeeze, "to rumors while they drink coffee, hints in the newspapers, and clues in their mailboxes."

"I think you're getting too big for your britches." Zulie put her hands on Elvira's shoulders and pulled her around to face her.

"Maybe, but then, I am not wearing any." She reached up and kissed Zulie's cheek. "And I have you to protect me."

Zulie embraced her for a moment. "I will give my life for you one day, but it may not be enough."

Elvira leaned her head on Zulie's shoulder, gazing at the deepening shadow below. "Let's get this beast in the air. I hate being grounded."

"Just remember that you can't get away from them once we fly." Zulie, too, stared out the viewport. "You can't own the city," she said at last. "And even if you did, the money's in Charles Towne. Plan your expansion there." Zulie let her go. "I'll see you in the engine room. Don't keep your fairy cogmother waiting."

Watching Zulie walk away, Elvira sighed. They'd made a new venture where no one else dared tread, bringing their marks together like hummingbirds around a bright red hibiscus. Why couldn't Zulie see that?

A few days playing in Charles Towne seemed a reasonable request. She could pacify Zulie and get her feet dirty. She'd have time to think about how to use her new alliances.

One more day, and she'd have everything under control.

**New York City, near the docks below the sky port**

K. P. Jonas signaled to his runner, Brian, to tell his handler at the Mauverton Detective Agency that he would be late checking in. His gut muttered wrongness. Rumors swarmed about this particular excursion, though Madame Elvira routinely chartered her high priced cruises. Not for the likes of him, ten year's wages for a single night's ride, but a secret meeting, maybe a war council about Texas, had caused a stir, though he couldn't figure why anyone in New York cared whether some buckskins broke away from Mexico and the Indians half a continent away. He hadn't been able to find out.

Loaded light, the liquor wagon's order came from Madame's distillery less than an hour before takeoff, not her usual instructions. Brian brought him the message to take a different route to the sky port where the ship was tethered. As drayman, Jonas knew every street in the city and the surrounding boroughs as well. This late in the afternoon, the streets would be crowded, not least along the river. He shook his head, coaxing the horses to pick up their pace. Madame Elvira didn't trust steam wagons with her products, though she paid her artificers well to create new gadgets. Horses were more reliable, rarely needed new parts, and ate cheaper. But she usually left the driving to the driver.

He could not figure what the Mauverton Agency wanted to know about Madame Elvira or who was paying them to find out. None of her many businesses were illegal, as near as he could tell. Her workers seemed happy enough, well-fed, even educated. He couldn't find much about her clients were, but rumors said colonial ambassadors. It didn't make sense.

The Red Hares Gang wanted him to recruit new members from Madame Elvira's people, but most of the workers were women, not the rough and tumble men the Hares wanted. Few ever left the Red Hares except in a pine box, and they were curious about his detective activities. He'd been one of them since he was in short pants.

Jonas snapped the reins to speed up the big horses, making good time. Something whizzed past his ear, followed by the report of a gunshot. He snapped the reins to spur the

horses on, and they responded, barely allowing him to restrain them into a controlled gallop. The wagon complained of the strain with the crates of whiskey bottles and the cobbled street. Jonas ducked as low as possible, but he was still a target. More bullets landed near him, splintering the wood of the wagon seat.

He didn't waste energy worrying about who his assailants were. He drove the horses as hard as he dared.

A wagon blocked the road ahead--an ambush. He could not get around it. As he reined in the horses, a great weight knocked him into the street. Kicking feet surrounded him, and curses rained down on him from men he'd known all his life.

Jonas curled up to protect his head and shield as many of his internal organs as possible, but these boys knew their business.

"That's what you get for spying on us, my boyo," said the Red Hares boss. "Since you've brought us such a nice present, we'll let you live today. Stay out of the old neighborhood if you want to keep your head attached to your shoulders."

Jonas lay still, pretending to be dead. With luck, nobody would shoot him to make sure.

The boss whistled to the men, who took the wagon, leaving him covered with mud and worse.

Jonas rolled to the side of the road and pulled himself to his feet. Probably a rib broken, otherwise he was a mass of bruises and a few cuts.

Why was he still alive? The Red Hares cared nothing for the police, most of whom were brothers and cousins. Mauverton detectives struck little fear into their black hearts, yet he lived—surely they would not leave an agent alive if they knew that's what he was. Maybe they just wanted the whiskey. It didn't make sense. They'd never even asked for anything to fall from his wagon before. But his cover was blown. He'd have to leave town. The Hares didn't forgive.

He'd never make it back to Mauverton headquarters, back across Red Hares territory, so the airship was his best bet. No æthergram office or even a runner lay between him and the sky port, no way to explain what happened. He'd get to the airship and ask the Madame for her protection. She had a security leak somewhere, which she needed to know. He needed a ride out of town. Now.

Jonas had seen enough of Madame Starr's way of doing business. He wanted to be part of it. He could spy for her instead of the Mauvertons. If she would take him on, he could get some real answers, see who her clients were and whose deep pockets kept his handlers well fed, and in return, he'd tell her what they knew about her.

Away from the city, he could start a new life and have some hope of keeping it.

He walked, staying to the sidewalk. He jogged when he could get his breath and staggered along when he couldn't.

By the time he made it to the ship, it would be ready to lift but without her liquor. Madame Elvira would not be pleased. He didn't yet know how much she knew about him.

He jogged down the next block, close enough to see the great airship shaped like an elephant tethered to the top of a five-story warehouse. Impressively silly, it outdid P.T. Barnum's live elephant. They had to let him work his passage. If not, the loading dock boss might let him stow away.

The thought of being aloft made him more light-headed than his injuries, making him stumble and prop himself up against a building to recover. The thoughts of climbing the stairs to the freight elevator and then to the top of the building where the airship was tethered gave him pause, but it couldn't be helped. He'd be inside. He began to run as best he could, his ribs screaming as loudly as his ragged wheezing.

He would tell her his story, and she would do whatever she would do.

## Engine Room - Elvira

On the port wall in the center section of the mechanical room, a small bowl hung from a short tripod of chain. It was not pretty, just a pan for catching oil, greasy inside and out, in contrast to the cleanliness of every part of the ship itself. In the bowl was a wrench, a cog, a bit of broken drive chain, a nut and bolt, and a few rivets. The great engine was silent, waiting for the steam to turn its screw and the propellers that pushed the ship along. The automatons that tended it were motionless, their gremlin handlers sleeping or hiding wherever they stayed while the ship was not in motion. Above the bowl, only visible from the corner of one's eye, was a soft, blue glow. Those who saw it said it was the fairy cogmother, but others dismissed it as a trick of the light, some kind of reflection.

The crew circled around the bowl, each one touching the inside of it and then marking a hand with the sooty smudge. The Chief Engineer placed a small finger mark of smudge on the great engine.

"May we all work well and true," the Chief Engineer intoned, "each hand in the right place at the right time and out of danger." The aeronauts all raised their hands, some left and some right, displaying their marks.

"We ask that you guide us through the night, and that your gremlins work with us, as we care for your vessel and its engine."

"Aye!" they said in chorus, and then the crewmembers moved to their stations without another word.

Neither Zulie nor Elvira spoke until they reached the stairwell to the passenger deck. Zulie turned up to the Gallery as Elvira stepped down towards the loading dock.

"Why do you go through this charade?" Zulie asked. "Liberian ships run on technology and science, not superstition."

"That's where you are wrong." Elvira said, touching the back of her neck. "The ritual is for the crew. It helps them to believe in a little fairy dust, even if it is made of grease. A bit of superstition can do magic as long as you keep it on your side."

Zulie raised an eyebrow and cocked her head. "But when it turns against you?"

Elvira laughed. "The peculiar fact of machines is that they know whether a person likes them or not." Elvira stroked the wall of the stairway. "I do love this ship. If getting a little fairy cogmother grease on the back of my neck helps me think a little better, it's a good thing." She took another step down. "*The Elephant* is my freedom, my life. I hate being grounded."

Zulie sighed. "And I worry about your being in the clouds. You need some downtime." She leaned against the wall, as if she too were tired.

Elvira reached up to stroke her face. "I said we'd spend time in Charles Towne. Just give me one more day, and then...." Elvira simpered. "We'll play as much as you like."

Zulie took her hand, holding it tight for a moment. "I'm holding you to that. No excuses. I'm tired of sharing you with the fairy cogmother."

Elvira laughed. "You are the only one for me."

Zulie smiled, and then turned to climb to the bridge. "I'll see you later then."

Elvira watched her disappear up the staircase before she started down. Nobody would be in surveillance yet, and the lower levels were not watched so closely. She slipped a flask from her chemise and drank a few swallows of her tonic. She was already tired, and she had been awake only a few hours. Sleep had evaded her while she lay beside Zulie last night and

tried not to toss and turn. She didn't let her women carry tonic with them, and she kept a close control over it. Nobody accused her of drugging her women, and she needed them sharp-minded, not dull and compliant. However, she needed to think for them all, and to stay on her toes. Zulie was right. A holiday on the ground would do her good, but she'd remember to bring tonic along so that she could enjoy their trip even more. Even Zulie took a swig on occasion, so she wouldn't mind.

Especially if Elvira neglected to tell her.

## Bridge of the Elephant

Captain Dahomey strode a few steps across a catwalk to the bridge. Though Elvira ran the cruise, Zulie commanded the airship. She wanted the crew focused, and her presence always put them on alert. She thought of it as respect, but she knew there was an element of fear there as well. Keeping a good balance benefited everyone.

"Captain on the bridge."

Each crew member turned to her and touched their foreheads in recognition of her authority. They too had smudges of grease on their hands. Then the crew returned to their work, checking controls, and going through each item on their checklists.

The pilot stepped closer. "We're on schedule, everything checks out so far."

"Excellent." Zulie nodded toward the door. She and the pilot left the bridge to stand on the catwalk outside. "The Liberian ambassador will join us when we cross over Virginia."

"Noted," Atwater said. "We will watch for their signal."

Zulie whispered, aware that the area was watched, "The password is 'crowfeather.' There can be no incidents this cruise. Keep your people on high alert."

The pilot nodded. "How secure is this meeting? Too many people know about it, some that would like to see us out of the sky."

"We are safe enough," Zulie assured her. "We've paid off all the usual authorities, and we have a Liberian escort ship."

"That makes for a lot of people to keep a secret." Atwater twitched her shoulders, glancing at the open space below the catwalk. "People don't keep secrets well."

"Have you heard something?" Zulie searched her pilot's wary expression, not her

cheerful self.

The pilot frowned and shook her head. "No, but something feels wrong, like an itch I can't scratch."

Whatever was on the pilot's mind, Zulie wanted it out in the open. She tried another tactic. "What do you hear from your mother? Is she well?"

Atwater stared away for a few seconds. "She said to be watchful, that we are carrying dynamite and too many matches." She glanced up at the periscope lens that focused on the catwalk, but made no sign to communicate. Her body was stiff, alert, as if listening to something Zulie could not hear.

"I've taken more than usual precautions. I think we'll be all right." Captain Zulie put her hand on the pilot's shoulder to reassure her. "Your mother's visions are good, but I trust eyes on the ship more."

"She said you would say that, but you should stop and feel your way through." The pilot held up a hand, palm outward, as if to ward off arguments. "She said some walls are hard to break through and must be scaled or gone around. Don't lead with your head."

The captain narrowed her eyes. "She said all that?"

The pilot met her glance, and then looked away, deferring to her authority. "I'm quoting her. I've delivered the message in good faith to her and to you."

"Thank you for the information." Zulie now also felt that itch of indefinable unease, but refused to show it. "Now, you have the ship to pilot."

"Yes, Captain." Atwater turned away, but then turned back, not approaching. "She said her influence was not the only one following this trip. Anything that happens here affects us

all." She paused, gazing away from the Captain. "She says we need to watch our backs and both sides."

"We always do. Thank you again." The Captain nodded to affirm the pilot's message. She did not want the pilot worried about anything other than the ship. "Just keep an eye out. We know our people."

"Aye, Captain." She held up her left hand, which bore a smudge. "Heads and hands where they should be."

Zulie showed her own smudge. "Hands and heads. We'll lift off within the hour."

As she returned to her office, she mentally counted their enemies, wondering which one might hire a hoodoo, and what they hoped to gain. Most of their enemies worked directly, taking action, covert or otherwise, not hiring old women to conjure spells.

When no names came to mind, she considered their allies, as they had no friends. Would someone in the network turn against her? It was possible, but to what end? Elvira provided everything they wanted - power, money, social position, education for their children and protégés...if someone wanted more, she could ask.

Elvira wasn't paying enough attention to her people, worrying too much about the information game. Nevertheless, she had good people, and she had the dossier on everyone else coming aboard. Did she have enough information on her clients to know who their enemies were? If she and her network were not the target, who was?

Could they find out in time to keep something bad from happening?

Twenty-one hours to Charles Towne.

**Promenade Deck - J. R. Dallas**

An open deck on the top of *The Elephant*, with high railings and seats, was designed for people to gaze through the windows along the sides. A brisk breeze ruffled the movable elephant ears that steered the ship, but once on the observation deck, passengers were protected by the transparent panels.

Mr. Jolly Rodger Dallas, representative of the new Republic of Texas, joined a short queue of well-dressed men in their top hats and fine suits as they entered the lift to *The Elephant*, the notorious air-borne whorehouse. The others had little to say to each other, saving it all for later, he supposed. His tailored buckskin frock coat was warm despite the evening air, and it gave him a sense of home, like the Stetson he wore, regardless of the amused looks they got.

Riding this bloated beast of sin had cost him a pretty penny, though the whore had offered to pay his way. He would never bed a whore nor drink a drop of whiskey, and wasn't about to be paid by such. He knew the evils of sin, and while he might have to live in the world, he would not be a part of its treachery. If the men he needed to deal with were happy with this smirch on their characters, so much the better. None would agree to meet with him while they were on the ground, so he'd bide his time and use their weakness against them.

The top-hatted nobs wandered about, looking out at the miasma of New York City across the river and marveling at how many of their brethren were crammed into such a small place. Dallas squinted into the sun. Maybe two hours of daylight left. He sighed, missing the wide-open plains of Texas, room for a man to breathe, space for a man to be part of something bigger than himself, not merely a cog in a machine gone wild.

One by one the men disappeared into a hatchway, a security procedure, just as he had been warned. He wondered how much of what he'd heard was true, but he owed no one any favors. He shook his head, thinking, what a sorry way to do business.

Dallas had a moment's doubt as he had no one to make introductions. However, with no more than a couple dozen passengers and twenty hours, he was bound to meet the ones that mattered.

Texas, he reminded himself, was the only important thing. She must be recognized as a sovereign nation, and then she could develop her power and resources in this hemisphere. He knew the riches of his native land, the red dirt where he had been born, and the men he had fought alongside, were better men than any of these yellow-livered colonists could imagine. Those riches were only the bargaining chip. For now, getting into the game was more important than upping the ante.

When most of the others had gone down into the ship, he took his place in line. The other stragglers were enjoying the view, awaiting their women and their drink. None of the other gentlemen had personal baggage, J. R. noted with interest. He was the only one with personal baggage, his presentation. He'd surrendered his traveling trunk when he entered the lift. How did this Madame deal with such things, to keep them from being stolen? How would he know his own things were safe?

It was his turn. He bent down to step into the short door, removing his Stetson. The room became dark as the door was dogged tight behind him.

"Your name, please, Sir?" A feminine voice asked.

As his eyes adjusted to the relative dark, he saw a young woman in modest street dress

sitting at a desk, not what he had expected. "J. R. Dallas," he said.

Two other young women, also dressed appropriately, stood behind him beside a screen.

"Thank you, Mr. Dallas," the first woman said. "Please step behind the screen and remove your clothing. We will return it to you as soon as we check for weapons and other contraband."

"Now you listen here," he sputtered.

"This is a security procedure, Mr. Dallas. We ensure that no guns, knives, or other controlled substances enter our domain."

"You do not have the right to do this." He crossed his arms and braced himself on his boots.

"If you do not wish to be searched, Mr. Dallas, you may leave now." The woman stared at him, unmoving and unyielding, but with a pleasant smile. She said, dispassionately, "We will do our best to be as efficient as possible, so that you may enjoy your cruise."

"But I've paid for this cruise, and I must get to Charles Towne."

"Certainly, sir, but as you read in our contract, we have dominion over every part of this ship outside the jurisdiction of local law enforcement. There are no refunds after you have boarded the ship. We expect to enjoy your company, but every passenger is searched to assure our security and your safety."

He stared down at her, frowning into her cheerful smile. "I don't have any guns."

"Yes, sir, you do. A derringer in your left coat pocket, a pistol in a holster at your back, and at least one knife in your boot." The lady nodded towards the door. "Your choices are to leave, or to be searched. Some of our clients enjoy this process, but if you do not, we will be as

quick as is practical. "

Growling his displeasure, he complied.

"Hat and boots, first, please. Lottie and Carla will be pleased to help if you wish."

He handed over his hat, and pulled off his boots. There was nothing for it but to go through this humiliation. Madame would pay for that, and there would be interest on that payment. His coat was next, and then his shirt, but he stalled at taking off his denims.

"Come now, Mr. Dallas, don't be shy. We are known for our discretion as well as our other talents."

Dallas grunted. He was not taking off his pants for these little whores, not on this date. He stepped out from behind the screen. "Now look here...."

"Yes, that is precisely what we will do." The woman held his own gun at his chest, much too far away for him to grab or even kick it out of her hands. The other two grabbed him with surprising strength, one holding him just off balance, the other loosening his belt and bringing his pants off. He tried to struggle, but the one behind him pinched both of his elbows in a way that nearly took his breath away.

Once his denims were off, the other woman inspected his private parts in a most unladylike way. With each sound he made or attempt to move, the pain increased on his pressure points.

"Take him to the shower," the first woman said, and the two others frog-marched him to a door he had not noticed before. They unceremoniously guided him into a room filled with steam and running water.

"Wash behind your ears, Mr. Dallas," one of them said, not stifling her giggle. They

dogged the door shut, and after he banged on in and yelled at them, he gave in and washed. No wonder the ride cost so much if they used this much water. Shortly the water turned off, and a blast of warm air dried him. Towels had appeared with a robe and a pair of leather slippers. As soon as he put them on, the door unlocked and opened. They were watching him - shameless.

Another woman, blond and petite, carried a bag with his folded clothing. "I'm Brandy, your escort for this cruise," she said. "Please follow me to your room." She was modestly dressed and had the decency to look away.

"Do I have any other choice?" he growled.

"Not if you want to get dressed." She smiled in a professional way, not mocking or even amused. "Come on now, it's not so bad to have a hot bath."

For all the power men had on the ground, the women were in charge here. He would change that power structure as soon as he negotiated his airship for Texas.

**Meeting room - Zulie**

Zulie climbed up the stairway to the level above the client cabins to the public door of the meeting room. a larger room set up with a round conference table and upholstered wing chairs. A new chandelier with ætheric candles made the room sparkle above the table and left the fabric-covered walls dark. It gave the right ambiance for a meeting of the diplomats of all the colonies in the eastern half of North America. A serving area was set to the side where water, glasses, and savories would be available while the officials postured, pontificated, and pursued solutions to various conflicts, the main one being recognition of Texas and purchase of their new resource—the meeting before the official meeting in Charles Towne.

Zulie smiled as she inspected the room again, all its normal furniture replaced and other features hidden. No one would have suspected that this same room functioned as the dungeon for Mistress Malevolent on many cruises. Soundproof except for her spy gear and protected from attack from the outside, it was more secure than any ground facility. They would be safe here, at least from outside forces. She had already done all she could to protect them from each other.

"Surveillance," she said, in a conversational tone, not loud, not whispering. "Send someone down here to report on sound quality."

While she waited several minutes for surveillance to send a runner, Zulie checked the stretched fabric that hid the viewing ports. With no light behind the windows, they were invisible. She spoke aloud as she walked around the room, so they could check the sound. "The room is well prepared. Good work."

Where were they? She needed someone to help check the listening ports hidden behind

the walls.

She went back to the chandelier and spoke loudly, "Did you hear me? I need someone to let me know if the new communications schemes are working."

Outside the room, she went halfway down the staircase to a hidden panel which opened to a dark room behind the meeting room, fitted out with stations for viewing the meeting. The voyeurs who paid for those spaces had only had a place to sit and watch, so the soundproofing was doubly important. Now each window had a small desk, an earpiece to listen to the newly installed listening devices, and a tablet for recording notes, making it a bit crowded, but well worth the efforts the artificers had made. They had yet to find a way to make photographs in the darkness, but they had a team working on that process and on making automatic recordings of all proceedings.

Elvira's women were good, but some information just wasn't traded even for excellent sex. Now she'd be able to hear what the clients said to each other, and not just what they told their escorts.

As Zulie watched from the spy station, a crew member from surveillance dashed into the room. She looked around and spoke, but Zulie could not hear her through the listening earpiece. The new listening system was not working, only hours before the meeting.

Zulie strode back to the meeting room. "Get the æthographer down here, with her assistant and anyone else she needs, to get this fixed now."

The crew member dashed out without a word.

Ætheric malfunctions were not acceptable, and the system had been tested many times in the last week. Someone hadn't done the job right, or someone had deliberately sabotaged

the system. Woz didn't do sloppy work, and they didn't have time to trace out every single connection that someone might have cut or pulled apart.

When the meeting started, it all had to work perfectly, seamlessly.

Zulie needed someone to check the inter-ship communications as well. It would not do to lose communication with the Liberian escorts.

Twenty-one hours to Charles Towne.

## The loading dock

Jonas stumbled toward the sky port into the afternoon shadow of the airship. He tripped on something, planting his face in the dirt. He scrambled to his feet, leaning on the fence for support. He would have to get into the loading dock first, with no wagon for explanation. He found a discarded box, and with some effort, lifted it to his shoulder. He hunched over as if the box were weighing him down, and walked by the guards who protected the toffs leaving their carriages and loading into their elevator cages. Some people had even paid just to ride up to see the view of the Hudson, but Jonas just kept walking. He knew laborers were invisible.

He'd never been up to the ship before, always just drove in the wagon and helped them unload it at ground level. They knew him, at least by sight, and didn't question why he was here or where the liquor was. They didn't ask about anything, and didn't talk much to each other, like there was something going on they weren't supposed to talk about.

Once the crate came out on the roof, the men climbed off. Then a set of mechanical arms reached down to bring the crate into an opening in the belly of the ship.

"What's all this, then, " Jonas asked, watching the box disappear into the ship.

"Special cargo has to be unloaded on the ship," one of them said, "Then they'll send the crate down and we get another one."

"Any idea what's in them?"

The man looked away, off across the river. "They don't pay me enough to ask."

Jonas didn't ride back down, but walked across the on the roof to a ramp where smaller things were being toted in—baggage, food, and to his surprise, cases of liquor bottles. These

things didn't need special handling, and another shipment was there on time. He'd been set up for the gang to hit his load, probably by Madame Elvira.

"Ask if I can see Plato for a minute," he said to one of the workers toting a box of vegetables. "Tell him it's Jonas."

The dockworker looked him over, her face passive, but she nodded and moved up the ramp.

He made himself look over the edge of the building, but felt his stomach climb into his throat. The pain from the scrapes and bruises was drowned out by the vertigo of seeing the city in the distance from five stories up. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. He'd have to get used to being in the air. Maybe once inside, he would not have to look out.

He forced himself to look up into the dark bowel of the airship and to feel the solid ramp and the building beneath his feet. He had to explain to Madame what happened and ask her to take him away from the city.

Another wave of dizziness hit him, but this time he wasn't thinking about how far he was from the ground. He'd used his reserves running from the Red Hares gang, and he was exhausted. He stumbled. A strong, brown arm grabbed his shoulder, sending stabs of pain through his body.

"Man, what happened to you?" Plato, the loading dock boss, put his shoulder under Jonas's arm and half-dragged him inside. "Get this man some water," he called out. Plato set him on a crate. He grabbed a dirty bandanna from a pocket and started to dab at Jonas's head. "Madame said you weren't coming today."

Jonas flinched away. "I got to talk to her right now. The Hares hit the shipment—got it

all." He leaned over to put his weight on his feet. "Help me up to her office before it gets any closer to lift off time." He fought the dizziness and nausea. With any luck, Madame would kill him now and save the Hares the trouble.

Plato's dark face frowned with concern, his grizzled eyebrows drawn together like a strip of wool. "Better stay down here with us. She's wound tight today--lots of toffs aboard, some bigwig meeting—lots of extra cargo."

"All the more reason." He steadied himself with a hand up to Plato's shoulder. "Thanks." He pulled himself up straight and headed for the stairs.

"Three flights up and to the left," Plato said. "I'll let her know you are coming."

Jonas nodded and straightened his back. The stairway was well lit from light set into the ceiling--the new lights some of the wealthy installed in their houses to impress their guests. It was like her to make the stairs safer for her employees. She didn't like sick days.

He pulled on the handrail and made himself focus on the next step, one at a time. He didn't let his mind stray to the air outside and underneath the ship, just to the next step, up and up and up. He'd be fine in the cargo bay, and maybe the ship's doctor would patch him up. He had to get to her to ask for help.

Two flights up and one more to go. He stopped to get his bearings, as this floor was considerably better decorated and polished than the lower decks, with carpet on the floor, brass rails on the stairs and flocked paper on the walls. Very posh. An elaborate chandelier lit the way, above the landing with no obvious openings to that floor. Odd that.

One of the women, still in her kimono, came down to meet him. "You Jonas?"

He nodded, not wasting energy trying to be charming.

"Come on, then." She held out her arm to steady him, but he shook his head. No need for her to get dirty.

"Thank you," he said, still watching his feet to make sure they went where he wanted to go.

In the Gallery, the bar was luxurious, dark stained wood formed into delicate shapes, with brass taps and a full cabinet of whiskey bottles.

The madam sat at a table, waiting for him. He focused his attention on her, standing as straight as he could.

Madame Elvira Starr was dressed in black and white striped satin, sewn into chevron patterns with ruffles and a bright red corset, which didn't help his dizziness. He focused on her smooth complexion, her black hair piled on her head, and her black eyes above red painted lips. Her expression was neutral, which probably meant she was furious. She made no pretense of being friendly and accommodating. She inspected him like a piece of horseflesh, as if deciding whether to send him to the knackers.

His brain refused to clear. She seemed angry that he had come. He stood before her, trying to keep his balance, meeting her gaze. He had nothing to hide and not much more to lose.

He'd have to play his one last card, much earlier than he expected, but it his only out.

He waited for her to open the gambit, not speaking.

### **In the airship Gallery**

Holding her ionic stunner below the table in the airship Gallery, Madame Elvira took measure of the man standing before her, hat in hand. He was dirty, drying blood crusting his greasy brown hair and staining his gray shirt. His green eyes peered through the dark fringe of his hair and met her gaze without flinching. K. P. Jonas was supposed to be dead already.

"You've got either bullet-proof guts or a thick skull to show your ugly face here, empty handed," Elvira said. "Did you drink my liquor yourself or sell it off to your Red Hares boss?" She would have expected him to run back to his Mauverton bosses since he'd been ratted out to the Irish gang.

"I can tell you what I know," K. P. said, his voice low but clear. He let his hands hang by his side. "Or you can shoot me. Better that than go back to the city."

He had nerve enough, not cocky bravado reeking of her liquor. He swayed slightly though the airship was steady at mooring. His skin was pale under the grime.

"Glad to know your preferences." Elvira kicked the chair across from her to slide in front of him. "Sit down. Share some of this information, and then I'll decide whether to shoot you or drop you over the side."

Jonas sagged into the chair, his head dropping for a moment. "The Mauvertons know about your liquor operation, and now, so do the Irish. They don't like competition. They'll want to shake you down for their cut of the proceeds." He wiped his hand across his forehead, and then glanced at the blood on his hand. "Could I get some water?"

"Bring out a bottle of tonic and two glasses," she said, raising her voice a bit more than necessary. She didn't have time for this banter, but she needed information.

The bartender brought a wet cloth, two shot glasses, and the tonic. She glanced at Jonas and raised an eyebrow.

Zulie stood behind Jonas in the stairway. She shook her head.

"Thank you." Elvira put her pistol back in its hidden holster and poured them each a drink. "This is better than water—my own recipe." She drank her shot and watched him grimace as he swallowed the bitter tonic.

He swallowed again. "Thank you. Can I have some water now?" He wiped his forehead.

The bartender returned with a pitcher of water and one glass. "Captain says we're loaded and ready to lift."

Making the passengers wait would stir up questions she didn't want asked, but this man was too dangerous to turn loose.

"Lift off then, then." Elvira nodded again. "Here's your water."

"Thank you." He turned to the bartender with a nod. "Thanks to you as well." He filled his glass, drained it, and then another, and a third. "Facing death is thirsty work."

As he drank, Elvira weighed her options. He'd be an asset at best and a hole in her security at worst. She was short of time. "Did you spy for the Irish or the Mauves?"

"Both ways, as you already know." He hid a burp behind his hand. "Excuse me." He wiped the wet cloth across his head, making a smear of clean under the grime and blood.

Elvira's hair stood up on the back of her neck. Both the Mauves and the Irish would take a bribe, but neither would ever be paid off. "How much do they know about my business?"

Blood and dirt smeared the cloth. "Not as much as I do. You own the brewery, the farms that grow the grain, and the textile mills that make your employees' clothing. You treat your

people well, take care of them."

He was smarter than he looked, an asset in the spy business. Blackmail she could manage, but he might find his demands less than hers. "Why are you here, Mr. Jonas? What do you want?"

"I'd like to work for you—not just making deliveries but here on the ship." He dabbed at his head again. "And I need to get out of the city."

"Come with me." She led Jonas to the viewport, suspended in a glassy cage above the world, the most popular part of the ship. A slight shift of gravity marked the disconnection of the tether and the gentle surge of lift off.

As he stared through the viewport, his face, already pale, turned nearly green, and he swayed a little. It could be a reaction to the tonic, but she thought it was fear—hard to work on an airship if one were afraid of heights. How would he react in the darkness when the land was little more than the dark side of an infinite sky? She would find out later tonight. That might be handy too, to give him a simple task for him to do that would either prove his mettle or show him a coward.

Elvira exchanged a glance with Zulie, who stood at the entry to the Gallery. Zulie narrowed her eyes and turned down the corners of her mouth.

How much did the Mauverton detectives know, how much did Jonas know, and who else wanted to know? She'd have her answers before the trip was over, or Jonas would disappear permanently. He'd turned out to be more difficult to get rid of than Velvet thought when she ordered the raid, and that was in his favor, as long as he was on Elvira's side.

"My employees call me Madame." She brought him back to the bar where Zulie waited

for them. "Please send someone to get Mr. Jonas cleaned up and put him to work."

Zulie marched him downstairs with no protest from the Irishman.

Elvira put on her brightest smile as the third dose of tonic began to take effect, clearing her mind, and making her ready to manage the night's work. She'd be watching Jonas and biding her time. If she needed someone to sacrifice, now she had just the right goat.

Twenty hours to Charles Towne.

### **On the client cabin deck**

Dallas followed Brandy, glad that no one else was in the hallway. He could hear nothing through closed doors--very discreet. His room was half-way down the hallway, a simple room with a wide bed set into the wall drawers underneath, a closet where his clothing was hung, and by the door, a desk with a chair and writing materials. On top of the desk was a list.

"Please check the list carefully," Brandy said, "as it is an inventory of all your belongings. If everything is listed, please sign it and give it to me." She smiled.

"I won't need your services." He grabbed the list.

"I am your escort, Mr. Dallas, and I will see to your needs, whatever they may be."

"I need my guns and my knife." He growled again.

"And you will get them back, once you leave the ship in Charles Towne. They are secure, and no one will touch them."

She laid his clothes out on the bed while he read the list. They had found every item he had packed, even in the hidden compartments and a few things he had forgotten about. He signed the paper and handed it to her.

"I'm happy to help you dress, if you like. I can give you a massage if you are tired, or bring you some refreshments. Tea is served downstairs, and dinner is at eight. You can eat in your room if you wish, or you can join the other gentlemen."

"I'm fine, thank you. Now get out." He pointed to the door, glowering at her. "I've been dressing myself since I was a boy, and I don't need another 'inspection,' thank you very much."

As you wish, Mr. Dallas." She smiled again and stepped out. He surveyed the room. There were probably peep holes somewhere, but well-hidden. He finally sighed and slipped off

the robe. He remembered what the stakes were and that he had to play nice with these overfed, under-worked scalawags to get Texas on the map. He wondered if the little bitch would help out with that, since that's what he needed most.

He dressed and went out, where she was waiting for him.

"Why do you do this kind of work?" he asked. "Does your mother know what you are?"

"I meet many interesting people," Brandy said. "I learn new things every trip. And I make more money in one trip than my mother did all her short life."

"Tell me about these interesting people on this cruise tonight?"

"I understand that you are here to make a presentation to the ambassadors about some new kind of technology, for the price of recognition of Texas.."

"No secrets here." He waited for a response from her, but she showed neither disappointment nor relief. "Let's go down and meet with these important men. You can introduce me."

"Yes, Mr. Dallas. That is one of my services." Brandy took his arm. "I am briefed on what interests each country has, and what might be the best approach for them."

Dallas walked with Brandy, walking slowly on his long legs to keep from dragging her down the hall. Once they were seated at his table in the Gallery, Brandy poured the tea and acted like a real lady. It didn't make sense. She looked like a member of a church ladies society, but her smile was hardly innocent. She reminded him of his long-dead wife.

"Tell me about your work." She passed him a plate of savories. "It must be exciting to start a new nation and develop its resources."

"What have you been told about the resources of Texas?" He glanced around but no

one was paying them any attention.

"I understand that you have a new resource," she said, "one that no one else has discovered, and it will make transcontinental travel affordable and efficient."

If all the ambassadors knew what she knew, he had no leverage. He'd worked hard all his life to fulfill a purpose, and it did not include chatting with a whore in a glorified balloon.

"This ship could be made efficient," Dallas said, leaning forward, "carrying 20 times the passengers along with freight."

"How would you compensate for the extra weight?" She had lost her professional smile and seemed genuinely interested.

"Removing the unnecessary structures and amenities would lighten the load considerably. Buoyancy would not be a problem."

"Wouldn't you need to make the balloons bigger? Some Liberian ships are twice the size of *The Elephant*."

"Yes, for freight, but not for people. Speed would be more important."

"Would you be bringing in new immigrants from the Colonies? I understand that the Colonial Council would like to export a number of people."

"Like the debt prisoners?" He grunted. "Some of them have joined us - good, hardworking men who are looking for a new chance in life."

"How can I help you get what you want, Mr. Dallas?"

"What's in it for you?" *Finally*, he thought, *we come down to business*.

"Education." Brandy smiled again. "Madame has promised me a job as an accountant, and eventually I plan to be an investor."

"You make enough money to invest?" He thought it was unfair that she could just lie there and make money, heel over fist. Men worked hard for their wages, but a whore had to do nothing.

"I'm saving up and have a few small investments now. There's no reason to waste money just because it is coming in. I won't always be young, and there are even easier ways to make money than by lying on my back."

"So I am part of your investment, then." His teeth were on edge. "Why should I trust anything you tell me, since you have been so open about your interest?"

"We are not competitors." She sipped her tea, and dropped the seductive smile. Her eyes looked shrewd. "I am interested in making money and being secure. You are interested in developing your new country's assets. If we can both profit and move toward our goals, what is wrong with that?"

"Would you want to work in Texas?" He thought of her in a hot, dry farmhouse, pumping water by hand, cooking beans and fatback for the ranch hands. She wouldn't last a week.

"I'm willing to relocate, for the proper incentive, to oversee my investments." She gave him a direct look, as straightforward as any man. "If I can audit your books once a quarter, requiring a visit to Texas, we could work out a long-term arrangement."

"And your boss does not mind if you freelance?"

"She encourages us." Her face paled briefly, as if she were afraid of the madam.

Something else to consider. He wondered what the encouragement was for them to dig out information from the clients. "What's her cut?"

"House gets 20%. She provides other amenities." The woman's expression returned to its youthful rosiness.

"What does she have to offer in return for her exorbitant prices?"

"Information. For example, I can tell you who is interested in listening to your proposals tonight and who is not." She paused, taking a bite of the small cucumber and cress sandwich on the refreshments tray. "The Liberians are concerned about competition, as their technology outstrips that of anyone else, even the Prussians. They are afraid of Texas." She nodded at a woman dressed in black lace with a dandy companion as they entered a private dining room. "The Spanish in Florida want to ship their produce fresh. California, too." She nodded at another woman across the Gallery, who nodded back. "Everyone here wants to make more money. We help with negotiations."

Madame Starr was in cahoots with them, with her own Liberian ship, specially designed, from what he had been able to gather from his inquiries and general gossip. "And what is the madam telling them about me?"

"What she wants them to know, that you have something they need and that she is facilitating the negotiations." She drank a sip of tea. "The cruise is the price of admission, which they allowed her to pay, rather than losing a seat at the table."

"So you are just part of the furniture?" He surveyed her petite person. For such a young woman, her figure was well developed, trim but womanly, not yet hardened by the life she lived.

"That's one way of looking at it. Well-upholstered, gilded, and if I do say so myself," she said with a twinkle in her eye, "comfortable furniture."

"Thank you, I'm sure." He crossed his arms and leaned back on his chair. "Now go set me up an appointment with your boss, so I can get the lowdown on these bigwigs."

She took out her fan and played with it for a moment. "Madame will be here in a few moments."

"You have your own secret signals, then?"

"Certainly, Mr. Dallas." She patted her hair and touched her earring. "This is how we share our information."

He felt that he was being played, that she was a bit too honest for the truth. He would not trust a whore, no matter how much she acted like a lady. It was unsettling at best, but he might as well get what he could from her.

"Give me who's who and what's what, then."

"Certainly, Mr. Dallas." She pulled a piece of paper from her from her sleeve. "With whom would you like to begin?"

**Client cabin of Sir Winton Randolph, Queen's Minister to British America**

In the nicest of the client cabins, Dixie, a blonde with brown eyes and a cascade of golden curls, stood behind her client with a towel wrapped around her, massaging his shoulders. He'd ruined more than one kimono with the oil he thought would bring back his hair. More than a favored client, he was her ticket off *The Elephant*. Tonight, however, he seemed preoccupied, his mind not on her nor on his usual, rambling court gossip.

"Sir, I have missed you this last month," Dixie said, working her thumbs into his knotted shoulders. "Was your trip to London pleasant?"

"Not particularly." The minister's shoulders were tight despite his soft, aging body. "It was cold and blustery the whole time. The meeting was even worse. Parliament was unwilling to listen to anything the North American Council suggested. The aisles were divided about every issue."

"What have you decided about the Texican problem? Can you tell me?" She stroked a particularly sensitive place, triggering a relaxation response.

"I haven't decided. It's a thorny problem." Sir Winton rolled his head, stretching his neck muscles. "I think every buckskin in the British colony would go to Texas, given a cheap way to get there. I'd love to transport them all and then make sure they have no extradition policy." He leaned his head back against her chest. "But it would not be long before they decided they needed to 'liberate' their cousins on east of the mountains, and then there'd be war. No one here has the firepower or leadership to win against the Queen, should she decide to fight. A waste of her resources."

"I hear that Texas has some new technology, but I don't think it is military." She worked to loosen both his shoulders and his tongue. She never knew if he told her everything he knew, but most of what he told her was accurate according to Madame's sources.

He relaxed under her touch, even though his voice was tired. "Has Yvonne said anything to you about the First Nations' position?"

"Nothing specific. Mr. Copperhead does not share much with her." She lightly touched his scalp. "My other sources suggest that recognizing Texas will shift the focus of the French and Spanish away from First Nations territory."

"What do you think, my dear?" He patted her hand. "Your intelligence is probably as good as mine, and your mind is better."

"If Texas is recognized, and has a voice in official politics, she will have to negotiate with other countries," Dixie laid her hands on Sir Winton's shoulders while he let his head rest on her chest. "If the buckskins raise sand in the wilderness, they have a lot more room to start trouble with not much to lose."

"Mexico is still upset about the secession of California," he said, "and while there appears to be no gold in Texas, any loss of territory is a problem. Setting up airship refueling stations in the Rockies has proved to be a problem as well, as the Sioux and Comanche do not like the airships disrupting their spirit birds."

"How different is that from European politics?" Dixie sat beside him. "Aren't those countries always shifting alliances and redrawing their boundaries? I don't see that the Americas are much different."

"How right you are." Sir Winton sighed. "Bickering children, all of them. How I long to retire. "

"Retire?" Dixie felt a stab of panic in her soul. "What will you do then?"

Sir Winton laughed. "Are you afraid of losing your best client?"

She simpered at him with a sideways look through her eyelashes. "I have come to expect a certain standard of gentleman. It's true that I hardly work a cruise unless you are aboard. A girl's tastes can be educated."

"And an old dog can still turn a few tricks," Sir Winton stood and took her hands in his own. "My work is less frank than yours."

She smiled at him then stood to kiss his cheek. "Much less fun, in my observation."

"You are much prettier than Axe Copperhead, yet I must give him a hand job every time we are together, just to keep him marginally on our side.

"I would be happy to do that for you," She whispered in his ear, "if it would make your job easier, although I'm sure Yvonne is keeping him well in hand."

He chuckled. "Yes, in hand, and in every other possible place. Ah, my lovely Dixie, you make me laugh and see how foolish it all is. I wish I could always keep you by my side."

That was not what she wanted to hear, and it sounded like she was going to be dismissed. Dixie took another tack, keeping things professional. After all, she didn't want show her cards to Madame, not until she was sure she was holding a royal straight flush. "Madame has arranged for the escorts to record the meeting, so I will be close by. I'll get to see how you work."

Winton jerked away from her, surprised. "Madame negotiated that? Has she that much trust in the community?"

"We won't be in the room." Dixie got up and laid out the minister's evening clothes.

"Then how . . .?" He turned to face her.

"I'll explain after the meeting." She sidled up to him. "All the escorts will be there taking notes, so you will get a reliable report in the morning."

"Speaking of which, is the Liberian aboard?"

"She is supposed to join us in the air, bringing her own guards."

"They are very suspicious of us, even now." Winton sat down and wiped his face with a handkerchief. "That's wise of them."

"Many places do not allow them to travel first-class on ground transport. So they do their own."

"Did they build this ship? It is a beautiful vessel."

"Yes, and our pilot is Liberian, as are most of the airship pilots." Dixie set his shoes by his feet. "They trust their own to be safe, and they trust Madame, as she works closely with them."

Sir Winton pushed the shoes away—he wasn't ready to be dressed as yet. "She has a strong reputation—not respect, perhaps, but recognition as a business woman." He regarded her with a calculating look. "Would you ever leave her service?"

"I will always do that which is in my best interest," Dixie simpered. "Make me a better offer."

"We will talk in the morning." He kissed her cheek. "Tell me about Madame's loyalties. Where does she come from?"

"There are rumors that Madame is part Liberian herself, and Spanish, French, Irish, and Cherokee. She probably starts the rumors herself." Dixie laughed. "I might have even helped on occasion. Didn't I mention that her grandfather was a British soldier who spent a night with her grandmother during the Rebellion, and she thanked him for his service in the most intimate way?"

Sir Winton smiled. "That's a version I have never heard. She is everywhere, and belongs to no one. She once had a patron, but he died. A sad story. "

Dixie had heard variations on the story. Madame did not consider it sad at all.

"Her benefactor was a friend of mine." He reached into a pocket of his frock coat where it lay on the bed and drew out a package wrapped in paper. "I would like to be a benefactor for you." He handed the package to her. Please wear this tonight."

Dixie opened the box carefully to find a bib necklace of gold chain and diamonds. It fit close to her neck and down to her décolletage, a perfect accent for her evening costume. "Oh, Sir Winton, it is lovely."

"Not so lovely as you. Perhaps you can dispose of the towel so that I can admire you in it."

One gift set a nice tone for the cruise, even if it was paste, and she certainly would not look a gift under the eyepiece until after the cruise.

Dixie stripped slowly, teasing him for his forty-five second quickie before he got dressed. She refrained from asking about his plans. Whatever he thought a benefactor was, she wanted to be more than just a once-a-month escort.

As soon as he spurted, he lay back on the bed, apparently asleep. Dixie washed her mouth, touched up her hair, and put her kimono on.

He swung his heavy body off the bed and grunted as he stood up. He was getting fatter and less flexible every day. The better for her to be in control, as soon as she got him where she wanted him.

"Madame will be here soon," Dixie said, "with some scheme or other for the meeting tonight."

"Yes, I want to talk to her too." He let him put on his shirt and tie his cravat.

Behind the ambassador, Dixie made a sign to the room's periscope.

"She's watching, isn't she?" Sir Winton leered. He'd often expressed an interest in Madame, though she never turned a trick anymore.

"No, I'm sure she's much too busy." Madame had people for that, always watching, always listening. Dixie would be glad to be out of range of those listening ears.

As if on cue, the knock on the door, a particular tattoo, announced Madame's arrival.

### **Crew quarters below Client Deck**

Jonas followed the Captain down through the kitchen to the crew quarters. While not as fancy as the client area, the crew had clean quarters, plain painted walls, and solid floors. He tried not to touch anything as he was dirty, and even the dock loaders looked more respectable.

"Get cleaned up here," The Captain said, opening a small door to a closet with a washbasin and a toilet. "Hand out your clothes."

He didn't feign shyness in a brothel. The clothes were all of his possessions, and if he never saw them again, he could start a new life. He scrubbed his hair and body, only rinsing off with the minimum of water, surprised that even the crew had hot water.

A knock came at the door, which opened, and a dark hand offered a stack of clothing, socks, underwear, a crew uniform, and his own shoes, cleaned and polished.

Jonas dressed, feeling refreshed if still tired. He wondered what sort of work he'd be assigned.

The Captain came in with a shaving kit and a stained towel.

"Madame Starr's in danger from the Mauvertons and at least one of their clients," he said, staring at the floor. "I don't know the clients, but they have deep pockets. They may come after me, and they will definitely go after the distillery."

"I've seen my share of their type. Sit down." She lathered a brush and opened a razor.

He sat on the toilet, and she started shaving his head.

"Look, I'm not here to hurt Madame, and I can help her, if I'm still alive." Jones winced as her razor scraped his scalp.

"She said for me to look after you," Zulie said, moving the razor to shave his neck, "but you lay one finger on her, you'll have one less finger. You will not do that business with her."

"I got it." He knew he had no value to the Captain, not one thing she could possibly want, except to prove his help for the madam. "Tell Madame that my boss, Chief Detective Williams wants to move in on her business," Jones said, keeping very still. "He doesn't know the extent of her businesses, and if he gets in on them, he won't treat the employees the way she does."

"I thought Madame was your boss." Zulie wiped off the razor and put it away.

He should be safe enough, then, for now. "Yes, of course. My ex-boss never said the reason for his interest in her, only to find out everything I could."

Would Starr be safe enough? He didn't think the Captain understood the danger both from the Agency in New York, and possibly from some of the gangs, but from shadows whose names and organizations he hadn't been able to discover.

The tonic he'd been given had been like a good night's sleep, as best as he could remember what that was like. He wondered how long the effect would last and what kind of hangover it would impose. He'd tried local concoctions of the saloons and brothels in the city, but this was both more subtle. He hoped there'd be time for sleep before the hangover started.

"Come with me, Mr. Jonas," the Captain said. "I have a job for you, one of the few that might actually make you useful."

He came out into the hallway.

"I'll send someone to clean up the room." She examined him, but he could not tell what she thought. "Make no mistake, Mr. Jonas, I still don't trust you." she said. "But I can kill you in

27 different ways right here without a weapon, and I have seen your scars. I know your weaknesses."

"Yes, one that I do not hit women--unless they attack me first." He decided to level with her, as she must be on his side. "What I know about Madame is that she helps women. She employs hundreds in decent conditions, giving a good wage for a good day's work and education for the children--the girls at least."

"And...?"

"When my mother died, I swore to help other women if I could, any way I could. I do want to work for Madame, and I think I have some skills that she needs. I want to be paid, but this is not about money, and it's not about sex."

"So you lost your momma and your sweetheart and maybe a sister or two, am I right?" the Captain's voice was pityingly sweet. "Or are you just pining for Madame since you were a squirt of a lad? Because if you are, give it up. That is not happening. Not as long as I am around."

"It's not like that. I've done too much bad and have nothing to offer a good woman," Jonas said, scanning the area to recognize it if he came this way again. "I'm not cut out to work in a factory, and I don't have the kind of mind that runs a business. I am good at what I do, which is getting information and getting it where it needs to go."

"Then how did the Red Hares catch up with your liquor shipment? Did your Irish connection slip you a mickey?"

"Funny thing about that." Jonas straightened his back to lose the cowering stance, and stared in the Captain's face, a little too close to her. "I was going to ask you, since only your

people knew about the shipment, who was driving it, and the new route." He didn't step forward but leaned in closer "Did you sell me out?"

Zulie laughed. "You have more guts and more smarts than I expected, Mr. Jonas." She matched his position, her back arching towards him, her small breasts straining against her blouse.

He kept his eyes on her face, watching her shoulders for any sign that she might attack, but said nothing.

Her expression did not change, but her back relaxed. "You might actually survive the trip and live to tell the tale."

He nodded and leaned back. "Thank you."

She raised an eyebrow. "Don't push your luck, white boy. You're in my house now."

### **Client Cabin of Sir Winton Randolph**

Elvira needed a private word with the British ambassador, but did not want to disturb him. A quick look through the spy hole showed that they were not thigh-thumping, so she knocked, two raps, a pause, and a third, to tell Dixie who was at the door.

Dixie opened with a scowl on her face. "Come in, Madame."

Elvira acknowledged her with a curt nod and swept in. "Good evening, Sir Winton. I trust you are comfortable."

The old man stood up and reached out his hand to kiss hers. "Yes, my Dixie is taking very good care of me."

"Excellent. Please sit." She took the second chair, leaving Dixie to sit on the bed. "With the recent secession of Texas, I am wondering if there is a new movement to unite the northern continent, under the Crown or not." She watched his face, always genial.

He might know nothing or he might have all the answers she desired, but if so, he gave no sign of it.

"The grandsons of the Rebellion still make their 'Manifest Destiny' noise on street corners," Sir Winton said. "They are older now, their own sons taking up the cause, but I've seen no one taking them seriously."

"Perhaps sharing borders with the southern First Nations Alliance has the South Carolina colony more motivated." Elvira leaned in, displaying her still smooth cleavage. "Here in the city, you are far from the skirmishes with the First Nations. I wonder if that is true in Charles Towne."

Sir Winton nodded. "Mr. Copperhead complains of buckskins crossing their territory on

their way to Texas or to the gold fields in California. For some of his people, transportation is a business, but they are not happy about it."

"Speaking of Texas, How does the Crown stand on recognition?"

"The Queen has her hands full with France and Spain at the moment," the ambassador said, "She thinks little of the colonies here as long as she gets her cotton, tobacco, and lumber."

Elvira decided to be direct. "I want to inquire about your plans for retirement."

Dixie glanced at Sir Winton, her face calm, but her hands flattened against her lap, stiff to keep from fidgeting.

Elvira hadn't shared her news that Sir Winton was on the outs with Queen Charlotte and was due to be released at any time. Apparently, neither had the ambassador.

His face did not change expression from his working smile. "I am exploring my options at this time. Have you any suggestions?"

"I hope to have a subsidiary in San Francisco soon." Elvira looked at her fingernails, blood red and sharp. "I wondered if you and Dixie might be interested in being the anchor of the network there." She waited a beat, to gauge their reactions. "You would both have new identities, if you wished. I understand that there is quite the polite society there."

Sir Winton's mask covered whatever he thought. "What would be the price of this new location and identity?"

"Recognition and good relations with Texas." Elvira smiled too. "I intend to expand my services, and a refueling station in Texas would put California in my reach."

Dixie cocked her head, looking skeptical. "Who would be the network in Texas then? Not much in the way of society there of any kind."

"You would know more than I," Elvira said, "being born in Texas. What can you say about it, the people, the land, and the resources?"

Dixie kept her face expressionless, but her cheeks reddened. "I was barely fifteen when I left. Much has changed in twelve years, so I hardly know what benefit my opinion might have."

"But surely you are familiar with the country, the people?"

"It's hot and dry, except near the Mississippi. I lived north of Natchez, near Red River country, where my dad was a miner." She looked at her hands, reciting as if she were in school, summarizing a novel she had read. "Life is hard there. My parents were artists who started a colony nearby, but it failed, and they came to live with the miners. Mother died early on. Father was killed in a mine accident. I left, and you found me in New Orleans."

"Towns? Roads? Farms?" Elvira kept her patience, having heard Dixie's sob story before, knowing that like her own story, large sections were omitted.

"Yes, there are some, more cattle ranching than farming from what little I saw." She took on the look the women were taught to use to greet clients - a smile and a turn of the head to look interested. Her hands made the sign for "no."

Elvira turned to the ambassador, who seemed to be thinking about something far away.

"What can you both tell me of J. R. Dallas?"

A look of anger and disgust passed across Dixie's face, and her cheeks turned even redder under her rouge. "He's the reason I left Texas. He's calculating, cold-hearted, and a right...." She stopped, pressing her lips together. "A lady does not use such language."

Elvira noted the ambassador's surprise at Dixie's response, but she continued. "How did you know him?"

"My father worked for him as a mining engineer." Dixie paused, regaining her composure. "An accident killed my father and his crew, but nobody knows how or why they died. Dallas hushed it up." Another frown crinkled her brow. "Most of the men weren't married, and my mother was already dead. I had no reason to stay." She stared away, but allowed the diplomat to take her hand. When she continued, her voice had dropped the Southern Belle drawl for a Texas twang. "Dallas offered me just enough money to get me to Galveston." She stared at Elvira, her eyes narrow and her cheeks red against the pale white of her face. "He didn't want me asking questions to find out what my father was working on that killed him."

"He came here looking for you," Elvira said, "and he was upset when you were already booked."

Dixie looked away. "He wanted me to marry him. Without my dad to look after, I had no reason to stay with that murderer."

"I see," Elvira said. "Would you trust him to keep his word in a business deal?"

"Maybe, if he wrote the contract." Dixie composed her face, losing her scowl, but not succeeding with a smile. The she continued in her practiced drawl, "I would not do business with him."

A moment of silence passed before the ambassador spoke. "Mr. Dallas has attempted to lobby me, Copperhead, and probably each of the passengers on this trip. He has excellent information, despite the rough edges of his manner." The old diplomat's expression only changed with a slight crinkling of his eyes, revealing jaded amusement. "I did not receive him, for obvious reasons, but he has some new technology he wants to sell. I am concerned that he was able to contact each of us. This meeting is not secret, Madame Elvira."

"The story is that several of you are passengers to get to the official meeting in Charles Towne," she said, keeping her face pleasant to avoid her displeasure at his news, "wanting to arrive well-rested and ready to solve the problems of the continent."

"Some children may believe that." He smiled a bitter grin. "But you are well-known for the business deals that happen aboard this vessel. No one is fooled."

"I've taken precautions." Elvira lifted her head and straightened her back, forcing herself into the most ladylike of poses. "You will be much safer here than on any land or sea transport, if for no other reason than you will be in transit for less time."

Sir Winton stared off towards the wall, his hand patting Dixie's knee. "Madame, do you ever think of our old friend, Dr. Kingsbury? He was so very fond of you."

"I do, in fact. I missed him so terribly when he died," Elvira glanced at the floor to hide her expression. "He took such good care of me."

Elvira didn't remind the minister that Kingsbury had bought her when she was sixteen. She'd gotten his money, finally, away from his lawyers and other vultures after he died, not to mention the money she'd made from what she'd stolen from him. Sir Winton didn't know about all that, of course. "Yes, I do think of him often." *Every time she went to the bank.*

"I wonder that you never took on another patron," he said, smiling again as if he were offering to take the job.

"It does not do for a madam to appear to have a favorite." Elvira smiled back, and stood up to leave. "Think about my offer, and let me know... after you arrange to recognize Texas."

Dixie's face was as stiff and pale as death, but her eyes were nearly steaming with anger. That would have to be dealt with later.

"As you say, Madame." He stood as well, gentlemanly always. "I would like to make an appearance downstairs before we start. Copperhead will be expecting me."

"Certainly." Elvira stood. "I will leave you to your work. Do consider my offer."

"I shall," Sir Winton said. "I understand that the climate in California is much like my homeland, and I dare say, much friendlier."

At that, Dixie paled, glancing at her client, and then staring hard at Elvira.

Elvira opened the door, paused, and turned back for a moment. "If there is no base in Texas, I won't need one in San Francisco."

Zulie was right. Dixie planned to marry Sir Winton, or at least be his mistress, and now she knew he wasn't going back to England. That should make the Texas proposal much rosier for both of them. The Queen's American Minister would owe her for getting him settled, and Dixie would either be the Belle of San Francisco, or she'd head off somewhere else. It was up to her, but Elvira would only help her if she wanted to go where Elvira wanted to send her. It was only business, after all, and something to consider after they got to Charles Towne.

## The Gallery

Elvira approached Brandy and Dallas in the Gallery. He had been insistent about seeing her now, so Elvira accommodated, but she would have preferred some privacy. He had the manners to stand as she approached and to offer her a seat, but his gentlemanly act didn't last long.

"If you cannot deliver recognition for Texas, Madame, I will take your ship," said Dallas, through gritted teeth, "and gut her of her whoredom. She'll be a fine ship for my purposes."

"You may make your attempt, Mr. Dallas, but you'll find *The Elephant* will not fly without my word." Elvira met his steely gaze with a dark one of her own. "If you would look at this as a business proposal instead of a philosophical debate, we could both find ways to make each other's goals happen on a strict timetable."

Dallas turned away, a bitter smile on his face, almost as if he were ignoring her.

Elvira kept her face pleasant. "Waste your efforts trying to out-man me if you like. I am a woman, and you'll soon see that there is no such animal as 'only a woman.'" She leaned forward, into his space. "I will protect my ship, my clients, and my employees with the ferocity of a mother bear and the cunning of a wolf pack. You are out-manned, Mr. Dallas, you are out-thought, and you are under-gunned."

"And you, little lady?" Dallas cocked his head towards Brandy. "What do you get out of this deal?"

"I told you, Mr. Dallas," Brandy said, ducking her head to look up at him with her big, blue eyes, "we do not know each other well enough for you to take me from all this. Although I might negotiate a better deal for you if you listen to me." Brandy smiled sweetly.

Brandy had always been a better pickpocket than Dixie, Elvira thought, the better for her to be an accountant, and maybe someday, a lawyer. The times required new thinking, and Brandy had a head on her shoulders. She would be a good bookkeeper, making sure everyone

stayed on budget. The Charles Towne network would need a new Belle in the next ten or fifteen years, plenty of time to build Brandy's skills and her persona as a wealthy and powerful widow. Or she might like to work in Texas.

"So, Mr. Dallas," Elvira said, weighing her options. "What would you like to see happen?"

"I want to see transcontinental flights," Dallas said, his contempt for her nearly dripping from his face, "and I have to wonder why you haven't thought of that yourself. Building a railroad through Indian Country without any military support is not possible, as we've discovered. Without the Texas Rangers, we'd be slaughtered."

"I see. How would you negotiate with the Dons of California? They don't like the British colonies any better there than they do in Florida."

"No, but they like British goods, and they don't have the shopkeeper mentality to figure out how to make them. You might like to add a few of those chili pepper girls to your... menu."

"I have found those women to be very well behaved and well-worth a premium when I have contracted with them." Elvira waited a beat to see if Dallas would relax or stay hostile. "I agree that this could be a most beneficial arrangement. I can provide ships if you will provide...your new technology."

"Out of the goodness of your golden heart, no doubt." Dallas grinned bitterly.

"Mr. Dallas, as you have noted, I'm a whore. I believe in getting paid up front." Elvira leaned forward so that her bosom was in Dallas's line of sight. "What do you plan to charge per shipload - let's say 500 pounds sterling? The helium..."

"Shhh!" Dallas said. "Not here where everyone can hear."

"No one else has it, Mr. Dallas, so what is the secret?" Elvira tilted her head, looking through her eyelashes. "The technology is worth about what the ship is, especially a ship that would carry cargo across three times the length of this trip, spproximately 3000 miles, correct?"

"A reasonable fee, I suppose," Dallas said, turning his head away to avoid looking at Elvira. He seemed uncomfortable with her direct financial questions and business-like tone of voice.

"One solution would be a partnership," Elvira said, leaning back and crossing her legs, "but since you don't consider me worthy, I propose to negotiate a deal with the Liberians, who build by far the best ships, for which you will pay me, and then I shall buy your helium from my profits."

Dallas grunted, his only indication that he heard her.

Elvira stifled her irritation with his stiff necked morality. "Your helium will only cost you extraction, while you will only pay a wholesale price for the ships, plus my commission." Elvira glanced at Brandy, a nod of approval for her behavior so far. "You could negotiate with the Liberians yourself, but clearly that option is not open to you or you would not be here." Elvira picked up and bit into a savory pastry, hoping to take the edge off the buzz from her tonic.

"I could simply take your vessel, gut it, and use it myself." Dallas crossed his arms, still looking out towards the view port. "You have resources enough to get another ship, but I would be in business immediately."

"My dear Mr. Dallas," Elvira said, still as sweetly as if he were offering her all of Texas covered in gravy, "taking this ship would ensure that any action you attempted with it would get you blown out of the sky. I have forged my alliances carefully, and my allies are personally offended when I am offended. If you were to harm my person, you would not leave the ship alive."

Brandy spoke up, "Mr. Dallas, everyone wants to expand across the continent and beyond...San Francisco is closer to Charles Towne than New York is to London. All the ambassadors came here on Madame's word. She is on your side." As she spoke, the roses returned to her cheeks. "You are the key to the success, and we all want you, and Texas, to get what you want."

Elvira watched as Dallas assessed Brandy. His expression didn't change, but his body shifted slightly away from Brandy toward Elvira. She gave Brandy a small sign of approval.

"This sounds expensive," Dallas said. "It always is to get in bed with someone like you."

"I propose a mutual exchange of resources," Elvira sat up straight, holding her head high to show her resolve to complete the negotiation.

He finally turned to face her. "And for all this generosity, what would you require?"

"A woman of high social standing in Texas, wealthy, widowed, educated, respected, to be the representative of my network." Elvira smiled. "The Belle of Texas."

"You are a hard woman, Madame. I don't want your kind in Texas." Dallas gazed at the couples around them. "I want clean women who can hold their heads up in public and bear strong children to the men who are making a new nation of free people."

"I could be instrumental in bringing them to you." Elvira studied her fingernails briefly. "Both hardworking men and women, the kind who survive floods, droughts, blizzards, and coyotes of all kinds. Population and builders of infrastructure."

"Your spies, then?" He sniffed, a humorless chuckle.

"No, just freight. My allies would pay to have them removed to a more... suitable location." She met his glance. "Many buckskin sympathizers are spread across the colonies. Most don't have the wherewithal to manage a trek across the First Nations. With indentures for the desperate poor and mortgages for the others, you could front them the travel and a stake, and then charge them interest for the rest of their lives as they get set up and profitable."

"You've done some hard thinking in this area, Madame." His face showed a softening of expression, something that might be mistaken for grudging admiration. "But I cannot be seen as your partner, not the lackey of a whore."

"Nor would you be even seen as a customer." Elvira waved her hand in an open gesture of generosity. "You would not be 'in bed' with me at all, only an adjunct to my network. Few members of my network are familiar with names or social standing of the other members."

"So that is how you get your information." Dallas chuckled. "They don't even know that you are skimming off the cream."

"It's not so one-sided as all that." Elvira shrugged. "After all, I'm delivering the milk as well. My representatives can, at their careful discretion, allow information to be released through secure channels." She leaned toward him again, whispering. "If you really want a view into my business, your Belle can hire Brandy - under her street name - and let her work for you freelance. You would have to pay her, and she would provide you with some information about my network."

"You'd trust me with that kind of information? He did look surprised then, amazed at her audacity. Then his eyes narrowed. "You'd also know about my business."

"Very quick, Mr. Dallas." Elvira smiled. "You have the option of hiring your own woman, one whom your miners might not realize is as smart as she is, but then you'd have information that your rivals and competitors do not have - if you pay enough for it."

"So you are a solicitor as well?" He laughed bitterly. "Everything has a price, doesn't it?"

"Yes, and I've stated mine." Elvira rested her hands on the table. "What's your price, Mr. Dallas? Your honor or Texas?"

### Hallway outside the Meeting Room

Jonas followed the Captain upstairs. "How does Madame choose her clients? Can anyone with coin come aboard?"

"Coin makes a lot of difference, white boy." Zulie walked quickly, keeping her voice low. "Not every politician has a £1,000 travel budget, not to mention extras."

"So if I robbed a couple of banks, did a few removals, and came up with a thousand quid, I could ride in style?" He saw the frown on her face. Most successful women he knew had long since proved that they were the equal and better of most men, just as strong, quicker and generally smarter than average--not too difficult at that.

"Who would vouch for you?" She shook her head. "You'd smell like Mauverton even if you rolled in pig shit."

"So there's no way I could sweeten myself up, then." He smiled, noting the disgust in the woman's face. What would it take to convince her to keep him on the payroll?

"They have to provide references from people Madame knows. Previous clients. She has her ways of knowing who someone is, even if he's from the back streets of Five Points, on his own since age 11, working in the stables and as a runner for Madame Leila."

"Impressive." Jonas nodded as Zulie recited the details of his life. Madame Leila had suggested his working with the Mauvertons as an agent, reporting back to her. He had always worked two sides of any game, sometimes three, but Zulie seemed to know more about him than he knew about himself.

"Madame Leila was one of Elvira's trainers." Zulie's voice held a bitter tone. "She served an apprenticeship. She went by Satin then."

Jonas thought back. He wasn't allowed inside the brothel except to do some chores downstairs. He worked mainly with horses that pulled the out-carriages and helped the groundskeeper. He knew some of the women by sight, but not Satin. He did remember seeing a dark-haired beauty staring out a window one spring morning, her face sad and pale. Elvira at what, fifteen, maybe? A few years older than he was, but without the hard edges that Madame Leila had. How had Elvira amassed her empire in that short time?

"I know you did not have her then," Zulie continued. "You were too young and poor even then, just as you are now." She chuckled and shook her head. "And no, she has no idea who you are."

Another memory came to him of a scrawny black girl, starving, hiding in the straw of the barn. He'd brought her food, always begging more from Madame Leila's cook and getting it because the cook liked him, thinking him a growing boy. He asked the cook to take her on, as she was not pretty or light-skinned enough to work for Madam, who kept no black women. He didn't know what she did in the house – laundry, cooking, or whatever – but the black girl had become Elvira's right hand.

"You never told me your name," he said finally. "You've grown."

"So, you can see how Madam picks her people. She knows them." Zulie leaned against the wall and propped her foot behind her. "I know them. You were kind to a street girl a long time ago. If I didn't know you, you would be dead. Don't depend on it happening again. Now you tell me what you know about Madame, and I'll decide if it's worth her time to keep you on."

"I know about the liquor, and the cocaine and the opium – all mostly legal." Jonas stood

tall to be eye-to-eye with the woman. "I know about the textile mills, the seamstresses, and the importers. I think there's a connection to the Liberians, more than just the airship." He scratched the back of his head, unused to the bare skin. "The Mauvertons don't know that much, yet the Chief's smoking a better quality of cigars. Someone is paying." He shrugged. "I don't know how much the Agency knows, but all they care about is getting on the gravy train."

"We know a few things about them. You want on the gravy train too?" Zulie rolled her eyes. "Maybe Madame is darker than you think, white boy, with hardly a drop of whitewash in her blood. Not like you." She turned on her heel, and strode down the hallway, leaving Jonas to step lively to keep up.

He could hardly pay attention to the twists and turns of the corridors in the operations sections.

"Can I ask you a few questions?" Jonas wanted to slow down, so he could remember where they had been and how to get back.

"A few more? Sure, I've got nothing else to do but keep you entertained." Zulie stopped, peering at him over her shoulder. "We can talk while I'm working. You might as well see the operation, since I can always drop you over the side if you are too much of a bother." She turned to walk down a short corridor. "You'll find out more than enough, and then you can ask intelligent questions, if you are still interested."

"Thank you," he said, trying to be polite. He was hurting from the beating and getting tired as well. The tonic put him on edge, keeping his mind running a little too fast for his body to keep up.

They passed a small woman in a crew uniform carrying a box of wire and assorted

connectors. She paid no attention to Jonas, but gave way before the ship's captain.

"I've been searching connections on the comm system," she said. "Who can I get to help me find the problem? I can't find my assistant."

The Captain turned to him. "Mr. Jonas, what do you know about electrics and æther?"

"I've done a bit, on my own and in general on the job." Jonas thought the small woman was remarkably pretty, though distressed at the moment. "I'm a good helper."

He saw the fleetest expression of amusement on Zulie's face, followed by the more usual suspicion. He would have to get to know the captain a lot better before he could hide his thoughts from her.

"Take him with you, Woz," the captain said, "and if he gives you any trouble, electrocute him."

"Yes, Ma'am." Woz turned to Jonas and handed him the box. "Make yourself useful."

He took the box from her, glancing down at the mostly unfamiliar components. This would be a good way prove himself, and maybe the captain would not toss him overboard. Maybe Woz would not be so suspicious. He could learn a lot more about the ship – or had he just been given enough wire to hang himself?

Zulie smiled, a frightening expression. "He's a Mauverton detective. Find out what he knows." She walked away.

"Mauvertons? Just like in the penny dreadfuls?" Woz smiled up at him, standing only as tall as his shoulder. Her honey brown hair was braided tightly around her head, but her hazel eyes sparkled with mischief. "So it is true?"

"Is what true?" Jonas shuffled the box to a comfortable position. The æthographer used

by the Agency was an old woman who never said more than two words, not a woman like this.

"That you never sleep and you never let go?" She had a wicked smile. Clearly she didn't know what the agents did every day.

Jonas struggled to find his voice. "I do have to sleep," he said, wondering when he would get to do so again. "But we don't give up easily." He remembered why he was there – to get out of the city, to find out all he could about Madame, and to keep his body and soul firmly attached. He found a smile and aimed it back at her.

"Good, we have a lot of work to do." She led him to a hidden panel in the wall, slid it aside, and started climbing up a ladder bolted to the wall. "Come on."

## **Elvira Madame's Office**

While Dallas thought about her proposals, and Brandy fed him information, Elvira rode the lift to the command deck and her office. She sent the lift back down to the loading dock to have the safe and contents delivered up to her. Guns and other equipment stayed locked up below to keep clients from shooting each other and possibly damaging the ship. Elvira was after documents, portfolios and any other information for future use.

When it arrived in the room behind her office, she opened the safe and pulled out each satchel. With a practiced eye, she sorted through the documents, making a few notes of what was to be copied and what left alone. She regretted that her artificers were having such problems with photography, as it would have been nice to have actual copies instead of transcriptions.

She called through the comm line to get her scribes to her office, but the line was silent.

Shaking her head in frustration, she stomped out to the bridge. As she reached the catwalk, she calmed herself and let her emotion fill her with energy. When she felt that she would glow in the dark, she entered the bridge.

"Madame on the bridge," someone said softly. Each crewmember briefly held up a hand with a smudge and then went back to work. She acknowledged them with a nod and stepped over to Zulie,

"Captain, walk with me," Elvira said, returning to the catwalk. She led Zulie back to her cabin, where no one was watching.

Zulie closed the door. "I know the comm is out. Woz and Jonas are working on it."

"And you didn't tell me?" Elvira clenched her hands and stifled a scream. "Everything depends on that system working. We tested it 100 times."

"Woz's assistant is missing as well." Zulie stood quietly, not moving. "Plato's men are looking for him, but he is likely gone already. I suspect he had a hand in this."

"Who's working the æthershack?"

"At the moment, no one. I doubt your new boy can manage that."

"Wait. You said Jonas is working on the comm?"

"He said he had some experience, and Woz needed a helper." Zulie shrugged. "Don't worry, she won't let him touch anything, but he can fetch and carry for her."

Elvira threw her arms open and yelled, "And he will see how it is all wired and how it works."

"Maybe, but if he tries to interfere with it, he's likely to find himself fried." Zulie crossed her arms and took on that look that suggested it was not a good time to argue. "You brought him aboard, but I know who he is, and I'll decide whether he gets to Charles Towne or takes a flying lesson."

Elvira took in a deep breath to scream at her partner, but then let it all out in a whoosh. "I don't have time for this. I trust your judgment. Just please get me someone up here to copy these documents and get them back to the loading dock." Elvira swirled around behind her desk and started sorting again.

"Yes, Madame, I'll see to it," Zulie said, with no note of sarcasm or resentment, though Elvira knew it was there. Zulie paused, as if waiting for some other comment, dropping her hands by her sides. "You might go up to the promenade and cool off for a moment before going back down."

"Yes, thank you. The air over New Jersey is so healthy." Elvira could not keep her voice soft and calm. Her blood throbbed in her head, and her heart raced. She slammed the documents back on the stack. "When were you going to tell me?"

"I wasn't going to bother you with it. I handled it." Zulie took a step closer. "You have enough on your mind, without worrying about every single thing on the ship." She took another step, reaching to touch Elvira's face.

Elvira flinched, avoiding the touch.

Zulie dropped her hand. "That's why I'm here, to handle the ship and crew. You manage the clients and the women. Remember?"

Elvira closed her eyes and sighed. "Yes, I remember. Please get someone up here who can do shorthand."

"Yes, Madame." Zulie's voice went flat. When Elvira did not look up to see her expression, or to say anything else, the captain spun her heel and left, closing the door behind her precisely, making no noise.

Elvira picked up the documents, her hand shaking. A trip up top might clear her mind, but it would probably disarrange her hair. She'd do it later tonight, after everyone was asleep - or at least in the cabins. Clear or starry, it wouldn't matter, just so she could be in the sky, flying away from everything, just for a few moments.

She got out her flask of tonic, but put it away. She had to pace herself, keep her control. She finished sorting the documents, stacking them to keep them in order, forcing her hands not to shake. She could not concentrate enough to remember what she saw. Finally, all the documents lay sorted, turned so that they would still be in order after being copied.

Then she opened her mouth wide and screamed, trembling from stress, but knowing the soundproofing would protect her release from anyone else. After a few deep breaths, she put her madam face on and checked her makeup and hair. She strolled out to grease the egos of the clients, giving them the tidbits of information they craved, so their papers would be the furthest from their minds.

Two crewmembers passed her in the hallway, out of breath from running up the stairs. She reminded herself to be sedate, in charge of herself and the clients, so she could suck them dry of information and whatever other juice they might have.

She took several deep, slow breaths as she made her way back to the lift, and wondered when she might take another sip of her tonic. It was going to be a long, bumpy ride.

Nineteen hours to Charles Towne.

## Surveillance Room

Between the decks of the ship, Jonas found a network of wires and conduits, each terminating with some component. After he had spent more than an hour crawling on his hands and knees to check each connection, finding nothing obviously dislocated or cut, Woz sent him back down to find the Captain. The comm system was running again, but there was no evidence of what had been done, or who might have done it.

As soon as he brought the wiring box down to the deck, Captain Dahomey was waiting for him. "I have a place for you, to keep you out of trouble and give you yet another look at our operation."

"Thank you," Jonas said. "I appreciate it."

Woz took the box from him and disappeared up the hallway. Once she was behind the captain, she turned and winked. She was even prettier with a bit of dirt on her face.

"Wait until you see what the job is," Captain Dahomey said, "and then decide whether I've done you a favor." She opened another hidden panel and took him into a dark room, sliding the panel closed behind her before opening another.

As his eyes adjusted, he saw ten women sitting at desks, each desk equipped with six periscope viewers. Each viewer had a magnified viewport about six inches across, giving a view of the client's room or of a table in the Gallery. Each desk was apparently wired with sound and had a toggle switch for each panel so that the watcher could listen in through an earpiece placed on a headband.

"Everyone on the payroll starts out here," Zulie told him. "Everyone knows everyone's secrets, so there is no hiding and no subterfuge."

He doubted that, but he saw the security aspects of making sure the women were not mistreated. "If there is a problem, how do you deal with it?"

"Quickly and decisively."

He saw a glimpse of white teeth in what could have been a smile or a growl. "Reba," Captain Dahomey said, "put Mr. Jonas on the floor."

A smallish woman got up from her seat, walked toward Jonas, who watched, wondering what she would do. He did not fight women. At least, he had never had the occasion where it might be necessary, though he had subdued a few hysterical ones, staggering drunk on whiskey or laudanum, or wailing in the madness of grief.

Zulie was taller than he, but Reba hardly came up to his shoulder.

He did not know what to expect, what kind of training the woman may have had or what she would do. He crouched a little, balancing solidly on his feet.

Reba paused, turned slightly, and then spun to kick his solar plexus with her steel-enhanced boot, knocking the breath out of him and putting him on the floor, just as the captain ordered.

He'd know what to watch for next time and hoped she hadn't broken another rib. His lower ones had been broken often enough that he had more scar tissue than not, meaning he could forecast the weather by taking a deep breath, once he was able to breathe. He suspected it would be a long night.

"Now, you, Jonas. Reba is going to offer you a hand, and you are going to pull her down beside you." Zulie did smile that time, as he hesitated. "Do it."

He had reach on her, and gravity was on his side. When she offered a hand up, he took

it, and leaning up, jerked her toward him, swinging his left leg to knock her off her feet. She saw that coming and so used her forward motion to do a flip and land with the boot on his collarbone, so that the more he pulled against her, the more her weight threatened to crush his windpipe.

He let go and hit the floor twice, tapping out, giving up. Reba looked at Zulie, who nodded, and then she stepped back. Two attacks in a day were three too many, but he had his answer, along with a side of insight into Zulie's character.

Reba nodded, just short of a bow. "I have no animosity toward you, Mr. Jonas." She also nodded to Zulie.

"May I get up now?" Another nod. He got up, bowed to the Captain and then to Reba, repeating her phrase, but not knowing her last name, called her "Miss Reba."

"Show him to a workstation and get him up to speed."

Reba walked to a desk on the far side of the room from the door, no easy exit, and pointed out the screens, the note-taking system, and how the listening earpiece worked.

Jonas thanked her, and she went back to her station.

"Do you have any more questions?" Zulie stood at his side, peering down at him.

"Not at this time."

"Good, because I have work to do," the Captain said, "and now, so do you." She stepped out, making sure to keep the room dark so that no one missed anything on the screens.

Clearly he had crossed over the line of what he needed to know. He was sore and bruised. The tonic must have some cocaine in it for energy, or some other stimulant for him to be awake after such a long and brutal day. He was in a world that had different rules than those

he was accustomed to, and he was likely to break one at any moment merely by leaning the wrong way. What had he set himself up for? Would he find what he needed? Did he have a real chance for a new job and a new life?

Could he learn to fight like these women?

Could he get them to trust him?

## The Gallery

Quaid Golden noticed that few of the open tables in the Gallery were occupied, while most of the private rooms had their curtains closed.

*Those must be the ambassadors' dining rooms.*

He saw few people he wanted to speak with other than the Texican. No point in wasting their time and his, as they might remember him. He'd just stay focused and follow the second leg of his plan, since the locals hadn't done their job of keeping *The Elephant* from flying, and his efforts against the comm system had been quickly repaired.

He offered his arm to Velvet, his escort. "Let's take a stroll, shall we?" He walked to the viewing area, now overlooking the darkening landscape below, with a rare farmhouse light.

"A lovely night," Velvet said. Her coppery hair gleamed in the electrical lighting, making her porcelain skin appear even paler, and her eyes the deep blue of the evening sky. "I love this time of the evening, so far away from the cares of the world. It is very difficult to see from here how many people live below in their villages and hamlets."

Golden knew that darkness well, having grown up in it. "Do you ever think of that mile of air below the ship? Are you never afraid of falling?"

"If I do have those thoughts," Velvet said with a coy smile, "I think the crew that works to keep us up here." She was keeping up with the charade, but unlike the other escorts, she wasn't always fiddling with a fan or touching her hair, and she was careful about where she stood. He could not read the code they used, but she was clearly not communicating with whoever was watching. That was good. He could not tell where the watchers were, but she seemed to stay away from them.

"A comforting thought," Golden said, "but what comes up, must go down. When can we get started?"

"The meeting will start in a couple of hours," Velvet said, looking out into the darkness, "and I've told the kitchen to send a late supper to our room. We won't be disturbed."

As the airship flowed through the evening, Golden became more restless. Velvet's banter was entertaining enough, but he was ready to get on with his mission. He did not like waiting in any case, but he needed to let things move at a reasonable pace. The ambassadors had not been moved to their meeting as yet, if the closed dining rooms gave any indication, so they'd have to wait. His attention wandered again to the Texican in his ridiculous buckskin frock coat sitting near the viewing section of the ship, a man restless as himself. What were they thinking, sending a backwoodsman to negotiate with worldly men?

Golden said, "I wish speak to the man there, the Texican."

Velvet made several signs, which were returned. "Yes, Mr. Dallas is interested in meeting his fellow passengers."

Golden held out his arm to escort her, and she led the way to the other man's table.

The Texican did not speak until the introduction was made although he had the good manners to stand. He offered a hand to shake. "Pleased to see you again, Mr. Golden. Will you join us?"

Dallas's escort showed a brief flash of surprise, followed by an awkward gesture. She seemed much younger than the other escorts, and more conservatively dressed, if not quite dowdy and provincial. Perhaps she too was a Texican, or perhaps she was what the client preferred. She poured him a shot of what turned out to be fine bourbon.

Golden tossed back the drink. "I am hearing some very interesting things about this new nation of Texas," he said. "I hear that there are many resources to be developed, and some new technologies."

"What stories have you heard, sir?" The Texican spoke slowly, his drawl harsh against the usual polished and oily tones of other men here.

"As I said at our last meeting, my employers wish to support the building of industry and the leverage of modern technology," Golden said, keeping his face friendly and devoid of his thoughts. "While they are not of a political bent, they do have economic clout."

"That is not what I asked you, Mr. Golden." Dallas leaned back in the chair a bit, appearing open and friendly, except for his squinting eyes and sardonic smile "I'm all for coming right to the point, and I do appreciate directness in a conversation, but I want to know what you have heard."

"A rumor here, a speculation there." Golden smiled, mirroring Dallas's pose, but aiming for a friendlier face. "Some believe that you may have oil fields that rival those in Pennsylvania."

"I have heard that same rumor, and I don't deny it." Dallas nodded to his escort to pour two more shots.

Golden noticed that the women listened intently, almost motionless, not to distract from the conversation. It was a bit unnerving. "Are there wells and refineries as well?"

"Plans are in motion for refining, as well as means of moving kerosene to the more developed colonies."

"How are you dealing with the Mexican government? They cannot be happy that you have taken these resources from their control."

"They have less interest in technology than in some other resources," Dallas said, pointing his chin towards one of dining rooms. "Mexico City is a long way across the Rio Grande."

"Yes, that does make a difference." Golden leaned forward. "Would you be open to making a presentation for an agent of interested parties?"

"Are these parties located in Charles Towne, or some other place?" Dallas sipped his bourbon. "Could I possibly present to them directly?"

"The corporation prefers to remain anonymous," Golden said, "which is why they employ me to locate and assess possible projects they wish to take on." This fish was not taking his bait, and Velvet was letting him do all the work. She had shared nothing of her Mauverton information with him.

"Miss Brandy, what do you know about this gentleman's corporation?" Dallas put his arm around his escort and turned his full attention on her. "Do you know him and who he represents?"

"I am not familiar with Mr. Golden or his company," Brandy said, smiling in a way that belied her demure dress. She turned to Golden. "Mr. Dallas is scheduled for a presentation this evening. Perhaps you could speak in the morning?"

Golden nodded. "Checking with the bigwigs first, I see."

"I have something they want. They have something I want." The Texican laid his other hand on the table, as if he had a straight flush behind his bet.

He'd be a formidable opponent in poker despite his lack of fashion sense, Golden thought. The man's eyes were sharp and intelligent behind the buckskin attitude.

"The question is how the trade balances," Dallas said. "Your investors may still be interested after I learn whether these people can provide what I require—something that can't be paid for directly, in the same fashion as roads, refineries, or other infrastructure can be."

"I see that you are taking the long view, but you may need some capital in the near future." Golden laughed to release some of his growing irritation. "Contact me when you decide you want our support."

"I am certain that our paths will cross again," the Texican said. "These ladies have quite the acquaintance among their clients."

"Meet me for breakfast in the morning," Golden said, "perhaps 10 o'clock, when you get a better sense of which way the wind is blowing. Money is still money regardless of politics."

Dallas cut him a sharp look, and then glanced at his escort. "I suppose that like a small town, everyone knows everyone else's business on this ship."

"Every one of our clients is a person of international business acumen," Velvet said, "but be reassured that your particulars have not been shared with anyone else, despite speculation and rumor. What you choose to share is your prerogative."

"That's true, Mr. Dallas," Golden said, with another smile. "In all my travels, I have never met such close-mouthed women. It is refreshing not to put up with inane chatter or mean-spirited gossip."

"I for one would like a bit more gossip," Dallas said, "to find out who else is aboard, such as yourself, and your invisible employers."

Golden rose to take his leave. "Until the morning then, sir, when mysteries may be unraveled. Miss Brandy." He bowed to her, and then to Dallas. "I wish you the best of luck with your presentation." He planned to be far away by then, leaving Dallas in the lurch with no investors and that much more willing to negotiate. His employers were not as interested in Texas as they were in the madam.

"Much obliged, I'm sure," Dallas said as he stood. He nodded to Velvet. "Ma'am."

As they returned to their table, Golden thought about how very little the women spoke, how intently they listened. They were more than whores, all of them spied, and possibly dangerous, not just his Mauverton agent. "What do you have on the Texican, Velvet? Is there anything in your dossier from the Mauvertons?"

"No, and nothing about your being an agent for others. Is that just a cover story?" She allowed him to seat her.

Golden looked at his escort with a new perspective. She knew more than she was telling, and she might even be amenable to further disclosures. "No, I am an agent for a large organization, which uses various means to get what it wants. You might apply to work for them if you should leave *The Elephant* and Madame Elvira."

Velvet regarded him as if calculating what to say. "I do believe there are more than just the oil fields, as there are rumors of a new technology. It could be a refinement process, but I suspect it is something more unusual. I know that Madame wants it, and she set up this cruise and the meeting to get control of it. She would not risk the politics just to leverage some new toy."

First, he would get her to lead him to the resources he required, and then, well, he would see how things went. Whether she shared any other information was irrelevant at that point. Her part in the plan would soon be completed, and neither she nor any others aboard would arrive in Charles Towne.

**A private dining room off the Gallery**

Dixie strolled arm-in-arm with Sir Winton Randolph to the private table near the Gallery viewing area, Randolph's favorite spot. She thought Madame was taking an unwise risk to have all these ambassadors on board at the same time—a fine target.

Still, Madame had her sources, and Dixie knew most of the clients at least by name and face, if not in the Biblical sense. She was well-known herself, and popular enough that she gathered nods and smiles from other escorts' clients.

She savored being well known and admired now that she was on her last cruise. Sir Winton might keep her as his mistress on the madam's dime in California, or they might go to another city, one where she could build her own new life. Sir Winton would live in style wherever he went, and she would ride along and steal whatever she could from him and his old-money friends.

Sir Winton droned on about some silly story, and she listened with half an ear, mentally recording but not really interested. She'd heard this one before and was mainly listening to see if any of the details changed. It was a good way to see how much of the story was a lie, or perhaps if any of it was true.

She insisted that he take the seat with the wall behind his back, which did not give him quite a full view of the landscape below but kept him safer from any possible attack. They settled into the sturdy chairs and looked out over the dark fields of Pennsylvania as they sped south, the gibbous moon laying a veil of silver over the muck and dirt of the farms. Dixie vowed she would never go back to that life. She had looked forward to being Sir Winton's mistress full time, in England, where her much practiced accent would be considered charming and her

background untraceable. But she would settle for San Francisco or some other place if it let her live in the style to which she wished to become accustomed.

Tea and cakes were served.

As Dixie poured the tea, Yvonne and the First Nations ambassador, Axe Copperhead, joined them. Yvonne pulled the privacy curtain so that only the watchers could see them.

Copperhead and Sir Winton were old friends, having met on many diplomatic missions. Genteel compliments were passed about, smiles, a bit of flirting.

It was good business to make the men think they were making something of a conquest, they were special, not just another client.

Dixie was genuinely fond of Sir Winton, and he was old enough to get her into a better place, but not to burden her. That was how Madame got her start, mistress of a wealthy man, and she had taken his money and invested it better than he had.

But the old fox had not been honest with her, leading her on, letting her think she might go back to England with him, and now her future was still in Madame's hands, not a safe place. She took some comfort in knowing that she had her own assets. He owed her much more than he'd paid for services, and she would collect from both him and Elvira, if possible.

Yvonne, a quadroon of golden skin and black eyes from New Orleans, seemed strangely quiet, not her usual arch personality. Dixie wondered if she was taking laudanum. Yvonne's eyes were glazed, though she went through the motions of flirtation, held Copperhead's hand, and whispered in his ear.

If Yvonne were incapacitated, she would not be a good listener, and Madame needed to know what the First Nations wanted to do about Texas. Dixie would have to find that out for

herself and then let Madame know about Yvonne.

She could tell that Mr. Copperhead also knew something was wrong. He was an astute judge of character, and though he was fond of Yvonne, he was a man with a wife, six children, and a whole tribe of grandchildren, hardly in love with her. He probably got more from her about her French cousins in Louisiana than she did about his politics. Still he always picked her, so perhaps she had hidden skills.

Dixie made a joke. The men laughed heartily—more than the joke deserved—but Yvonne only smiled, and then a beat too late. Dixie's concern grew, but she could not use the hand signals to alert the listeners, or the code words, since Yvonne knew them as well. She fluttered her fan as she made a sign to Yvonne, but she got no response. Something was wrong with that French whore. Yvonne was staring at the wall, not listening, and certainly not flattering and flirting with Copperhead as she usually did.

Maybe they'd had a falling out. Copperhead loved his wife and kids, and while the wife tolerated some extra-marital activities, as long as they were discreet, she would not give him up. Or, if she did, she would literally throw him out and leave him with nothing. Yvonne should be professional enough to accept that.

Yvonne raised her hand to her head, scratching in her hair—most unladylike. What was she thinking?

Dixie tried to get Yvonne's attention but the other woman ignored her, even when Dixie kicked her under the table.

Sir Winton was expounding on the merits of manufacturing for consumption rather than warfare, how the richness of raw material was turning into riches here in the colonies. She

pretended to listen, but she'd heard it all before, and in some parts, had coached him on it.

Copperhead, nodding, sipped his tea.

Dixie heard a guttural sound and caught a movement in her peripheral vision.

Copperhead gasped. Yvonne pulled a long hatpin from the Cherokee's chest and reached back to stab him again.

Dixie jumped to her feet. She grabbed Yvonne's arm to yank her up and away from the ambassador. Yvonne swung around and kicked, catching Dixie on her hip. Dixie staggered, but held on. She got her balance and jerked Yvonne's arm around behind her. Yvonne's fist grazed Dixie's face. Then Dixie brought her elbow down on Yvonne's shoulder and wrapped her arm around Yvonne's neck, restraining her as much as possible. She released Yvonne's other arm and made a choke hold around her neck.

Her arm freed, Yvonne went for Copperhead again, nearly dragging Dixie off her feet. She stabbed the hat pin into Dixie's arm. Dixie quit worrying about how it might look or who would get bruised and squeezed her arm against the Frenchwoman's slender neck, tighter and tighter until she passed out. She got the hatpin from Yvonne and hid it in her own hair. Then she cut the laces of Yvonne's corset and tied her hands behind her, tied her feet as well, binding her to the chair. Someone would come to help them before Yvonne regained consciousness.

Sir Winton had pulled Copperhead's chair to the side. He looked up into the chandelier and said, "Get the doctor here now." He helped Copperhead up to his chair and then tried to help Dixie, but he was too old for this kind of nonsense. He sagged back into his own chair, pale and winded.

"Take care of Mr. Copperhead," Dixie said. "I've got this bitch."

Yvonne was coming around, struggling against her bonds. Her eyes were nearly rolled back into her head. Dixie grabbed her by her hair and pulled her head back so she could get no leverage. When Yvonne started moaning, Dixie stuck a napkin in her mouth. They had to get out of the Gallery and upstairs into the cabin without making more fuss than they already had.

Finally, though it had only been a few minutes, the doctor came down the hidden stairs behind the dining room. Taking in the scene, she prepared a syringe and stuck it in Yvonne's arm. When the French woman didn't lose consciousness after a minute, the doctor gave her another shot. Dixie didn't see what it was, and didn't ask, as long as it worked.

Yvonne sagged, limp against the chair, and Dixie saw something fall from her hair.

Sir Winton had opened the Cherokee's vest and shirt in front, revealing a scratch rather than a puncture. Some blood stained Copperhead's shirt, but it was not bleeding very much.

"What happened?" the doctor asked, as she cleaned the ambassador's wound.

"Yvonne stabbed him with this." Dixie pulled the hatpin from her hair.

"You as well, I see," the doctor observed as she inspected Dixie's arm and face.

A trickle of blood trailed down Dixie's pale skin and stained her blue dress. "I'm fine. Take care of him." She stuck a napkin in a glass of sherry and wiped her arm.

The doctor turned to Sir Winton. "Mr. Ambassador, are you all right?"

The Queens' Minister nodded. "Yes. A bit shaken. How is Mr. Copperhead?"

The doctor listened to his chest, front and back. "I can't hear anything unusual at the moment. Please come with me to the infirmary."

Four dock workers came down the back stairs, two to help Mr. Copperhead, who was able to move on his own, and two to carry Yvonne. The doctor followed them.

"We need to go too." Dixie picked up the small bundle of calico that had fallen from Yvonne's hair. "It's not long before your meeting. Do we explain that Mr. Copperhead became ill?"

"I hope he can change his shirt and attend anyway," Randolph said as he got up slowly. "The pro-Texas forces need him there, even if he does not say a word."

"All right, then. Go on up to the cabin, and I'll meet you in a few minutes." She hoped Captain Zulie might know what the bundle of calico was. Dixie preferred to talk to the captain rather than the madam, given their last conversation. Rumor had it that the captain was a sorceress whose magic kept the airship safe from both Liberian and other kinds of pirates.

Madame was not going to be happy about this, and Dixie was not ready to make her demands for payment in handling the situation. The time for settling accounts would come soon enough.

## The Gallery

Elvira made her way from her office to the Gallery. The clients who weren't being entertained in their rooms were taking a meat tea. Well-fed clients were easier to manage, less likely to over-indulge in drinking, and much more talkative to their ever-attentive escorts.

Adding electricity had been a brilliant idea, and the cost of running a generator was much less than keeping gas aboard - and much less of a fire hazard. The escorts took care to wear paste jewelry to catch the light and dazzle. The room sparkled like a galaxy of stars, especially after dark. The more dazzle, the better for business.

Madame had only a few regular clients this trip, the fewer people aboard, the fewer to know her secrets. A couple of plantation owners from the Carolinas compared notes on their favorite horses, and a man who had found a rich field of oil was negotiating with one of her artificers for a better process of refining kerosene and for making use of the by-products. Much like a spider in her web, she felt the quiver of the slightest breeze, but unlike those insects the spider fed on, her victims were enriched and fattened up, helping her spread her web ever further.

She nodded to Velvet, who sat with her client, Mr. Golden, in the open Gallery. Brandy and the Texican were talking, though he still looked angry and uncomfortable. Elvira considered that maybe that was how he always looked.

The next room held the Queen's Minister, and the First Nations Ambassador. Elvira particularly wanted to introduce Dixie to Mrs. Pleasant as a future network center in San Francisco and to scout out other relocations in the gold country. San Francisco would need a belle for the western coast to anchor the network there, and Dixie was nearly thirty, too old for

an escort. Sir Winton might marry her, or might present her as a daughter, but either way, Elvira would get the information she needed. Still she decided to stop by for a moment, just to be pleasant and to ask if anything else was needed or desired. When she opened the curtain, she found the private room in disarray, a steward clearing the mess.

"Miss Yvonne stabbed Mr. Copperhead," the steward said, her eyes wide and her hands shaking. "The doctor took her away."

"What about Mr. Copperhead? Is he hurt badly?"

"I don't know, Madame." She looked away, unable to conceal her nervousness. "You were in The Gallery with clients. We didn't want to disturb you then."

"Thank you. You did right." Elvira patted the woman's shoulder to calm her, but the steward started at the touch. Elvira spoke to her in a calm voice, "Just finish up here and go see what Cook needs for you to do."

"Yes, Madame." Elvira noticed Alice cowering as she swept up the remains of food and drink. Elvira couldn't help wondering why Alice was so afraid of her. She would have to ask Zulie later, maybe after this cruise, another item to discuss.

Climbing the hidden stairs that led to the client cabins on the next level, Elvira made her way to Copperhead's cabin. No incidents, she had said to them, but now she had a major crisis. How could one of her women done such a thing?

Had she paid any attention to Yvonne at all? Had she missed any other signs? Her forehead was creased in thought of what else might have gone unnoticed.

Elvira had to get to Copperhead to see just how bad his injury was and what could be done if he could not attend the meeting. If that were the case, then she would see to Sir

Winton to make amends and make it look as good as possible.

Seventeen hours to Charles Towne.

**Axe Copperhead's cabin.**

Elvira met the Cherokee diplomat in his room, where the doctor filled her in on the attack.

Copperhead had insisted that Dixie be treated first, as her wound was deep. After the doctor cleaned her up, Dixie went back to Sir Winton's cabin to help him regain his composure.

For once, Elvira was glad that the escorts were not allowed in the ambassador's meeting room. People would notice if one escort was swapped out with another, and no one needed to know that Yvonne was not there, or to see that Dixie was injured.

She hoped that the incident could be kept quiet at least until after the meeting, though once the ambassadors were back in their cabins, word would spread. She could not think of a way to turn this disaster to her advantage.

First, she had to see what Copperhead wanted to do, and then see to Yvonne, and then Dixie and Sir Winton. She reached for the tonic flask in her skirt, but thought better of it. She didn't want anyone to see her taking it. She'd have a moment to herself later.

The doctor put a dressing over the ambassador's wound with some green poultice, one that did not, thank goodness, stink as some of her potions did. She wrapped it up tightly and had the ambassador move his arm to check the bandage. In a few minutes she packed her things. "I'll go back to the infirmary now if you don't need anything else."

"Thank you for your help," Copperhead said. "I will send for you if there are any changes."

The doctor nodded and left.

"Are you certain you want to attend the meeting?" Elvira asked, affecting a concern for

his well-being. She wanted him there, but she could not coerce or even encourage him. He'd been injured on her ship. "We can say that you are ill. Everyone will understand."

"No." His face was lined with pain, but he refused anything that would dull his senses. "I need to be there." He stared at her for a moment, not looking away as was more politic. "What about Yvonne?"

"She's heavily sedated, restrained for her own safety and yours. She will be dealt with." Elvira glanced away. "I cannot say how upset I am that one of my women could do such a thing." She wrung her hands but made herself drop them in a pretense of calmness.

Copperhead shook his head. "We have known each other for a long time. This is not your way." He let her help him put on a new shirt and tie his cravat. Then she helped him slip into his frock coat.

"You need to watch your own back, Madame." He shrugged experimentally, only wincing a bit. "This meeting may not have been such a good plan."

She nodded. "Please tell me what I can do to make this right." She fussed over him, combing his hair and helping with his coat.

"It's a bit late for you to stay out of international politics," Copperhead said with a wry grin. "I am not injured, just a scratch, well-tended by your physician." He flexed his arm, keeping his face stoic. "Do you know why dog fights are held in a pit?"

She shook her head, too tired for riddles.

"It keeps them at each other instead of attacking the monsters who put them there." He glanced up towards the hidden meeting room. "You have a bunch of dogs here, all baited and ready to bite. But someone is paying to watch this show, and it isn't you."

"That's not quite a proper analogy," she said, trying to seem amused rather than terrified. Despite her witty response, the picture he described looked all too accurate now.

"You are all here of your own free will."

"You have more enemies than you realize." Copperhead shook his head. "I have to go and speak with the Queen's Minister. Watch your back, and make sure someone watches whoever watches your back."

She turned to face the watchers and made a sign for them to send an escort for Copperhead.

"I do have a concession in mind for my vote," he said, turning back from the door. "I want cheap transport for the buckskins in our territory to be moved to the new nation. Tell the Texican to expect a sizable number of immigrants to build his new state and to make sure he has the authority to keep them in line."

"I'll pass the message along," Elvira said. "I'm sure Mr. Dallas will be pleased. He'll need folks. Would really want all those malcontents in one place?"

Copperhead stared at her for a moment, as if weighing his words. "Better than having them on my doorstep - or yours."

"We are in agreement on that point," she said. Could she get the Texican to transport the malcontents as part of a deal to get his floating gas? What would that cost her, and would it be enough to keep the First Nations happy?

One of the women from surveillance arrived to escort Copperhead upstairs, keeping with protocol. Elvira introduced her to the ambassador, and they walked up the corridor, chatting as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

Elvira straightened the room and called the watchers to have one of the loading dock crew stay in the room until Copperhead returned with his new escort. Perhaps each of the ambassadors' rooms should be guarded, a precaution, but that would be like locking the door after the mule escaped.

Her power in this situation had crumbled, and as soon as the others heard, and they would, even if Copperhead didn't tell them, she would have no standing at all. She had already leveraged most of her resources, and if the upper echelon of business people lost trust in her, she was ruined. The network, the ship, the cruise must be secured and saved. She would get Cook to put some kind of sedative in the clients' dessert, something that would encourage the clients to sleep.

Then once she had a few minutes of time to think, she'd come up with a plan. Zulie might know what to do, and even if she were still angry, it was as important to her partner as it was to Elvira to get these people safely to their destination. Then they could regroup...and then...she didn't know what.

She'd inform the watchers as soon as she got back from the infirmary. She had to learn what the doctor thought about Yvonne. She needed to get everything back under control and save whatever credibility she might have left. Her security suddenly seemed like a very long, thin chain that might harbor any number of weak links. Figuring out how to strengthen it had to be her first order of business.

The Liberian ambassador would be arriving soon, and this mess needed to be cleaned up before she arrived. It occurred to Elvira that the Liberians might be behind the hoodoo, but then the Liberians were not even aboard the ship as yet. What would they have to gain from

attacking the First Nations? It didn't make sense.

The Haitian? The New France ambassador? Or someone else? Whom could she really trust, and how would she know?

She'd talk to the Queen's Minister and get his perspective on the situation. He and Dixie were there, and they had no reason to provoke an attack. At least, she hoped not.

Seventeen and a half hours to Charles Towne.

**Sir Winton Randolph's cabin**

When she reached Sir Winton's cabin, Mr. Copperhead was just leaving. He nodded to her, but did not speak. Dixie held the door open. She had a bandage tied around her arm, and the other hand held a kerchief filled with ice against her face.

Sir Winton sat in a chair nearby, gripping a glass of sherry with both hands. His face was gray and his hair disheveled. He looked quite ill. He must have struggled with Yvonne, or perhaps with Copperhead, and perhaps he too had been stabbed.

"Dixie, go down and change clothes." Elvira stood beside the ambassador with her hand on his shoulder as a gesture of support. "I'll stay here with Sir Winton until you get back."

"No, I need to know what you two decide what to do now," Dixie said, shifting the ice against her face. "Mr. Copperhead suggested that he just spilled a cup of tea on his shirt."

"He told me that he decided to go on to the meeting," Elvira said, trying to sound reassuring. "He isn't badly injured. Yvonne is sedated."

"She was acting strangely tonight, not herself at all." Dixie sat on the bed, propping her arm against her thigh and resting her head in her hand. "Maybe she took laudanum."

"Mr. Copperhead offered no suggestion of why she would attack. Have you heard anything?" Elvira watched their faces for any sort of reaction.

Dixie shook her head. "She never talks about him off ship."

Sir Winton patted Elvira's hand. "The wine story is good enough." He looked thoughtful, a slight frown creasing his brow. "We were only seen by your people, Madame, so there is a chance that no story will need to be told." The old man sagged in the chair like wet laundry-not the usual genial gentleman, perpetually amused by the world.

"What concessions do you think the Queen will want to recognize Texas?" Elvira stepped back from the minister. "First Nations wants malcontents removed there."

"That's a good idea, if you can get the Texican to agree to it." Sir Winton wiped his brow. "As she loses no territory or imports, I'm sure she will be fine with it."

Sir Winton stood up, pushing off from the back of the chair to get to his feet. "The sherry has fortified me, as does your magical tonic." He smiled, and glanced into a mirror to pat his hair back in place. "I'm sure the walk will put the pink back in my cheeks. I will be fine." He continued to primp. Then he snorted a pinch of snuff.

Dixie stared at the ambassador, visibly biting her lower lip. She would need a talking to, but not here, not with her client listening.

Elvira straightened Sir Winton's coat. "then we agree to say nothing about the incident with Yvonne."

"That is simple enough." Dixie took a silken cloak from the closet. Her face was not terribly swollen, and make up might cover the rest. She put the cloak over her dress and pulled the hood over her face, masking her expression.

"Yes," Sir Winton agreed. He quaffed the last of the sherry, and his cheeks began to turn pink again. "Simple and easy to remember."

"I will escort the ambassador." Elvira gestured at the viewer port. "Send an extra note-taker to the meeting room until you can get there."

"Yes, Madame." Dixie was not happy in the least, her face pinched from keeping her thoughts to herself, but that was all right. She would get her chance to say her piece in private later. Dixie opened the cabin door and checked the hall. She slipped out and closed the door

behind her.

Neither the madam nor the minister said anything for a moment, each collecting thoughts and preparing what to say next.

Elvira held out her arm. "Are you ready to go?"

Sir Winton took her arm and leaned on her a bit. They went out towards the conference room, whispering as if they were old friends, conspirators.

He straightened his back and pulled Elvira closer to him, holding her arm tightly. "So spilled tea is the story," he said, clamping her arm against his, and holding her hand. "What are you offering me to tell it? To Dixie?"

Elvira did not resist or pull away. She'd learned long ago that letting the client think he had the stronger position was always a better strategy. "I have already offered you both the network in San Francisco if this deal is successful." She reached across and patted his hand in return. "Of course, you could go anywhere in British America, separately or together. Whatever suits you." She wondered if Sir Winton was tired of Dixie, wanting a younger woman. They had worked together, the three of them, for many years. What had changed?

"Is that what you offered Copperhead?" The Queen's Minister had now taken on a much more confident look, not the frazzled old man he'd been in front of Dixie. It might be just the game of diplomacy, but Elvira thought it strange. She didn't care if he and Dixie stayed together or not, as long as both of them stayed on her side. She'd invested a lot in them, over the years, and she held enough information to counter any blackmail schemes they might have against her.

"Would you prefer we meet together in the morning rather than making an

arrangement now?" She smiled at him and pulled him a little closer. "As this is your last cruise as an ambassador, perhaps there is some other position I could provide for a man of your knowledge and expertise. We have known each other for such a long time." She ran a list of cities through her mind that could use a smart man who would report to her, each city with a belle and a strong network of informers.

He laughed, with little humor. They approached the meeting room where Copperhead stood outside the door. "The morning will be a good time to negotiate. I want Dixie there to advise me."

He and Dixie had already had a chat, then, about the future.

"Certainly, Sir Winton." She pulled back on his arm for a last moment of privacy. "I am generous to those who serve me well."

He released her arm. "And how do you deal with those who do not?" He bowed slightly and left her there. He greeted his colleague, shaking hands and speaking genially.

Elvira could see no change in Copperhead, so he might not be in pain. Winton seemed cordial, speaking of trifles, as if they had not seen each other half an hour before. The performance might only be staged for anyone who was listening...or it might be for her.

The meeting would begin in earnest in an hour or so, and while the ambassadors danced the tarantella of diplomacy, her women would be watching and listening. It was going to work out. She would make it work, convinced that the diplomats would play nicely together to show a unified front, at least during the meeting.

Now to get Yvonne squared away, and then to make sure she collected any other loose information lying around. She would prove to Zulie that her plan was worth the effort in the end.

She rounded a corner on her way to the infirmary, and took a quick sip of tonic.

Sixteen hours to Charles Towne.

## **Surveillance room**

Jonas felt the glances of all the women in the dark room.

They were handing him enough rope to hang himself if he made a wrong move. He sat at a workstation and put the listening device over his ear. Reba had showed him how to listen to each of the rooms, one at a time. At the workstation was a list of who was assigned to each room, organized by the numbers on the viewport.

As he worked, he began to see the communications pattern and who was in charge. She did not wander behind the workers, but stayed at her station, glancing up when someone tapped a certain rhythm on the table. Then there would be an exchange of hand signs, or she would go to the woman to read her notes. The room stayed as silent as possible so that each of them could hear her section.

He watched them scribble on their notepads in some undecipherable scrawl - a code of some kind. Soon he realized there was another code, as the clients and escorts came in. The women always made a gesture to the periscopes behind their backs or anywhere that the client could not see. They made sure that the watchers saw every part of each client as he was dressed. Some clients wanted sex immediately, but others were more interested in getting to the Gallery and meeting their peers.

The women whispered among themselves. They weren't pointing or staring at him, so he convinced himself that it had nothing to do with him personally.

He peered into the array of lenses that magnified the peephole of each room. One was dark and quiet, apparently empty. The next showed a woman retrieving the client's clothing from a closet in the wall. A third revealed an escort dressing her client. Another couple were

having sex. The fourth window showed a table in the Gallery where a man in a buckskin frock coat sat with his escort.

Jonas held the ear cup to hear better. The man's accent was one he didn't know, but it was Deep South or the West. The man groused about the ship, the wasted time waiting for the meeting to start, and his having to put up with the protocols. Jonas took notes, but nothing seemed important. By that time, the tryst in the other room was over, the man lying asleep while the woman cleaned herself and fixed her hair. She stood in front of the periscope and made several signs. He wished he could read them.

Did they know they were being watched, these clients? The escorts did, and he wondered how that affected their work, or if they liked being watched. Soon he was bored, as watching other people have sex or eating and chatting was not nearly as entertaining as doing it himself, especially when there was no seduction. He was hungry and tired.

He hated surveillance, but it gave him time to rest and think. The tonic kept him awake, and he used other skills to stay alert. He had to find out how what he was learning fit with what he already knew.

Elvira would either hire him or kill him, since he'd seen so much of how the ship worked. He knew he'd been put where he was to be out of the way and not underfoot. He wondered why he wasn't in the loading dock with the crew who already knew him. Maybe this let him know how things worked while keeping him out of the way, yet he would know too much to be let go once they arrived.

He was also thinking about the comm system, about how all the wires and periscopes must be designed for all the rooms so that he could see them in the surveillance room. Some of

it ran on æther, but some was electrical. The airship's engines would provide power, but how was it all connected? Who would want to disconnect the comm system? Woz had kept up a steady stream of chatter about the Mauvertons, but hadn't let on about anything from her side of the ship.

Jonas could see that there were small rooms curtained off, some open, where the clients would talk privately or receive visitors. Who monitored those rooms? Why would some folks sit out in the Gallery where they were less private, unless they did not pay extra for the private rooms or they just wanted to be seen? He knew nothing of the fee schedule on *The Elephant*, assuming that all were equal in their obscene wealth and privilege. Maybe there was a second class after all. The idea pleased him that even among the top of society there were levels, just as there were levels at the bottom.

Bored with the small talk in the Gallery and the lack of movement in the dark client rooms, he wanted to see more. He'd be more at home in the storage dock or the machine room, not that æthernauts would even talk to groundhogs like him. They were the top of their society. In their opinion, even the lowliest æthernaut was of a different breed than the wealthiest passengers in the knowledge of how the great machines worked and what kind of magic kept them in the air. Even the magic of æthographers was secondary to flying, but not to being useful, at least not to Jonas.

The tonic he'd been given was keeping him awake but restless, until the client came into one of the rooms and faced the periscope.

Caleb Coontz.

Jonas checked the listings under the rooms: #22, Quaid Golden - Velvet. He switched

the earpiece to listen to that one. They spoke very quietly, mostly away from the periscope and listening devices. They definitely knew someone was listening, and they were not playing along.

He'd known Caleb Coontz more than fifteen years ago when they were both working construction on the airship port. From a skinny, beardless boy, Coontz had cleaned up very nicely, with an elegant manner, wide muttonchops, and a well-figured body.

Should he let someone know that he knew the man under a different name? Maybe that was part of the service, but he could not imagine how Coontz had been able to amass the kind of fortune he needed to ride this beast or pass the "who knows you" test.

Maybe he had reconciled with his father the banker, though that didn't seem likely, given the stories Coontz had told about how his father educated him, not to be a banker but just a clerk, cheap labor. Coontz was always angry, but maybe he had taken on a new life - or maybe he was a scoundrel. Jonas made a note on his pad: "Golden, real name Coontz, Caleb. Bastard son of Virginia banker, can be violent. Warn the woman."

He fluttered the note to the supervisor then turned his attention back to the periscopes.

He kept an eye on Coontz and his escort, but then the women all knew each other. The couple was out of sight for a few moments as they strolled from the Gallery, a security risk he hoped someone else was watching.

He scanned the other rooms, which were mostly quiet now, only dimly illuminated by the electrical fixtures. Finally, people gathered around the two tables he watched, Coontz among them.

Once she faced the view screen, something she seemed to avoid doing, unlike the other escorts, he recognized the woman with Coontz. She worked as a freelance operative for the

Mauverton, but he did not know her name. Something was wrong here, and someone needed to know. He tried to tap the rhythm on his workstation, but he must have been too loud, as he got a few hisses and dirty looks.

The woman in charge finally came over, and he pointed to the screen that overlooked their table.

"That's Velvet," the woman whispered. "Number 22. Look on your list."

The name on his list was Quaid Golden. "That's not his name. He's Caleb Coontz, a demolitions man and dangerous." Jonas pointed to Coontz. "Velvet is a Mauverton agent. Does Madame know that?"

"You know him?" The woman squinted at the view screen.

"Yes, a long time ago." He saw no point in trying to tell a long story. "How did he get aboard?"

"That's not your concern." Her face scowled in the darkness. "I'll let Captain Zulie know. You just keep watching."

He nodded, unsatisfied. If he couldn't get a ride for love nor money, then Caleb Coontz should not be on the list either. Someone was going to be fleeced, and he thought it might be Madame. If she listened, maybe now she would trust him - or she might think all three conspired together. Coontz was certainly able to disable a comm system, and who knew what else he'd learned while being dandied up. Jonas wouldn't put it past Coontz to kill, given a reason or enough reward. Why disable the comm, and who would benefit from loss of communication? Who would pay Coontz and clean him up?

What could he do about it, other than watch?

## Outside the Infirmary

Elvira entered the doctor's lab beside the infirmary. Inside the lab, the doctor had scraped the hairpin to make microscope slides. "I want a guard on Yvonne. I asked Dixie to stay with her until they got here," the doctor said, "I think it wise to put one or two of the dock crew to guard her, both from herself, and anyone who might harbor resentment towards her."

Elvira paced across the room, turned, and faced the doctor. "What do you make of this incident?"

"I don't know." The doctor did not look up from her microscope. "I'll do what I can to analyze the material on the pin. It may not be a poison, but it will take time to figure out what it is and then do something about it."

"Do what you can. I've told both of them to report any symptoms." Elvira stopped, thinking about the attack in the dining room. "She could have attacked him while they were alone in the cabin. The watchers would take a minute or two to get there. Why wait until someone was there to stop her?"

"We won't know until we can question her tomorrow." The doctor made a few notes. "I knocked her out for six hours at least."

Elvira counted the hours. "We won't be halfway to Charles Towne by then."

"I can only give her so much at one time," the doctor said, checking her notes. "That is, if you eventually want her to wake up."

"Thank you." Elvira brought out a smile to let the doctor know she was doing a good job.

Why was the First Nations ambassador targeted? He was in favor of recognizing Texas, as far as she could tell. Was Yvonne was caught up in some other scheme? She needed extra

watchers for her watchers and more security than she had planned for. If one of her women had been compromised, then there would be more attempts. Who would be next?

Two of Elvira's crewmembers stood outside the infirmary.

"Did anyone else help you with Miss Yvonne and Miss Dixie?" Elvira asked the two men.

The man on the left, Marcus, she thought, nodded his head. "We brought Miss Yvonne, and Jerry and Raul brought the ambassador."

"You go get Jerry and Raul, and bring Alice from the kitchen down here."

"Yes, Madame," Marcus said, and loped off towards the loading dock.

"I'll call you to come in when Marcus gets back. Meanwhile, do not let anyone else in."

"Yes, Madame." The man set his back to the wall to watch the hallway.

Elvira entered the infirmary, a small room with two cots, two chairs, a water closet, and a locked cabinet of supplies. Yvonne was restrained in one cot, with straps tied over the blanket where she could not reach them.

Dixie was seated in a chair across from Yvonne. A smudge of brownish paste covered the bruise on her face.

"What did the doctor say?" Elvira asked, remembering that she needed to establish her concern for her people before bribing them. "Are you all right?"

"She says the bruise will be gone by morning, at least enough to be covered." Dixie looked at the bandage on her arm. "She is not happy with the arm, and she does not know if it will be infected." Dixie crossed her arms, drawing her eyebrows into a frown. "When were you planning to tell me about Sir Winton losing his post?"

Elvira gave her a long, slow gaze. "I assumed you knew. He's your client and source."

Dixie's cheeks reddened. She was angry with her client as well as her boss. "What did you offer Sir Winton for his silence about Mr. Copperhead?" She too had a long, penetrating stare.

Elvira was impressed with Dixie's astute assessment. "A place in the network, even if San Francisco is not available."

Dixie shook her head, then stared back at Elvira. "Did he take it? With me or without me?"

"He wants a meeting in the morning with you and Copperhead before he decides." Elvira smiled. "He wants your advice."

"The old coot is smarter than I gave him credit for." Dixie rubbed on her arm, but her face did not look pained, only angrier. "Aren't you going to offer me something, on the side?" She smiled, and leaned forward slightly, exposing her décolletage. "A friendly gesture for my management of the situation?"

"What did you have in mind?" Dixie was ready for a larger responsibility, but her loyalty was very much in question, that is, her secondary loyalty after that to herself. How much did she care for the old man, and would she remember who paid her?

"I want out" Dixie stood up, cradling her injured arm with the other, all pretense of cordiality dropped, "I want out of the network, out of the life, out on my own."

"You are free to leave at any time," Elvira said, extending her hands, a gesture of not holding anything back. "That has always been in your contract."

"There are other things in my contract," Dixie said, almost spitting like a cat. "Like not competing with you, not disclosing what I know about your operations." She turned up her

nose, turning away from Elvira.

"Yes, you agreed to those conditions, and I insist on them." Elvira forced her arms to hang by her side, not crossed to match Dixie's. She had taught them to model the client, but she had to do something different to get through to Dixie. "I would happily help you get set up in your own establishment, whatever business you may wish to pursue." Elvira was not pleased with the turn this conversation was taking. Having Dixie in San Francisco was a key to her success, but Dixie might be a liability. "I am very generous to my belles and to those who manage my other concerns."

"I have saved a few pennies for myself. I don't want to make my decisions based on what you think or what will affect your business." Dixie straightened her head and dropped her hands to her sides, clenched into fists. "I want a new identity, one that has no connection with you, and transportation far enough away that no one will ever know who I was or where I came from."

"That can be done, once we get to Charles Towne. Have you an agent or a lawyer to conduct the business as a mediator?"

"You are really afraid this will come out." Dixie cocked her head, propping her injured arm on her hip. "I believe I will defer my decision until I can confer with the ambassador." The arm must have hurt because she moved it again, frowning.

They were interrupted by a light tap on the door.

"Come," Elvira said. The four crewmembers and the steward came into the infirmary.

"This is everyone," Marcus said, looking around at the others.

"Thank you for coming." Elvira nodded to them. "You two stay in here and guard Miss

Yvonne. Make sure no one comes in here to bother her. If she becomes conscious, send Marcus to get the doctor, but you stay in here." She turned to the woman. "Alice, you are here because it looks better if a woman is present when men are guarding. Do you all understand?"

They all nodded.

"Good. This incident is not for gossip." Elvira looked into each of their faces, one by one. "I do not wish to hear speculations and theories. Keep your mouths shut, and your mind on your work. I will bring Miss Yvonne with me for further investigation after the cruise is over. If you would prefer to spend your time off somewhere else, rather than investigating this incident with me, then I expect this incident to be forgotten. Is this clear?"

"Yes, Madame," they said in chorus.

Elvira saw Dixie's lip curl in disgust, but she decided not to deal with it then. "Miss Dixie, please walk with me."

Dixie grabbed her cloak and put it on. Marcus opened the door for them, and then he and the other crew member followed them out.

The two women walked down the corridor.

Dixie stopped when they were far enough way not to be overheard. "There's something else, something you should tell the Captain." She reached into a pocket of her costume. She will know what it is, I think." Dixie still seemed angry, but she showed discretion as well, wanting the crew not to know what she was doing.

"Yes?" Elvira waited to see what Dixie would say, not hurrying her, although the meeting would start soon, and she had to meet the Liberian ambassador.

Dixie held out a napkin, which opened slightly to reveal a small bundle of red and black

printed calico tied with a bit of black, frizzy hair. "This fell out of Yvonne's hair. Some of her people practice voodoo. From the stories she's told, I know she believes in it." Dixie's hand closed tightly on the napkin, snatching it out of Elvira's sight.

Elvira stood speechless. The Haitians believed in voodoo as well, and many of the Louisiana French. "Why didn't you tell me sooner or show it to the doctor?"

"This isn't about science." Dixie hissed, her sneering face partly hidden by her hood. "Do you want to spook the whole crew and risk wrecking the ship?"

"Give it to me. I will have it taken care of," Elvira said, getting herself under control and using her command voice as quietly as possible. She held out her hand. "You have your own duties to attend."

"Duties." Dixie jerked her head back as if she had been slapped. She stuck out her fist as if to hit Elvira. "Take it and be damned." Dixie dropped the napkin and its bundle into Elvira's hand. She glanced back at the guards. "You ought to feed them, at least," Dixie said from under her hood, no longer hiding her distaste. "They've likely missed their dinner dealing with this."

"Thank you for suggesting it," Elvira said, smiling to hide her own dismay. What else could possibly happen tonight? When had she forgotten who made the cruises work?

Still, Dixie was on the payroll, and Elvira was the madam. "Would you please handle that for me on your way up?"

"Yes, Madame." Dixie hissed.

**The Promenade Deck, open air platform at the top of *the Elephant*.**

Captain Zulie met Aza, the Liberian ambassador's escort, in the dressing room and called up two uniformed crewmembers to welcome the Liberian ambassador and her entourage. She hoped Elvira had things secured in the infirmary.

The ambassador had agreed to join the cruise after everyone else was aboard to help with security and keep her presence a secret. Death threats arrived from various factions, so keeping her secure was important.

Elvira had received some threats too, but not much more than the usual. Where was Elvira? Didn't she know she had to keep protocol to ensure her association with the Liberian Pirate Queen?

When Zulie arrived on the Promenade, the Liberian's shuttle was already waiting to be docked. The crewmembers rushed forward set up the ramp for them to disembark. How long had the ambassador been waiting? Could anything else go wrong?

*No, check that.* Zulie didn't want to know.

Surrounded by her women warriors, who carried spears and knives and possibly hidden firearms, the ambassador made her way down the ramp. Zulie didn't like it, but the Pirate Queen insisted, and she must be present for Elvira's sake. Zulie did not allow herself to think of the negotiations required to get the queen to agree to come. There would be reckoning for that later—much later, she hoped, after the cruise.

Ambassador Mpenzi Okoro was a large woman, her blue-black skin contrasting with her red, green and gold robe of strips of cloth sewn together, and a printed silk turban that covered most of her fuzzy white hair. Golden jewelry glittered from her ears and around her neck and

wrists. Her guards, four women carrying swords and spears, were dressed in traditional leather armor with drapes of indigo fabric. A fifth woman in an indigo uniform carried two satchels.

"Madame Ambassador, welcome to *The Elephant*." Zulie bowed. "I am Captain Erzulie Dahomey. May I present Aza, your escort and amanuensis for the cruise?" She saw a glance pass between members of the guard. "She is here for your convenience, to assist in any way needed."

"Good evening, Captain Dahomey. Aza." Okoro smiled and nodded. "Are all the other diplomats aboard?"

"Yes. They are having tea and will be assembling in half an hour." Zulie gestured towards the bridge-level entrance. "Your quarters have been prepared, as you instructed."

"Excellent. Please lead the way." Zulie led the group across the promenade and onto the command deck. The crewmembers and Aza followed the guards.

*Where was Elvira?*

Zulie took the group to a room beside Elvira's quarters and instructed her crewmembers to watch at each end of the hall, leaving space for the Liberian women at the ambassador's door. Another crewmember brought a suitcase, which one of the ambassador's women carried inside. The fifth woman took the satchels into the small sleeping area.

In a few minutes, Aza served tea for the group, a tray for the ambassador, and a cart with beverages and savories for the guards, inside and outside.

"Please join me," the ambassador said, extending her hand to one of the two empty chairs at the table. She appeared to be at ease, not upset about the lapse in protocol. "I assume Madame Elvira will join us later?"

"Yes, Ambassador Okoro. She should be here shortly." Zulie sat and poured for each of them, tea grown on Liberian plantations. "A new situation has developed in addition to what we previously discussed." She had hoped to have a private word, but the ambassador put protocol first. Zulie had a lot of experience with Elvira and her clients. Appearances must be observed before any business could be done.

Both Aza and a Liberian guard tasted the tea and a snack before the ambassador ate, and then stood behind her, facing the door. The room was crowded, designed for no more than four people, not seven. It would make for crowded quarters, but the guards might be required to watch all night.

The ambassador helped herself to sugar and cream and sipped from her cup several times before speaking. "I understand that you have brought a Texican along, with their new technology." Her voice was pleasant as if she were speaking of shopping.

"He will present a prototype using a new natural resource they have discovered." Zulie picked up the cup, savoring the smell of the tea before drinking it. "He's rough around the edges and more of an engineer than a diplomat, but not stupid." She did not often deal with the clients directly, but she was the highest-ranking officer aboard, and in the air, it was her station. They must have some privacy soon. The Ambassador might trust her entourage, but Zulie did not.

The ambassador nibbled at a scone. "What are your plans to use this new technology? Do the Texicans have ship builders as well?" She ladled a bit more clotted cream to her plate.

"Not as far as I have been able to learn." Zulie set the cup down and served herself a scone, not hungry but observing the custom of sharing food. "I have reports of mining, small

scale refining of kerosene from the oil deposits they have found, and cattle ranching. They are still developing their infrastructure."

"Madame would, no doubt, like to help them." Okoro spooned a bit of blackberry preserves on her plate, and then spread some on her scone. She made a show of eating heartily.

Zulie's stomach was not tempted by sweets, especially not now. "If the technology works as promised, she plans to offer excursions to Mexico, California, and possibly to Europe." Zulie forced herself to take another bite of the scone, her concerns having taken all her appetite. "She is always interested in expanding her options."

"As are we all." Okoro smiled as if the snacks had fulfilled her deepest desire. "What about you, Captain? What are your options?" The Ambassador sat back, as if she too had performed the proper acts of civil behavior and could now get to business. "Where does Liberia fit into your rosy scenario? What of developments from our previous discussions?"

Zulie glanced at the guards. "I believe we can expand our mutual interests. I am concerned for Madame Elvira's safety, as I have suggested in my correspondence."

Okoro's face settled into an expression of neutral geniality. "We will talk later, after the meeting. My women will guard me inside as well as being posted by the doors."

"I must insist that your guards leave their weapons outside," Zulie said. "We have taken strict precautions to remove all weapons from the ambassadors."

"I am glad to hear that. My women do not need weapons," the ambassador said, "But I am concerned about any jewelry the others may be wearing."

"As you say, Ma'am." Zulie hadn't thought of searching for items that did not look like

weapons. "I will see to extra security."

"We will talk of other matters later." The Liberian reached for her teacup. "Our original plan may need to be altered."

The door opened, admitting Elvira.

"I will leave you to talk," Zulie said. "Ma'am. Madame."

### **Mpenzi Okoro's quarters**

Elvira started up towards the lift, considering if any of incidents could be used to profit. She could not find an angle that suited her, not one that promised a good return. She had to get topside to greet the Liberian ambassador before anything else went wrong. She was late, and she doubted the ambassador was one who tolerated waiting.

One of the crew stepped out of the lift. "Madame," he said. "Your guest has arrived."

"Thank you," she said. She lifted her skirts and ran to the lift, cursing the seconds as it moved along its track to take her up. She had no time to retrieve the small gift from her quarters since the ambassador was already aboard, in her quarters, she hoped. When the lift finally reached the officers' deck, Elvira could see the warrior women outside the ambassador's quarters. At least they were not standing in the dark on the promenade. With a quick pat to her hair and a deep breath, she strode out to meet the Pirate Queen.

She stopped before the guards, who looked her over and then opened the door without comment.

More guards were inside, with Aza standing behind Ambassador Okoro, and Zulie sitting beside her, holding a teacup. Despite the ambassador's genial smile, she seemed ominous.

"Welcome, Madame Elvira," Okoro said. "I am gratified that you could join us."

"Thank you, Madame Okoro." Elvira curtsied, as a lower rank to a higher one. "I apologize for my tardiness."

"Captain Dahomey met us and has proved herself a good escort." Okoro spread a bit more cream on a bite of scone. "I had so hoped to meet you before the conference began. Please join me."

Zulie stood left without a word after a significant glance to the ambassador. Elvira sat down at the table.

Aza poured tea for Elvira and brought her a plate with two scones. Elvira added a bit of cream to the tea and then sipped, all part of the game of polite conversation. She followed Okoro's lead and took a bite of the scone. "I hope you are well."

"Tolerably so." Okoro sat back with her teacup, though she made no pretense of drinking. "I appreciate your invitation and your willingness to meet my needs. What can Liberia do for Madame Elvira?"

Elvira wondered how long the Liberian had been aboard, how long Zulie had entertained her. She took one more sip of the tea to wash the crumbs of the scone down her throat and settle her stomach. "Liberia is known for its artificery. Adapting to a new technology would be much more efficient than waiting to see what Texas may be able to cobble together."

"I see." After another pretend sip, Okoro continued. "What is your intelligence on the unrest among the colonists? Do you think a war is brewing?"

"I think an alliance might provide benefits to those on both sides of British America and the First Nations. Texas already has enemies in Mexico and Louisiana, not to mention the western Natives." Elvira said, keeping her voice calm and steady, with warmth but no emotion. "There are always wars and rumors of wars. War is bad for business."

The Ambassador nodded. "For some, war is a bad choice. Others, however, manage to profit."

"My hope is that this excursion will alleviate the pressure to seek that result and open the doors to more international understanding and trade." Madame took another sip. She

needed to talk to Zulie, but could she trust the Pirate Queen, and could she allow herself to be so vulnerable with the person who could ground her entire operation with a word?

"Choose your friends wisely, Madame Starr," the ambassador said. "The highest bidder is not always the best steward of the product for sale."

"Good advice, as always." Elvira sipped more tea. "Did you have a particular friendship to promote, or one that you wish to know better?"

"People need not be friends to do business," the Ambassador said, "But one needs friends in any business."

"I hope we are such," Elvira said. "Liberia has been a wonderful resource for me."

"I am representing Liberia, Madame, but I am not Liberia." The Ambassador set her cup on the tea tray. "I have my own interests as well as the interests of my nation. Do you have other interests than your business?"

"I have many interests beyond the cruise."

The Ambassador shook her head. "You have many business interests, but I wonder if you have any personal ones - a garden, music, art, horse racing?"

Elvira thought. The network was her life, as was *The Elephant*. And Zulie, of course, who always harped on getting their feet on dirt, feeling sunshine on her skin. "I have dedicated my life to my businesses and to my workers," she said finally. The night's events made her question her priorities. Zulie might have been right.

The ambassador set down her cup. "So it is not about the money, then?"

"Of course, there is money to be made," Elvira said, also setting down her cup, "and to be spent. Plans must be made and carried out, and information gathered for sharing."

"Sold, more like." The ambassador smiled. "What would happen if you lost your ship, lost your network? What would sustain you then?"

An involuntary shudder wormed its way down Elvira's back. "I should have to start over, perhaps find a new business. Could I look to Liberia, to you, for advice and suggestions?"

"That remains to be seen." Okoro glanced down at her last bite of scone as if it were fascinating.

They sat in silence for several moments. The tension deepened. Zulie said that Liberians didn't believe in magic, but they might know more about it than they let on.

"May we invite the Captain back to the table?" Elvira said. "I have something I think you both should see."

Okoro nodded to one of her women, who went out of the room.

The madam and the ambassador sat in silence, each with her own thoughts but no further pretense of cordiality or hunger.

When Zulie came back in, her face was stoic but her movements tense.

Elvira retrieved the napkin, let it fall open, and showed the contents to Okoro and Zulie. "One of my women said this fell out of an escort's hair after she attacked her client, an ambassador."

Zulie jerked back with an intake of breath. She never reacted to anything. Now Elvira was scared.

Mpenzi Okoro took the napkin, careful not to touch its contents. She took a whiff of the poppet, turning her head and sniffing out to clear her nose. "That is bad--a very bad hoodoo." She folded the napkin back around the calico and held it between her palms. She closed her

eyes and whispered in a strange language. When she opened her eyes, her expression was angry. "This must be burned." She tied the napkin shut by its corners and handed it to Zulie.

"I will see to it, personally, Madame Ambassador." Zulie tucked the napkin into her jacket pocket. "I want everyone on board kept safe." She glanced at Elvira, and then went back out.

Okoro glanced at Aza. "Bring me a notepad and a pencil." Okoro wrote a list on the notepad and gave it to one of her women. "Get these things from the kitchen or bring them aboard as soon as possible. Go back to my home if necessary, but I need them immediately."

The woman bowed slightly, but did not speak. She left the room.

"What should I do now?" Elvira asked. "How can I help you prepare for the meeting?"

"Thank you for your kind hospitality," said the ambassador, dismissing her. "Perhaps we can speak again in the morning."

Elvira rose from the table, unused to being commanded, unused to being without power. "Please ask for anything that will make you or your people more comfortable."

"Thank you. I will do so." The ambassador placed her hands in her lap and looked away.

An inside guard knocked at the door and then opened it for Elvira. The outer guards let her pass.

Once out of the guards' sight, Elvira sighed. She didn't like having the Liberian there with her own guards, not inspected or searched, but that was the only way the Liberians would agree to Queen Mpenzi's presence. Everyone needed to be there, and Elvira had no real leverage, except what the ambassadors would allow. If they were all as strong as the Liberian Ambassador was, nothing would be accomplished this trip. Maybe Zulie had been right—

nothing to gain and everything to lose.

Still, the ambassadors were all aboard, and they agreed to speak, if not listen, to each other. It was a step, and she would know more about all of them than any of them knew about each other by this time tomorrow.

It was going to be a long night.

Fifteen hours to Charles Town.

## Golden's Cabin

Back in his cabin, Golden watched as Velvet brought out the crew uniforms she had stashed in the dumbwaiter.

"These will let us get down to the loading dock for your kit." She laid the uniforms on the bed. "We will still need to stay out of sight, as everyone knows everyone else, but from a distance or in the dark, we should be able to pass."

"You could simply give me directions, as one person can be more stealthy than two," Golden said, as she helped him undress.

"One who knows the ship, perhaps." She folded his clothing. "What is that big package, and why do you need it now?"

"It's all part of the plan. Don't worry about that." Golden was not happy about her curiosity.

"Tell me more about your employers. What do they want with Texas?"

"They are interested in development of Texas's resources, as I told Mr. Dallas." Golden was not pleased with the information she provided so far, so she needed no more. "With resources come opportunities, and I want my cut of the profits."

Once he was dressed, she bound her hair, placing it under a cap.

"They pay well, these employers of yours?"

"Are you looking for a third job, Miss Violet Daughtry?" He smiled at the drain of color from her cheeks with the mention of her birth name. "I would think that being a spy for two agencies would strain your loyalties sufficiently."

"My loyalty is always to my own interest," she said, her color returning to her cheeks. "If

I can get a higher rate of return for my time and information, I would certainly consider a new assignment." She released the busk of her corset, and untied the fastenings of her costume.

He could not see her face, but he watched her strip. While fashionable, the whore's clothing was designed to come off easily without the aid of a lady's maid. "I suppose you would like more money for your child's support."

She paused, not looking up. "I have no children."

He knew that was not true, although his information had not come from her Mauverton dossier. "I believe your daughter's name is Sarah, and she is fostered with one of Madame's women in Baltimore. I'm sure that your mother would be pleased to know of her whereabouts."

She dropped the rest of her petticoats. "You apparently have me confused with someone else, Mr. Coontz." She paused as if to gauge his response to her knowledge of him. "I agreed to help you with your mission in order to get more information about your employers, but if you think threatening me will get you more cooperation, you are sadly mistaken." She stood there in her shift as defiant as if she wore armor.

Golden regarded her expression and decided she was serious. She would be a liability to him as she knew who he was. "My employers do not wish to be known, and in fact, I have only one person to contact who gives me instructions. I can't help you."

"Then give me a reason not to turn you over to Madame." She stepped toward the microphone and the bell for the dumbwaiter.

He shrugged. "All right, I will play it your way. We'll get the kit from the loading dock, and then you can show me where the safe is for the diplomatic pouches." He turned away from

her to into the water closet where he cut the wires for listening devices. He made a mental note to run any wires he needed in the walls of a place of his, so they would not be so exposed. No matter how bright the madam thought she was, he was a couple steps ahead of her.

He dimmed the light as low as it would turn, making the room dark enough that a watcher would have a difficult time seeing into it. He threw a towel over the periscope. He might have only a few moments to do what he came here to do

He went back over to Velvet, now dressed in the uniform. He kissed the back of her neck. She stiffened ever so slightly. He slipped his hands up her shoulders to her ears, and made a hard, quick twist, so fast that her expression did not change in death. A pity that she was so smart, but he couldn't take her along, and she was too high a risk to his plans. His loyalty too was always to his own interest, and the highest bidder.

He placed her in the bed, regretting that it had been so quick, but she appeared to be sleeping. He arranged a second lump of pillows so that anyone walking in saw only two sleeping figures. He checked from peephole in the hall, but the closed room was too dark for peeking.

He placed the few tools he'd brought aboard in the crew uniform, not much to work with but enough to get his kit and do what he'd come here to do.

Golden strode purposefully down the hall towards the lift, but at the landing he took the next stairwell down. At the next landing, there were no openings, only a turn and another flight of stairs. He was sure that something mechanical was on this level, as the sounds of the engine were louder. He went further down the stairs, past another landing with no cross path, and down again. Two levels. There had to be another way to access that space. He had already checked out the water closet and the dumbwaiter--too small for him to get through. The access

panels for the plumbing, for repairs, were not easily spotted.

He kept walking, looking for a door or another stairway up. He remembered the stairway behind the bar which led to the kitchen. He must avoid all passenger areas until he could find what he needed to disable the ship and get away. But first, the loading dock and his escape plan.

## Conference Room

Elvira took another shot of tonic from the flask hidden in her bustle. She had to be bright and shining for them, keeping them focused on the cruise and the business at hand. Her brilliant idea had leaked, and now the very people she wanted to protect were in the gravest danger--from her brilliant plan. She was glad she had hired an extra Liberian escort, and they had insisted on bringing their ambassador aboard separately. Short of the ship being compromised, the last thing she wanted was some international confrontation.

She would go make nice for the ambassadors, promise them future favors, and then find a place to sit and think for half an hour. She would apologize to Zulie, too, admit she'd been wrong, and try to get some kind of a plan together.

She made her way to the conference room leaving the public area to move through the half floor to the hidden surveillance area. She was proud of the design developed by her artificers and ship wrights, whose expertise paid off their expense when she needed them.

Only the ambassadors were to be allowed in the room, brought in by alphabetical order of country, which allowed Sir Winton to come in first, and to preside over the meeting, which he had called. The ambassadors were spaced around the table to balance the known supporters of Texas, and those opposed, separated as much as possible by the undecided. She had asked for the escorts to be present, but she had not been surprised when her request was not approved.

The only others allowed inside were translators, one for French for the Haitian and the Louisiana ambassador, both of whom spoke excellent English, and Spanish for the Mexican ambassador, who did not. Ambassador Okoro of Liberia brought her own translator, a speaker

of Gullah, not that she needed her. Aza spoke Gullah as well as French, so Elvira would know not only what was said, but also what was translated. They would watch from nearby, unobserved and taking copious notes on the proceedings. She had pulled one of Plato's crew to stand in for Yvonne. He was literate and spoke very good French, a man captured in England for some crime and transported to Charles Towne. He seemed eager for the chance to impress her despite having worked all day. He too drank a shot of tonic, and settled himself into the small space, taking no notice of the women around him.

Satisfied with the surveillance area, Elvira walked to the public entrance. Inside, the ambassadors grumbled about the seating, the lighting, and anything else they could think of. Fruit, savories, and beverages were provided, along with paper for notes and writing utensils.

"Welcome, Ambassadors," she said, making a curtsy. "I am so honored to have you here, and hope that you will find your accommodations comfortable and conducive to your work." She walked around the room behind them, establishing herself as the mistress of the room.

Returning to the door, she paused. "I would very much like to expand my services to each of your countries and colonies, so I hope you will keep me in mind as you discuss your important issues." She knew that Texas was the main agenda, so there was no need to be blunt. "Please inform me if there is anything I can do to make your time here more productive. Sir Winton, I leave them in your capable hands." She dropped another curtsy, and left the room.

Time to get the Texican. She hoped that Brandy had gentled him down and schooled him in his presentation. Her whole plan was riding on it. She hoped there was some charm under that morally superior attitude of his.

Zulie met her in the hallway. "How did that go?" Never sanguine, Zulie's mood had

definitely darkened.

"So far, so good. No blood yet." Elvira patted her shoulder. "Now we wait, listen, and learn. I need to get back to my office to check on the scriveners."

Zulie stopped, turning to block her way. "You need to find someone else to run the excursions. Be the queen bee on your own time."

Elvira ran her hands along Zulie's arms, gently pulling her hands forward to hold them. "You ever see a queen bee? All she does is lay eggs. Not my style."

Zulie stood silent for a moment, staring down at Elvira. "Maybe so, but the whole hive protects her."

Elvira smiled. "After this trip, I'll think about swarming. I need to train a replacement anyway."

"Yes, you do." Zulie kept her working frown.

Elvira put on a flirting expression. "Think about who would be a good choice."

"I'll put that on top of my list right after getting us all to Charles Towne tomorrow afternoon." Zulie said, pulling Elvira along as she walked backwards. "Right now, we need to talk to the doctor."

## Outside the infirmary

Zulie stopped in the hall outside the infirmary, touching Elvira's shoulder to get her to stop and breathe. Elvira thought she was covering it, but she'd been at her tonic again.

"You're tired and nervous," Zulie stated, touching Elvira's face to make her look up at her. "You are feeling that something is wrong, but you can't say what."

"That's true. We can't go back now..." Elvira glanced around as if she wanted to escape.

"It's not you. Everyone on the ship is having second thoughts. That is why we must see the doctor immediately." Zulie held out the napkin Elvira had given her in Okoro's chambers.

"This is a hoodoo. I've had Yvonne's things need to be searched to see if there are any more, but this seems to be the only one."

Elvira nodded, though she stared away. "Dixie said she was acting strangely. We'll need to keep an eye on everyone else." She sighed, slumping from her usual posture.

Zulie put her arm around Elvira's waist, moving her again towards the lab. Elvira was almost shivering from overdose of the tonic.

At the lab, doctor invited them in. "Has there been another problem?"

"We need for you to examine this and destroy it." Zulie laid the napkin on the doctor's examining table. "Did you discover anything from your experiments?"

"No, there are some herbal elements." The doctor picked up the poppet with tongs and laid it under her microscope. "No direct poisons that I could detect, but I've only had a couple of hours to work. What else is the problem?"

"It's a hoodoo, one that works." Zulie pointed to the exam table with her chin. "Can you burn it down here?"

"Yes, I can manage that" The doctor pulled a set of tongs and a square of ceramic from her cabinet. "I don't often have need of these."

"It will smell bad, very bad." Zulie warned her, hoping that the doctor's belief in science would not compromise her safety. "You should cover your face and eyes, maybe all of you. I don't know what's in it, but it is dangerous. Open the ventilation vents before you start."

"Is it likely to be explosive or toxic?" She held the tweezers over it. "Should I cut it up, burn it in pieces?"

"Don't untie it. It's probably not explosive, but very possibly toxic." Zulie stepped closer. "Most importantly, it has bad intention, and if you have a belief system, you should call on it to protect you."

Elvira was visibly fidgeting. "I need to get back upstairs."

Zulie wished she could have the doctor sedate her, but that would take too many explanations. "Do you have any rock salt? Or even table salt?" Zulie asked. "If you do, put it around the packet--it will likely ruin your crucible, but it will help break the spell."

"I'll manage." The doctor put on leather gloves and then an oilcloth overdress with sleeves and goggles attached to a hood that shielded her face. She covered the bowl and carried it with the tongs to a tripod over a Bunsen burner. "You should go now." She opened the ventilation hood above the crucible.

Zulie motioned to the infirmary door, waiting for Elvira to precede her. Once outside, they waited for the doctor.

"I thought Liberians did not believe in magic," Elvira said, devoid of any hint of humor.

"Most don't, but Haitians do, and so do some of the Voudoun in Louisiana, near

Yvonne's family." Zulie crossed her arms and frowned as a noxious smell wafted through the spaces in the walls--the essence of excrescence, acrid, bitter, and nauseatingly sweet. "They believe in it enough to work it on non-believers."

"What can we do to protect the ship and our people?" Elvira covered her face with a handkerchief.

"We're doing it." Zulie stepped over to a maintenance alcove and grabbed a water bucket, kept close by in case of fire.

The infirmary door opened just enough for the doctor to slip out, but the hallway was filled with a slimy, greenish fog. Her overdress was covered with it, too. The doctor skinned out of it, turning it wrong side out and then bundling it into a ball.

Zulie drenched the overdress in the bucket of water, and then added the doctor's gloves, shoes and stockings.

Within few moments, the fog cleared. "Are you all right?" Elvira asked.

"I believe so." The doctor's usually calm face was gray with fear and disgust. "Will I ever use my lab again?"

"In a couple of hours, it should be cleared away," Zulie said. "It has no human energy to feed on, except residual, so it will fade away." Zulie noticed the cross on a chain around the doctor's neck. "Wash everything in salt water and put salt around the perimeter of the lab. Pray."

"I will do that. I'll start keeping two buckets of water in the lab, just in case."

"Drink lots of water for the next two hours," Zulie said, "and get some rest."

Elvira patted the doctor's shoulder. "Thank you for doing this. I had no idea. I should

have..."

"No, it's my lab and my equipment. It was safer for me to do it." The doctor picked up the bucket with her wet things. "What do I do with this?"

"Go to your cabin," Elvira said, "Bathe and rest there. I'll get Cook to send you salt."

"Thank you," the doctor said. "I'll change and set up in the infirmary for tonight."

Elvira opened the alcove and took out a mop to clean the slime that had beaded up on the floor.

"Do you feel different now?" Zulie asked. "Calmer. Better able to handle things?"

"Not a lot." Elvira started mopping.

"Get someone else to do that." Zulie jerked the mop from her hands. "You need to get away from here and go back to work."

Elvira stared at her, expressions of anger, fear, and exhaustion flitting across her face.

"You are right. I'll go back up now."

"For once, you will listen to me." Zulie took her by the arm. "This was done against you. You'd better talk to your fairy cogmother for whatever protection she will give the ship, if you really believe in her. "

Elvira turned away. "I have to get the doc some salt."

"I'll do that. You are going to your office to rest." Zulie held her arm and moved her towards the lift. "I'll bring you some supper, and we'll figure out what to do next."

Sedating Elvira looked like the best plan. What could she tell the doctor to convince her to knock out the boss?

"All right." Elvira was pale, her skin shading towards gray, and her age showing through

her makeup.

Fourteen hours to Charles Towne.

**Mechanical deck**

The clatter from the kitchen covered any noises closer by, so Golden made his way past there and back towards the crew quarters. He wouldn't be able to get close to the engine room, but he should be able to find some catwalks from one area to another. No vessel could operate without these spaces.

The sound of the engines increased, so he stopped to look for anything different, tapping lightly on the walls. Near the center of the ship, he found the access ladder that led to the belly of the ship, the center section surrounded by loading dock and storage. He slid into the narrow opening to start his descent. He could not get a clear picture in his mind about where each part of the ship aligned: the public parts, the service areas, and the crew areas. The airship was a three-dimensional maze of open spaces, hidden passageways and dead ends.

As he moved deeper into the ship, the engine noise grew louder and the tunnel lighter. The ladder led to an open area, not an easy place to scout before he would be seen. He stopped just above the opening--no closet here or other hiding place, no room to turn around to hang his head out without being seen. He listened. No talking, no footsteps, only machine noises, clicks and humming. He listened for several minutes—maybe only one person managed this area. One person, maybe two, he could manage.

He slid down the last ten feet of the ladder, turned to look, and then stood still, so as not to attract attention. As he scanned the area, only the drive train and metal automatons moved, dropping oil here and there into gears, cleaning. None of them took notice of him. Not in their programming.

The ship's crew then would likely keep their fingers and other body parts intact. The

automatons were not built like men, but more like cranes, solid, heavy bases with a waist that swiveled, and long folding arms. They had large, ball-like heads with lighted sockets, like double torches that shone on the sections they monitored, and gave them some kind of sight. The head was mounted on a metal spring that moved in whatever direction the automaton looked. The bases held the oils that they used to lubricate the machine, and their power supply, possibly from the engine itself. He found them impressive if not beautiful. He could not decipher what powered them.

He slipped a length of spring steel out of his pants leg, and started looking for a likely place to drop or throw it into the gears. Each likely place, however, was guarded by an automaton. He approached one, but as soon as he was within arm's length of the gears, the automaton pushed him gently away. He tried again, several times. The automatons did not pay him any attention unless he came near them. They moved very quickly, much more so than he would have thought, as if they were sentient. Someone must be controlling them from a distance. If so, someone would be down after him soon.

He slipped the steel back into his coat. His instructions were clear: he was not to destroy the ship, nor to make irreparable damage, only enough to force a landing far from Charles Towne. He'd have to look elsewhere for a weakness, but if it came to that, he'd just get creative.

He went back out into the corridor to get back to the loading dock where his things must be stored. He needed his kit, even if Velvet had said he couldn't get to it in flight. Surely not every part of the storage was guarded, but how to find his things among all the boxed crates? He didn't see any periscopes, but there was a communication port. He disabled it.

Down one corridor he moved, hoping the area was not watched as were the cabins. He listened for any noise not provided by the engines. He peered into each opening with dim light, trying to spot crew quarters, access spaces, any place to hide from a search. Finally, he found crates, stacked against one another, row by row, each numbered, more than a hundred. Had he paid attention to which number carried them up? He looked for his cabin number, but no luck. There'd been some quick release mechanism, not the bolts that held the crates rigid. He searched for it, catching a splinter in his hand. At the side, at last, he found the release, but the crate was empty. Only then he noticed the label, denoting the passenger name or the contents. He had 99 crates yet to check, but now he knew what to look for. At least these women were well organized. Who knew what else he might find useful?

He checked fifteen crates, ten more, but he found nothing useful, no papers, no cash, and no weapons. At the end of the next to last row, he found his kit, a rucksack nearly five feet long and weighing more than twenty pounds.

The documents were either in the ambassadors' hands, Madame's, or being copied somewhere. Velvet had told him they would be copied in Madame's office near the bridge at the top of the ship. Maybe he'd wasted Velvet too soon, but two could not travel as quietly as one. He didn't know what she might have told the Mauvertons or the madam about him, but she would not tell them anything more.

He put his coat in the haversack. He heard someone walking, so he stepped into the crate and pulled the door close, just enough to keep from triggering the quick release, which didn't have an inside latch. Time to make a move.

Only 11 hours to keep them from arriving in Charles Towne and for him to escape.



### **Ambassador Meeting Room**

J. R. Dallas opened the satchel he carried and brought out a brick. He held tied it to the balloon he had brought along, and then released the brick, dangling, but held up by the balloon. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he said, gesturing to the balloon.

The ambassadors snickered. "A child's toy? We know about hydrogen. It is far too dangerous."

"This is not hydrogen, Ambassadors, but a different gas, helium. It is lighter than air, only a bit less dense than hydrogen, and it will not catch fire." He lit a candle with a Lucifer and opened a small valve on the balloon. The gasp from the Ambassadors appeared to extinguish the candle with no other fanfare.

"As you can see, it is not inflammable." Dallas allowed the balloon to float against the ceiling. "We have found a few dangers, all of which require very careful conservation of the gas. It will escape from any container that is not well sealed, due to its very light nature. If a large quantity were to escape into a room where people or animals were kept, it displaces oxygen." He did not continue, but let them think on that aspect. "Good design eliminates both of these problems, as well as reducing the weight of the transport engines by eliminating the need for heat production. Helium will lift much more than hot air or steam, increasing shipping capacity and lowering manufacturing costs."

The ambassadors around the circular table seemed to be holding their breaths, as if afraid to breathe in this gas.

As no one asked any questions, he continued, "Texas is looking to ally with more established nations, to share raw materials with those who recognize her sovereignty and who

have more advanced engineering."

The Liberian woman spoke, her deep voice mocking. "Have you no engineers among your buckskins?"

A murmur traveled through the group.

"We prefer to leverage the skills of others as we build our infrastructure." Dallas could see a bit of greedy realization lighting up the poker faces of the ambassadors. Even the Liberian in her ridiculous clothing saw the benefits and the possibilities.

*"Este gas, este helio, no te pertenece, sino a México.."* The Mexican ambassador shouted, his face red over his in his black suit with silver buttons and his thick mustache and sideburns. *"No puedes negociar con algo robado de nosotros."*

"He says you can't negotiate with stolen resources," said the translator.

Now the gloves came off. Dallas was ready for it, keeping his calm. *"No lo encontraste y no aprendiste a conseguirlo."* He said. "Texas owns it, and only we know how to deal with it."

Louisiana's ambassador, a French woman much like the madam, but with more arrogance. "Mr. Dallas, I understand that there is much mining in the northern area that Texas claims, between the Missouri and the Red Rivers. Am I correct?"

He did not want to answer that, as there were few enough men to guard the area from the natives, general renegades, and other pirates. Nevertheless, her information was correct.

"Yes, Madame Ambassador."

She smiled like a rattlesnake fixing to strike. "Clearly, that is not Mexican territory." She paused long enough for everyone to glance at the Mexican ambassador. "Mexico ends at the Red River north of Amarillo, does it not? Helium then belongs to Louisiana, as it is in French

territory."

"I assure you, Madame Ambassador," Dallas said, keeping as still as he would if she were actually a coiled rattler, ready to strike. "The materials are from Texas, as New France has no control over the area north of the Red River."

Axe Copperhead spoke up. "What of the Caddoes, the other First Nations?"

"We have a treaty with the Caddoes," Dallas said, "and they will share in our profits." He saw a nod from the woman from California. "Texas has been able to get along with her neighbors. We hope to continue to do so as our neighbors recognize Texas."

"Thank you for your presentation, Mr. Dallas." Sir Winton stood. "We have your proposals." He nodded towards the door, dismissing him.

A slight touch on his sleeve reminded him that Brandy was behind him. "Let's go now, while they argue this out," she said. "I promise you'll have a transcript of everything said here."

Once outside he strode away from the guards posted there. He was angry, but walking away without arguing with them was a better position. He'd played nice, now they could be nice to him--as if either the French or Mexicans could figure out what to do with the helium and how to keep it from killing them even if he handed it over. He could make sure they never did, or that they paid well for the privilege.

Brandy scrambled to keep up. When they were halfway back to the Gallery, Brandy whispered, "Well done. You'll be hearing from them soon enough."

He grunted in reply, but slowed his pace. "What can you tell me about California, the woman in there, not the country?"

Brandy smiled. "Mrs. Pleasant sailed all the way around the horn to get to New York for

this meeting." She took his arm. "She's likely to be motivated, especially about bringing in people who want land and new businesses. They want the things that they don't have the manufacturing to make for themselves, and they have more gold and silver than they have things to buy."

"A sky port in Texas would be halfway or so, a good place to fuel up." He imagined his mining shacks built into real homes, with an actual town. Lives had been paid for helium, and the survivors deserved to get return for their sacrifice.

"The sky port could be called Dallas." She winked at him playfully.

He smiled down at the short blonde. "I do like the sound of that. We could use some of the finer things of life as well." He wondered if Brandy could convince Dixie, as she called herself now, to find out what happened to her father and the others.

She deserved to know. He hated to see her working as a whore, but if she was as smart as Brandy, and if she had the ear of the Queen's Minister, maybe she would overlook their past to help out the families that had been her neighbors. He didn't expect her to return to Texas, but he wanted to make things right between them. She might listen to Brandy if not to him. He'd made the right decision to pay the whore, and putting a few listeners on her spider web network would soon pay him back.

**Madame's office**

Elvira made her way back to her office, not even stopping at the Gallery. Zulie was right. The hoodoo sapped her energy, made her tired when she usually hit her stride about midnight. She would get the scribes squared away, put the papers back, and maybe rest for a few minutes. She entered the lift to the officers' deck.

The ambassadors meeting would be winding down in another hour or so, and she could work her magic on them when they came back into the Gallery for private negotiations. Then they would sleep, and she would regroup, make the cruise accomplish its goal, despite everything. She would make it pay off.

Did she really believe in a fairy godmother, as Zulie said?

Elvira paused when the lift reached the deck, picturing the ship and whatever soul such a beast would have. "Help me, please," she whispered. She felt the ship wrapped around her, a safe place, and the vibrations of the engines like the purr of a cat. She smiled to think of a purring elephant. With that, she strode to her office to get the scribes squared away and plan for the distribution of information.

In her office, the diplomatic pouches had been reassembled, and the notes about them stacked neatly to one side. Making them learn the new shorthand method had been a good investment. She hadn't expected the scribes to be so efficient.

She brought the safe down to the landing behind her office and replaced the documents. Then she sent it down to the loading dock for security. She didn't worry about any other luggage, as it was all inventoried with the inspections, and she'd get reports on that from Plato. She sat behind her desk, reading the notes. The ambassadors had prepared well, but with

little in the papers she didn't already know. She wondered if they had other materials stashed in their clothing, and if their escorts had followed protocol inspecting them. Plato needed to go through the other storage to make sure she wasn't missing anything. No matter how bad this idea was turning out to be, some intelligence must come from it.

A wave of exhaustion made her eyes droop shut. The papers fell from her hand, and images played out across her closed eyelids. A blue glow led her in the dream through the ship. Everyone was chasing her, Jonas leading the pack with Zulie right behind. Elvira ran and ran, through the dark spaces, towards an opening in the side of the Elephant. She could see a patch of blue sky framed against the darkness, and when she reached it, she jumped. Falling, falling, falling through the blue sky, she felt peace, she had escape, and no one could touch her any more, get anything from her.

Her head fell forward, her chin against her chest, waking her up. She sat, dazed, stiff, disoriented. She hadn't been afraid when she was falling in the dream, but now she was. Someone was attacking her ship, her clients, her women, and herself. She thought about the dream, both Zulie and Jonas running after her, clutching at her, their hands like grappling hooks to capture her, to lock her down. She shivered, trembling at the thought of jumping to her certain death. The hoodoo worked her nerves, enervating her, making her more afraid than she had been in many years.

Nowhere to get away, as Zulie said. All together on the ship with no place to hide. A target perfect to cause the very thing she wanted to avoid. How stupid she had been.

Elvira made herself get up, stretch, and retrieve the notes. She drank a quick swallow of her tonic, determined to wake up and face the situation, not some phantasm. Still muzzy-

headed, she started reading again. One page was written out in plain manuscript, not the shorthand scribbles:

"Velvet is in danger. Her client is not who he says he is."

Elvira remembered the two crewmembers who rushed up to her office, good women. Why would they leave a message like that, where anyone could read it? Had someone else been in her office? No one signed the note, not unusual. Elvira closed her eyes again, shaking her head, waiting for the tonic to do its work.

Her door opened, and Zulie came in with a tray. Cook had sent up chicken and rice, coffee, and a sliced orange.

The smell of the food didn't tempt Elvira, but Zulie's expression brooked no dissent. She would be eating. She handed the note to Zulie. "What do you make of this? Did we not vet Mr. Golden carefully?"

Zulie took the note, but didn't read it. "Don't talk. Eat. Swallow." She watched as Elvira took a bite of the rice, and then another. She sat staring at Elvira, not speaking until her partner swallowed half the serving.

"The note is from Jonas," Zulie said. "He claims Mr. Golden is called Caleb Coontz, someone he used to work with. I brought the note up here."

The rice in Elvira's stomach turned to vinegar. "Do you believe him?"

"I don't think he is lying, but I do think he's trying to get out of surveillance." Zulie ate a piece of orange. "He wants to move around, see what he can learn. He's not one for sitting still, which is why I put him to watching."

"A good place for him." Elvira agreed. She took a sip of coffee, thought better of it, and

picked up an orange slice. "Still, since both he and Velvet work for the Mauvertons, he may be trying to get a message to her."

"My thoughts exactly. I want to keep them apart, at least until after the cruise." She leaned her elbows on Elvira's desk. "Maybe we could assign them to tail each other, keep them both busy."

"Maybe," Elvira said. "Is anyone else watching Velvet?"

"No, but she's one of our best agents, double-trained. She can take care of herself."

Zulie glanced down at the rice. "You, on the other hand, need a full-time nanny."

"I can't eat anything else." Elvira shook her head, hardly able to abide the smell of food.

"Then hand me your tonic flask." Zulie held out her hand. "The one you keep in your pocket and the one in your bustle."

Thirteen and a half hours to Charles Towne.

## Surveillance Room

After another half hour, Jonas stretched his neck and rolled his shoulders to stay awake. Most of his section focused on client rooms, all empty and quiet now. Sitting for long periods doing nothing was not his style. He suppressed a yawn.

Coontz and Velvet had left the Gallery over an hour ago, but they were not in the room, unless they were very quiet. He made a note to ask if they were entertained in another room he couldn't see—the ship was a perfect back room kind of place for making deals. A few signs passed between the women, but they kept their faces so calm that he could not make out the exchange.

Jonas looked at the periscopes in front of him. Not much going on, empty rooms with low lighting. The Gallery was not much more interesting, chitchat and innuendo from the two tables he was assigned. He noted one room was completely dark, not just dim. He plugged his earpiece into that room, but it was dead silent--Coontz's room. He tried another room, and while he could see that it was empty, there was some sound--the thrum of the engine, the wind outside the ship. Something was wrong. He tapped to the woman in charge and beckoned her to him, since he did not know the signs.

"Someone needs to check on this room," he whispered. "I think the periscope has been covered or disabled."

She scanned the room listings. "That's Mr. Golden and Velvet."

"His name's not Golden," Jonas said. "It's Coontz. Something is wrong here."

"They are probably still in the Gallery." She made a sign to one of the others, who shook her head in answer.

She listened for a second through the earpiece.

She went back to her station and spoke to someone to come to surveillance.

She turned to Jonas. "Come with me."

They went up a half flight of stairs to another hallway. She checked the peephole and then knocked on Room 12, but got no answer. She opened the door to peer inside, and then rushed in, Jonas right behind her.

Velvet lay in the bed, in crew uniform, dead.

They rolled her over, compressing her chest, but it was too late.

Jonas scouted the room, where he saw the wires from the microphone hanging loose in the water closet. Coontz clearly knew he was being watched, and had taken preventative measures. Where was he now, and what could Jonas do about it?

"Stay here while I fetch the doctor."

"I will." Jonas studied the room while he waited, noting openings in the hallways and the general layout. If Velvet were as well trained as Reba, how had Golden been able to kill her? He checked her body again—her neck was broken. An unexpected attack could cause one to be overcome, as he had reason to know from recent experience.

He should have noticed the difference in that room sooner. How long since they been here? They'd left the Gallery, maybe two hours ago, more than enough time to disable the microphone and periscopes while he hadn't seen them. He saw the dim light from the hall peephole, not much used, he imagined, since the clients paid for the whole night and most of the next day. The women upstairs probably had more training on what to notice than he did, but he should have seen it sooner.

He checked out the room as he waited for the doctor. He checked the wall to find the panel that hid the dumbwaiter. The opening was about two feet square and deep, enough for a carpetbag or diplomatic pouch--or supper, but not much else. He looked for a signaling device for sending orders or retrieving the contents from below. He found it--a simple bell pull.

He pictured the shafts for the dumbwaiters, one for every room, probably back to back between rooms, which meant that the walls were much thicker than they appeared to be--good for sound dampening, but also good for secret passageways and hiding places. He wondered how well those were watched. He was searching the opposite wall when the doctor came in.

"Return to your post, Mr. Jones," the doctor said. "We will manage this. Can you find your way?"

"Yes." He said. He might take the long way around, however, to make sure that the captain saw him, so he could tell her himself what he knew.

How had Coontz moved into the ranks of the elite to be able to get passage on the ship? Was he working for the Agency? That didn't seem likely as his boss hadn't been that well out-fitted. For someone else? For Madame? What would he do if he were Coontz? What was his mission that was important enough to kill a person?

Madame was in danger along with the cruise and whatever other mission she had planned. The captain needed to know she'd been duped, and Jonas was sure that he could not get as close to Madame as Golden would.

He took a wrong turn, away from surveillance and toward the engine room, thrumming under his feet. This happened literally on his watch, and he was upset, but there was no time for that now. He needed to tell the Captain what he knew and offer to find Coontz. The captain

had a good reason to eliminate him now.

He hadn't taken ten steps before the Captain appeared before him, frowning, tense, and threatening.

## Cabin Deck

Zulie stared at the Irishman she had assigned to surveillance, headed the wrong direction, and not supposed to be here in any case. "Get back to your post. You have a job. It's not busywork."

"I'm doing it," he said. "One of the clients, Golden, is a man I know as Coontz. He killed an escort and is roaming the ship." The man looked away, hung his head, and sighed before looking back at her. "I assume you know that Velvet worked for the Mauvertons."

"Coontz...the name is familiar, but I don't know him. Are you certain?" She studied his face for clues that he was lying.

"I used to work with him building the sky port." Jonas shook his head. "He's either come into a lot of money since then to build himself a new identity, or someone is bankrolling him."

"I will find him. You go back surveillance."

He nodded, not happy but not arguing or walking away.

"If I need your services, I'll send for you." She pointed down the hall with her chin.

He nodded again. "How do I call you?"

"You don't. I call you." She stared at him, waiting for a response.

He strode back the way he came, headed for the surveillance room. At least he obeyed direct orders when she could see him. She entered Cabin 22. The Irishman had been right about Golden-smart, devious, and mean. She saw the severed wires. One of many details to deal with later.

Zulie rang the service bell, answered in the kitchen. "Send two dock workers up to Cabin 22." She left the doctor to her work and strode out to catch Jonas before he returned to

surveillance.

"C'mon, Irish." She said when she caught up to him.

"The name's Jonas." He turned and stared into her face, defiantly. "If you call me, call my name."

"You coming?" She passed him and headed to the Gallery. He would follow or not.

When they got to the Gallery, he was at her heel. She stood where she could be seen by the escorts. She made a sign, jerking her thumb towards her chest. Each of the escorts signed a reply, as if brushing something off her cheek.

Now to get to the ambassadors, make sure they were safe, then Elvira, and if she was safe, slap her. Zulie headed back towards the kitchen level. "Tell me more about this Coontz."

"Banker's bastard, educated but not acknowledged, no money. Knows construction, demolition, some artificery, good shot, and a mean fighter. I've heard that he's killed a few people. I've never seen him kick a dog, but plenty of men." Jonas paused. "Ten years ago we were friends, but we went different ways."

"Would he know you now?"

"Up close, maybe." He shrugged.

"Yeah, you Irish all look alike." Zulie did not smile. She stopped halfway down a stairway to slide a panel aside. "Another surveillance room. Be silent."

After he entered the small passage, she shut the door, and then opened another. They moved slowly into the viewing room for the conference room. Golden was not in the meeting, a good sign. Zulie whispered to each escort, telling her what to look for. They moved to the other side and out a second entrance.

Now outside the passenger area, Zulie ran up the stairs to Elvira's office. Madame wasn't inside--getting some rest for a long night, Zulie hoped. She closed that door and entered her own office. From a hidden closet, she pulled out a large roll of paper. She unrolled a floor plan of each deck of the airship on the desk.

"We are here." She pointed to the bridge deck. "Gallery. Cabins. Surveillance. Meeting Room. Kitchen. Loading dock. Engine room." She showed Jonas the many service areas and access wells. "This rat's got a lot of holes to hide in. Ready to think like a cat?"

"Where's the safe? Did Velvet know where it is?" Jonas asked.

"Yes, it's kept above the bridge deck." Zulie pointed to a large box on the uppermost level, one with a shaft under it all the way down to the loading dock. "So might you. She's on your team."

Jonas looked confused. "We are not working together on this mission," he said. "I recognized her, but I don't even know her street name."

Zulie crossed her arms and leaned back. "If you were helping a known criminal, where would you hide him?"

Jonas began to study the blueprints. "Was she an operative for Madame or for the Mauves?"

"You know how that works. You tell me." She studied his body language. He was a good actor, maybe good enough to hide his tells. "Looks like a setup, doesn't it? You being here, and her, and now you're both cozy with the Golden Coontz, and one of my people is dead."

Jonas backed up and raised his hands. "I don't have anything to do with that. I tried to tell surveillance about Coontz." He looked sincere, but Elvira could lie to the Pope without

blinking.

"I reckon you'd better start finding out fast." She pointed to the loading dock. "Start with finding Golden. Go. Now."

He left, and she stared at the blueprints. Golden could hide on the ship for a month and not be found. What could he possibly want, and why kill the one agent best suited to help him get it?

In the air, Madame was in more danger than on the ground. Would this Coontz destroy the ship? He didn't sound like the martyr type. Zulie's plan would have to be put in action sooner than she thought.

## Madame's Office

Elvira collapsed into the chair in her office. First Copperhead and now Velvet. She had to take a short break to rest her mind and fortify herself with another drop of her tonic. It hardly seemed to last an hour these days, and she was so tired. She already had the shakes, so she mixed a bit of tonic into a glass of bourbon, hoping to relax and yet stay alert.

She had to plan how to cover up what this renegade Golden had done, or Coontz or whoever he was. Word had not yet spread when the ambassador meeting ended, and most of the escorts were involved with that, not available for gossip. But as sure as rain, word would be out in the morning. At least it was a client, not an escort, but murder was not easy to sweep under the carpet.

Just then a runner came to Elvira's office. "Madame, you are needed on the bridge."

Elvira pulled herself together and followed the runner. She did not think she could manage one more challenge, and she wondered why Zulie wasn't handling it. The ship was her job.

When she went into the bridge, she saw armed Liberians standing with each of the bridge crew, with their commander standing beside Zulie.

"Madame, for your protection, we are taking over the ship."

"What do you mean you're taking over my ship?" Elvira shouted at the Liberian commander. "That was not in the agreement."

"Our ambassador is aboard, and there have been incidents." The commander glanced around. "Our people will protect your people."

The bridge crew had clearly not heard about Velvet or Yvonne, judging from the looks

on their faces, but they also looked afraid, the cramped quarters made tighter with armed guards, not Madame's people.

"Madame," Zulie said, her voice soft, "Let's go back to your office and sort this out."

Elvira stared at Zulie for a long moment, clenched fists by her sides. To the commander she said, "Get your ambassador and haul yourselves right back to Liberia, if that's your scheme."

"Let me explain, Madame," The commander said, almost spitting out her title. "We are now in control of this ship. It is ours. We shall go where we please to do what we please."

"You cannot do this." Elvira stepped forward, her arm drawn back to slap the commander, only to have his Liberian guards grasp her arms and pull them behind her back.

"Get your hands off me. I have kept my contract, paid for this ship, and paid passage for every voyage." She squirmed, trying to work her way loose. She could not understand why Zulie just stood there, staring at her. Why didn't she speak up?

"I have my orders, and that means your contract is rescinded." He nodded toward the door. "You are not my superior, and I do not follow your orders."

Elvira looked at Zulie for backup, but her tall, black lover shook her head.

The commander continued, "You will now go below to look after your passengers, or you will be restrained."

"Let go of me," Elvira screamed, "You pirate bastards."

"They are right," Zulie said, softly, where the crew might not hear. "You have lost control, and you need to rest." She nodded to the Liberian commander. "Take her to her office, which is across the catwalk and down the corridor. She will be safe there, and I will see to the

safety and comfort of the passengers."

Elvira struggled, trying to kick her way free, but the guards were well trained, larger, and stronger than she was. "Zulie!" she cried.

Zulie stepped up beside the commander, making no move to free her lover. She shook her head, no, briefly, crossing her arms. It was clear she was on the Liberian side.

"You can't do this to me." Elvira shrieked. She tried to bite the guards, to kick her way loose to attack the commander.

"Yes, Madame Starr, we can." The guards twisted Elvira's arms and turned her towards the door, forcing her to walk ahead of them down the narrow catwalk. She tried to turn away from her cabin office, to go back down to the rooms and Gallery, but they pushed her in the other direction.

"If it's money you want, I can provide." Elvira said, having thought better of having her shoulders dislocated. "I am not without means."

Her captor chuckled. "You have no money aboard. We will not be going to ground with you, so even if you could persuade us," he grinned, "we could not benefit from your bribe. Even your person is not temptation enough for us."

They reached the door to her office where two guards were already stationed. They took her inside, bound her, then tied her into her office chair. They secured her chair to the wall so that she could not move a finger. They found the safe as well, and rather than emptying it, they operated the lift that moved it down to the loading dock..

One of the new guards felt along the walls until he found the back passage and opened it. He went through and closed it from the other side.

Even if she could scream and beat on the walls, no one could hear her—her one place of privacy on the ship. As a last gesture, the short guard jerked the comm system from the wall and tore it loose from its wiring.

"You will be safe, here, Madame," the short guard smiled bowed, as if she were a princess in her boudoir. "I suggest you get some rest, as it will be a long night, and an even longer day."

He opened her cabinet and cleared it of her tonic, glassware, and utensils. They did not leave so much as a leaf of foolscap or a nib of a pen in her desk.

She glared at them. "You will regret this day, I assure you."

Zulie came in. "Calm yourself. Get some rest. When you come down from the tonic you have taken, you can go to bed and rest."

If Elvira could have sent bolts of lightning through her eyes, she would have burned Zulie to a crisp. "I cannot believe that you would do this to me."

"Leave her in peace," Zulie said to the guards, who turned off the lights and followed her into the corridor and shut the door behind them.

With a slight chuckle, the short guard shook his head, turned off the light, and left her alone in the dark.

Why would Zulie turn against her lover after all this time? What were they holding against her? Could she be that jealous of the business?

Breathing as well as she could, Elvira calmed herself. They had not hurt her person so much as her pride. As she pondered, she wriggled against her bonds. These Liberians had left her no slack, not enough to fray or twist her way out even if she dislocated her shoulders. She

could not even lean back far enough to bang her head on the wall.

Her shoulders and arms ached as she strained against the bonds. She tried to get at the knife in her corset, but could not bend her head down far enough to get her teeth around it.

She was stuck, kidnapped in her own ship by her best friend and lover--*sleep it off indeed!*

She sagged against the bonds, forcing her muscles to relax. She made herself breathe as deeply as she could, trying to clear her mind and fight the waves of maddening thoughts that surged through her brain. First she must get loose, whether through her own efforts or through convincing Zulie that she was coming down. She had drunk--how many- five, seven, ten shots--of tonic? She would never allow her women that much, but she was used to it, maybe too used to it, as one or two shots had little effect on her.

She tried to calculate the time. It could not be more than two. Surely, by the time they got to Charles Towne, she could get the ship back, if she could get loose, if she could escape, and if she could formulate a plan.

A thought chilled her, making her shiver despite the warmth of her office. They knew all the other ambassadors were aboard. They had no reason to fear anything from them as the ambassadors did not know who was flying the ship. Why didn't they just take the Pirate Queen back to the escort ship?

Why was Zulie standing with them? Had she sold them out, planning this all along?

With their ambassador aboard, at least the Liberians would do nothing to harm the others, unless they decided to ransom them, a nice package of them all tied up in a bow.

Elvira listened to the engines, to the ever present sound of the wind rushing around the ship. She could feel no change in the vibration, nor a shift in direction, though that they might

have changed direction already.

For once, she wished her office were watched, but she had wanted one private place in the ship—a mistake that would be rectified as soon as she landed in Charles Towne and contacted her artisans. That would mean a new set of watchers, trained for more discretion among themselves, to be discreet about the business that was transacted on the ship.

Time to rethink this venture. Could she salvage it—held hostage in her own office, betrayed by her best friend and lover?

Eleven hours to Charles Towne, if they were even going there now.

## Loading Dock

Jonas strode down the passageway looking for the cross passage. He found the steps and came down as quickly as possible while being quiet. He didn't want to surprise Coontz or to fight him without back up.

Down in the loading dock, Plato was not impressed with Jonas's story either.

"Madame is very careful who rides *The Elephant*," he said, "She checks them out thoroughly, and she does not take all who apply."

"Yet she has two Mauverton agents aboard," Jonas said, "not working together, one of them dead, and a rogue passenger."

"That does shine a new light on the situation." Plato stroked his white beard. "I'll send a runner to the engine room, let them know to be watching, and you start searching down here."

"Yes, sir," Jonas said. He turned to go.

"You had better not be playing with me, Irish," Plato said, catching hold of his arm. "This is my home, my family. I don't know you." He called two more of his crew, who were playing cards in the next room. "Tom, go with Irish here, and look for the passenger Golden, also called Coontz. Nancy, you and George start checking the comm units, and check out the old whistle tubes too. We may need to use them."

"Yes, sir." The two teams moved out, the comm team going to the closest unit, and Jonas following Tom past rows of crates to another section. They came to a small room with one large crate--one that would not fit through any of the doors into the room. Tom inspected the crate and the floor around it.

"He's been here, or someone has," Tom said.

"What's in the crate? Weapons? Personals?" Jonas asked.

"Nothing," Tom said. "That's not its purpose. How do you think it got in here?"

Jonas checked the hallway openings. "Disassembled?"

"Good guess. Look at the ceiling." Tom glanced up.

Jonas could see an opening, slightly offset from the rest, just smaller than the crate.

"The crate keeps what's up," Tom said, "from coming too far down. But someone has been prying on it, trying to open it, and moved it just enough to know that it's too light to have any real valuables inside."

"I see," Jonas said. He looked down each of the hallways, where something caught his eye. "That's not all I see." A comm unit dangled, the wires ripped from the wall.

"How do you know it was Coontz? How do I know you didn't do this?"

"You don't, but why would I?" Jonas held up his hands. "Who else would do this? We need to tell Plato and then check on the rest of the crew. Where does this passage go?"

"Crew quarters." Tom started running.

Jonas followed, but when they reached the crew quarters, everyone was sleeping, no evidence of any struggle or fuss.

"This guy has found the access panels," Tom said. "He could be anywhere on the ship by now. You keep watch here for now."

Jonas found an empty bunk and sat on it, fatigue and anxiety vying to put him to sleep. He kept an eye on the door, listening for any movement in the passages or in the walls.

He should have insisted on getting someone to tail Golden. How could he get Zulie and Plato to trust him, while Coontz was skulking around doing the Devil only knew what? If he

wasn't out to steal something, whatever that might be, was he out to wreck the ship? Who would benefit? Coontz wasn't the type to risk his own life, so that means he had a way out—or off the airship, maybe even from the air. Killing his escort did not seem like a good way to get off in Charles Towne.

Jonas wished he had some answers, and he wondered where the money was flowing. There was a smell of bad money on this ship, and he needed to sniff it out. What would he do if he learned it was Elvira's money, that she was playing her own games with the ambassadors?

He'd warned her and Plato. Again he was stuck in one place, again, unable to act, and not trusted. Did he even know the right thing to do? Yes, find Coontz, stop him before he could kill anyone else, and protect the airship crew and clients.

He hadn't noticed the dark room soon enough, which let Coontz kill the woman, but he had warned them about him. What hold did Madame have over the crew that they didn't gossip among themselves? He didn't know anybody that loyal.

No matter what Madame Elvira planned for them, it wasn't like her to start an international incident—too many people knew about the cruise, who was on it, that it was special. He didn't think she was stupid enough to let anyone hang a kidnapping rap on her unless she really did plan to ransom the diplomats. From what he'd seen until now, that wasn't her style, but what did he know about her?

He slumped, resisting the temptation to lie down. His brain spun, making and discarding plans, each second taking him further from Coontz, and leaving him fewer options. Captain Zulie told him to find Coontz. Plato had other responsibilities, but he didn't. Coontz had taken out a comm unit. If his plan was to put them out of communication, it would be a place to start

looking for him. If he could find a way up to the æthographer's nest, he could learn where vulnerable spots were, and then start checking them out, maybe he'd find Coontz's trail.

### The Æthographer's nest

Jonas climbed the stairway at the end of the corridor past the crew cabin to get to the lift that went up to the officer's deck and the promenade. The ship was too big for him to cover it all—too many hiding places. Coontz could be 100 feet away and not be seen. Still, it was better than being in surveillance where he could not move or take a deep breath without disturbing the others.

He rode the lift to the very top, looking around to see that no one was there. He wished he had another dose of Madame's green tonic—a good reason for him not to drink it again. He came back down to the next level to find the æthographer's nest.

He approached the last door in the corridor sat the top of the ladder, one that had a number of conduits run from the overhead space into the room. He knocked but got no answer. The door was not locked, so he opened it.

Inside was a tangle of wires and arcane equipment. A fan pulled air from outside through the room to cool all the machines running the æthography panel with its odd gauges, a keyboard, and a sort of glowing screen, which showed the currents of the æther. He'd read of such things and could hardly believe he was seeing one, especially on a ship. The Agency used æthography, of course, but had no operators on staff. Fieldwork was what kept the doors open, his chief had said, not this new tech that sucked money with little return.

In front of this panel sat Woz, her head dwarfed between two enormous earpieces. He could not see her face, and since she seemed quite busy with her panel, he hesitated to distract her.

"HA!" She yelled, completely unaware of his presence. "Checkmate, you lead-fingered

poppycock!"

Jonas cleared his throat.

She jumped out of her chair, and then spun around, dangerously entangling the wires connecting her headgear to the panel. "What are you doing up here?"

"We have a problem," he said. "A client named Golden has torn out some comm units. Can you tell me which ones aren't working, and where they are located? If I can follow his trail, I can stop him."

"A client? That's insane." She sat at the workstation, flipping switches and turning dials.

The console buzzed. The æthographer held up her finger to shush him. She listened intently and then scribbled on a notepad.

He gazed at the wiring and gadgetry that surrounded her, wondering how she could keep track of it all. She must be brilliant, he thought, judging himself moronic in comparison.

She continued to scribble in a code he did not understand, muttering curses. When she did not look up for several minutes, he moved closer, trying to understand the readouts and the small lights that blinked out across the board. She scowled at him, but continued writing.

Finally, she stopped. She stared ahead and whispered, "Strip my gears and call me shiftless."

The buzzing stopped and the lights went dead. She dropped her pen. She took off the earphones, and started checking wires, buttons, and connections. "The whole system just went down."

Jonas felt his stomach sink to the floor as the ship soared higher.

"What we fixed this afternoon might have just been a glitch, though I personally

checked every single one of those wires," Woz said, frowning, "but for the whole system to go down, that's sabotage."

"Coontz must be behind this," Jonas said. "His assignment must be to shut down communications...." That wasn't something to kill for, but it would certainly make the ship unable to call for help. "We have a saboteur aboard, tall, blond, beard, goes by Golden, real name Coontz." He rubbed his head.

What if Coontz came up here? Woz couldn't fight him off if she was not paying attention.

"He killed one of escorts, Velvet." Jonas looked around for access points into the æthographer's nest. "You aren't safe up here."

Her face paled as she glanced at the entryway behind her equipment. It had no latch or lock. "It's worse than that," Woz said, not looking up from her troubleshooting. "Liberians have taken the ship." She frowned at him. "That's not all. Your Mauverton bosses are planning to take the ship when we get to Charles Towne."

"I didn't know about that." Jonas held up his hands and backed away. "Now..."

"Now we've got to find the problem, and fix it," Woz said, "then get a message to our people, and find a way around the Mauvertons."

"What can I do to help?" Jonas asked. He so wanted this woman to believe and trust him. "This whole business stinks."

"Can I really trust you?" Woz frowned at him, her hands propped on her hips. "Or are you just some decoy?"

"I'm hiding out from some people in New York, not the Mauvertons, but they don't

know where I am either." Jonas dropped his hands. "I'm working for Madame, just as you are. I'm trying to find a killer and saboteur. Where's the one place that the power to the æthography is managed?"

She glanced again at the door to the bridge. "It's on the deck below, a fuse box." She opened a drawer in her workstation and took out a handful of large, glass objects. "If they all blew at one time, something is very wrong, but if someone just took them out..." She put them in a tool bag.

Jonas said. "I can..." He watched her take the earpieces off and shoulder the tool bag

"No," Woz said. "I'll replace them. You go find this Coontz and deal with him. I'll find the Captain and tell her." She stopped. "This ship is my home, my life. Nobody is going to hurt her."

"Let me at least go with you." Jonas said. "I know you are all well-trained, but..."

"I'll be fine." She gave him that hardheaded woman look.

Jonas stepped back to let her pass. "I'll find the Captain, then." He followed her out the door, wondering where to go next, and what the Liberians would do if he showed up on the bridge demanding to see his captain. No, the Captain said for him to find Coontz, and following Woz would take him to where Coontz most likely still was. And she knew how to get there.

**Bridge Deck**

Zulie watched as the guards stood guard outside Elvira's office. There would be hell to pay, and now it would be worse than she had planned, but there was no help for it. She maintained her composure. The bridge crew was shaken and nervous, but they accepted and carried out orders from the Liberian commander.

"I will see to our guests," she said to the commander. "They should be kept calm." Her plan was to get them back into the cabins where they would be safe and incommunicado. If Cook followed her orders about supper, most of the clients should soon be sleeping.

The commander nodded to one of the remaining guards. "Go with her."

She took the passage to the Gallery, which she hoped was being watched carefully, as the presence of the guard escort would be noted and protocols put into play. She raised her hand as if to scratch her ear, and made a sign of emergency.

As they approached the doors to the Gallery, she suggested the guard stay behind, still able to watch her, but out of sight of the clients.

Activity in the Gallery was sparse for this time of night. Few clients were present as the ambassadors were still meeting. She walked through, nodding to each guest, but not speaking, just making a show of being present. They needed to make a better sign for 'be calm and get your man into bed now,' but for the time being, an alert sign would have to do. The Texican was not in the Gallery, probably making his presentation, if they had made him wait that long.

What were they going to do to protect the ambassadors? Who else knew about this cruise and what were they doing to stop it or move it along the way? She'd told Elvira this was a bad idea, and she hated being proved right.

If only Elvira would get off her damned tonic and face reality.

This was never supposed to go this far. Zulie had only planned to get a face to face with the Pirate Queen before the meeting, one that Elvira would see was in her favor. The pilot's mother was right--or was she behind this as well?

After circling the Gallery, Zulie led the guard down into the storage docks to see how Plato and his crew fared.

"No clients are allowed here," the guard said, bringing his weapon to the fore to block her way.

"My job includes managing the crew." She pushed the weapon aside. "I'm checking in with everyone to see that things run smoothly." She stepped into the stairwell to the dock.

"Coming?"

The loading dock was dimly lit, but clean with everything stowed for flight. Plato was nowhere to be seen, probably sleeping to be ready for unloading in the afternoon. She wanted to give him a heads-up, but it would have to wait. She noticed that at least one comm unit was disabled. That made two—Liberian? Golden? Or maybe the Mauverton? Why wasn't anyone working on it? Maybe they were all looking for Golden.

From the dock into the drive room, where everyone seemed calm and on task, Zulie moved along a catwalk, observing not only the people at work but also the lack of guards. That was something she could use. She slid down a set of stairs, the guard in tow, where everyone would see him. She would see that word spread soon enough. She also noted that each person had the black smears on both hands now, as if a second ritual had taken place. They already knew about the takeover then, and her appearance was merely a confirmation. The crew chief,

a heavy-set woman with gray hair and more than one smudge on her face, met them at the stairwell.

"Report," Zulie said.

The chief did not miss a beat, though Zulie never checked on the workings of the ship, being more concerned with the clients' safety. "She's running like a two-dollar watch, moving steady with a tailwind."

"Excellent." Zulie made no sign, nor did the chief, but their eye-to-eye glance told the story. She turned on her heel to start back upstairs, brushing by the guard as if he were on her own payroll. She would check on the ambassadors next before deciding where to dump the guard.

She might even let him report to the commander that all was well, but she was ready to get her escort off her heel, if it meant putting him in a crate. She moved through the ship, doing her best to be seen by the watchers, but not approaching their space. Finally, she took the passage to the ambassadors' meeting, where the Pirate Queen's women guarded the door.

Though they did not respond, Zulie could see that they recognized her escort and immediately sized up the situation.

Zulie told the guards, "It's time for this meeting to be over. Escort your leader to her quarters, and see that the other ambassadors return to theirs."

The women opened the doors to a shouting match between Florida, New France and Mexico. The women crossed the room to their ambassador and whispered to her.

Zulie strode in, her escort tagging behind. "Gentlemen. Ladies." She waited a moment to get their attention. "This meeting is adjourned. Please return to your cabins. Your companions

will join you shortly."

A pause preceded a renewed roar. "What is the meaning of this?" shouted Lord Randolph. "I am in charge here."

Zulie watched the Pirate Queen leave with her women. "Sir Winton, this is for your own safety." She nodded at her escort. "We have taken on an extra security detail. Please return to your cabins, where you will be served supper."

A look of amusement flickered across his red-cheeked face. He clapped the shoulder of Mr. Copperhead, who looked much relieved. His pallor under his bronze skin showed how much pain he suffered despite his minor injury.

By the time the ambassadors gathered their papers, their escorts were at the door. Zulie made the sign of 'sedate' and waited for the room to clear. Dallas's tiny airship and some papers were left behind. Zulie gathered them up to deliver them to the Texican. Zulie needed to debrief Brandy and to know if Dallas would be a problem.

For now, the crew had seen her still in charge, and the watchers would focus on the cabins, while the rest of the clients were put to bed.

Her plan began to materialize. She might get some good out of the Mauverton after all, if she could get Elvira calmed down and in her right mind.

## The Balonet Level

Golden climbed up the access shaft through the dark, making as little noise as possible, but resting often as his kit was heavy and bulky in the narrow space. Velvet said a lift brought the safe from the loading dock to the level above the madam's office. That would be his next target, as soon as he found some better way to disable the ship.

They'd be looking for him by now. He needed to cut the communications systems, effectively this time.

He continued to climb and search. The æthographer's nest was usually at the top of the ship, where it had a wide range to send the signals across the ætheric plane. Tricky stuff, æther, but he'd worked with worse. The operator would have all the tools necessary. He wanted to find a place that would interfere with the signals but not be noticed immediately.

The ladder ended in a room with a normal door and some light. He peeked out to see a grid of catwalks between the huge balonets that kept *The Elephant* aloft. It was hot, the radiating heat from the balonets nearly stifling.

Golden hadn't seen security guards, but he was still as quiet as possible and stayed to the outside of the ship until he could figure where he was and how the ship was laid out. He'd studied Liberian plans, but none of their ships was shaped like the elephant with its wide back and deep belly full of passengers.

He didn't fancy blowing himself to bits, but surely, he could find what he needed. One end of the open space was closed off, probably the Bridge, perhaps Madame's office and somewhere, the æthographer.

Near the center of the open space was another closed shaft, not the one for the viewing

arena at the top of *the Elephant's* back, a privilege for the wealthy to perch above the workers who kept them high and mighty. This one ended at this level and went down as far as he could see. Velvet said the safe was kept above the madam's office. That's where the valuables and papers would be. The communications array must be nearby.

He traced out the wiring from that shaft to find a panel box. He could not tell what it controlled, the markings making no sense to him, but he did see fuses which could be removed. He unscrewed one and then another, throwing them into the depths of the ship as far as possible from where he stood, each one in a different direction.

Power would go out somewhere immediately, but they might not bring enough fuses to replace them all, and he could see no replacements stored nearby. That meant it would take that much longer to get them up here, once the source of power loss was discovered.

The ship made an odd vibration, a shuddering movement. That would get their attention, but it might bring it up to him as well. It was time for him to get his job done and get away. He worked his way around the shaft, looking for an access door for repairs. He got the access door open, but inside was only an empty shaft disappearing into *the Elephant's* belly.

A ladder led down into the shaft, as the controls were in the lift car. If the madam's office was on the next level, he could stash his kit here, and climb down to deal with her directly. At least no one would look for him here.

### **Client Deck – Sir Winton Randolph's Cabin**

Dixie helped Sir Winton out of his clothing and into a nightshirt. She was ready to get some information, and she knew he would never give it to her straight.

He chuckled. "That went well, wouldn't you say, my dear?" He let her pull off his boots. "Everyone is riled up, all clamoring for their own small interests, and no one sees the bigger notion."

"What's that?" Dixie hung up his clothing, letting him talk while she poured him a glass of port, adding a few drops of sleeping potion to it.

"None of them will get the Texican's helium. It will be on the international market, and everyone will have to pay." He took the glass from her, his fingers brushing her breast. "Do you want to go to San Francisco and stay on Madame's payroll, or are you on my side?"

She snuggled up to him, her breasts in his face. "I've always been on your side. What did you have in mind?"

"My base of operations will be in Charles Towne for the foreseeable future." He took another swallow of port. "Have you worked much there? Do people know you?"

Dixie didn't like this line of questions. She'd worked Charles Towne for years, discreetly of course, but a number of the local old boys would know her, even if she dropped the accent and dyed her hair. "I don't have an establishment, if that's what you are asking." She sat beside him and slid her hand along his thigh.

"You may want to start one." Sir Winton drained the wine and set the glass aside. "If you are known as one of Madame's girls, it would be a strong base of operations."

There it was. He'd never take her away from the life, only set her up to bleed her money

and her information. No thanks, milord.

She smiled and opened the busk of her corset. "I could be your belle of Charles Towne." While he readied himself for his short spurt, she imagined her life as his private madam, a little Elvira, never moving from the life, but just moving one step up. Belle of San Francisco suddenly seemed much sweeter. She remembered just in time to fake her orgasm.

The old man rolled off her, already asleep. She cleaned herself, and dressed. There were questions to be answered before she made any decisions. If Sir Winton was ready to get off Madame's retainer, then he had another venture lined up that didn't include her.

Dixie strolled down to the Texican's cabin. She took a peek through the peephole to see if Dallas and Brandy were still awake, and then she knocked at the door.

When Brandy opened the door, Dixie brushed past her as if she'd been invited in.

"Why, I do declare," Dixie said, as sweet as if molasses wouldn't melt in her mouth, "Mr. Jolly Roger Dallas, in the flesh." She sat in the chair across from them. "I'm sure you won't mind sharing your guest with me for a few minutes, Miss Brandy."

Brandy's cheeks turned pink, but she kept her composure and smiled. "We were just talking about your home, Miss Dixie, and the changes that have been made since you left."

"Do tell." She patted her hair, a request for truce between the women. "It has been many a year since I shook that dust from my feet."

Brandy responded with a flutter of her fan, accepting the gesture.

Dallas didn't bother to stand, since Dixie was already seated. "Dixie, yes? It's nice to see you again." He did unfold his arms and turn towards her. "You have filled out nicely since I saw you last."

"Thank you, Mr. Dallas, it is not through clean living, I can assure you." She laughed lightly, displaying her charm like fine jewelry. "May I ask how your presentation was received?"

At that, he leaned over toward her. "You may not. I can't tell you anything you don't already know." He paused, looking her over like a horse he might buy. "It would make more sense for you to share your observations with me."

"Would you like some tea, Miss Dixie?" Brandy played the part of hostess. "I'm happy to order some."

"Thank you kindly, Miss Brandy," Dixie said, "but I think we all just need to confer."

"What is it that you want, Miss...Dixie?" The Texican's frown was back on his face, his usual hard-eyed look, but now with a gray shadow of a beard and many more lines in his face. "I thought you were...engaged...for the evening."

Dixie dropped the level of her voice and the thick drawl. "I came here to see what I can do for you and Texas. It has become important to me personally for Madame to have access to your new technology."

"A new deal for you then? How nice." Brandy's hard eyes belied her soft voice.

Dallas shrugged. "Get your old boy to twist some arms then, especially Mexico and New France."

"All right. I would do that anyway, since it's what Madame wants." She paused, decided to lay her cards on the table. "Did this stuff kill my daddy? Is it safe?"

Dallas hung his head, but then looked back up to face her. "We learned, after the accident, that the gas has to be pumped out of the mines." He stared at the view port across the Gallery. "You can't smell it or taste it, but it can push all the oxygen out of the shaft. We

learned how to use air pipes to keep the miners safe."

"And you covered up that fact?" She made no attempt to hide her disgust.

"No, we just didn't understand what happened." He gazed directly at her, not flinching away. "We had to come up with new ways to capture the gas. It is safe now, if it's properly dealt with."

"No more widows and orphans, then?" Dixie's drawl dropped into a twang.

"Mining is dangerous." The Texican said, "But I take care of them, as much as they'll let me. Just as I would have looked after you." He glanced around the cabin. "This is not the life I would have given you."

"You didn't have much to offer back then." Dixie gazed at the Gallery, too. "At least now I am never hungry or dirty, and I don't have half-a-dozen young-uns to feed on dust and scraps."

Dixie turned to Brandy. "What did she promise you? Belle of Texas?"

"No, accounting school, college." Brandy raised her chin a bit, sitting up straight. "I'm a whore, just like everyone else, but I want to be stock broker, to make money with other's people's money." The she leaned forward, showing her tits and gazing up at Dixie, as if she would seduce her. "Once I am able to build my own fortune, I'd be honored to be a belle. I'm more than happy to help you any way I can, if it will help you get where you want to go, England, California, maybe up in the Canadas." There was no hint of sarcasm in Brandy's voice, only seductive sweetness, accompanied by a look that would freeze alcohol. She touched her cheek in the sign for "back off."

"Oh my goodness, how late it is," Dixie said, cranking up the drawl again, "I must return

to my client." She knew he wouldn't notice she had been gone. She stood up to leave. "It has been so nice chatting with you tonight. Perhaps we could get together for breakfast?"

This time Dallas stood up too. "Please tell your client that I like to know with whom I'm doing business."

Dixie nodded, a bit relieved. "We'll be down around ten o'clock." She smiled. "See you then." She went back to Sir Winton's cabin, satisfied that he was snoring peacefully. She'd like to know whom she was dealing with as well. She would talk to Axe Copperhead to see where he stood, and then go to Madame and set things straight between them. She still had to get out of the life, and maybe reporting to Madame would not be so bad after all.

She had at least ten hours to work a plan before they landed in Charles Towne.

## The Infirmary

In the infirmary, the doctor studied the residue on the hatpin Yvonne used to stab her client. There was very little of it on the pin, not much to test, and that was contaminated with both Copperhead's and Dixie's blood. She decided to get a bit of the green residue that filled her lab when she burned the small calico packet, hoping that would give her an idea of what had been used.

Her protective clothing was covered with the stuff, so she siphoned a bit of the water it was soaking in to do some tests. Under her microscope, it looked like dirty water, no greener than pond scum or a black swamp water, but a trick of the light made it seem for moment that the floating things in the water looked back at her. She shook her head, stretched her neck, and then hunched back over the microscope. A random move of her hand bumped the pipette and broke it, cutting her hand, and smearing the dirty water on the cut.

She cursed, then cleaned the cut, and cleaned the mess. She didn't have enough room to work in the infirmary, so she decided to go back to the lab, which surely by now had aired out. She could not remember whether she had opened vents for freshening the air, but she would do that now, and if the lab wasn't too bad, she'd work in there. Yvonne would not be coming around for a while yet.

The doctor took her microscope and the bucket of slop with her clothing. The captain said it should be salted down, but the doctor saw no reason to do that as the salt would interfere with her investigation.

The lab was not cleared out completely, but she'd dealt with worse in medical school and other places who deigned to hire women doctors. At least she'd have plenty of muck to

work with, as smoke residue and green slime covered everything.

She cleared a space for the bucket and her microscope and got back to work, her notebook by her side. The slime from her lab was more interesting than the water, much thicker and full of paramecia and other creatures she had never seen before. She drew the creatures, noting whatever she could about them, their shapes, movements, and interactions each other. The residue from the hatpin seemed to have some of the same things, only dead. She decided to try evaporating some of the water to see if heat killed the creatures.

She set a flask of slimy water over her spirit burner, to let it heat up slowly. That would take a few minutes, so she went back to the infirmary to check on her patient.

Yvonne slept peacefully. Surely, there was no reason to keep her tied up. She'd be unconscious for hours yet. Alice, too, was asleep.

The smell from the heating slime drifted through the air, making the guards cough and rub their eyes.

"This is not a good place for you right now," the doctor told them. "I'll take full responsibility. You go on to crew quarters and get some rest. Take Alice with you. "

"But," one of the guards started, "Madame said..."

"It will be all right. She is busy, and this is my domain." The doctor drew herself up to her full height, an unusual sight. She used a strong voice. "This is for your health. I will tend to Miss Yvonne, and she is not going anywhere."

Shaking their heads, the guards did as they were told, glad to get away from the stench and the stinging mist.

She closed the door behind her and went back to the lab, where the liquid in the flask

had bubbled up and thickened into a green slime. She set the flask on a pad to cool. She made some notes about the consistency, color, and opacity it had taken on, despite not being reduced in volume. She spread a bit of it on a slide and peered through her microscope.

This time the floating things—no longer like one-celled animals she'd ever observed—took on the shape of a face, which smiled at her.

In her mind, a voice said, "Drink a bit of the tonic and all will be revealed."

It seemed like an odd request, but she poured a bit into a small flask and tasted it. It was bitter, salty, and disgusting at first, but then she turned up the rest and swallowed it. She felt a surge of energy and euphoria, much too quickly for any substance she knew, especially taken orally.

She looked back into the microscope for more instructions. She had a need to know what this was, how to make it, how to use it.

"I will teach you this potion," the voice said in her mind, "but you must do something first for me."

"Yes, of course," the doctor said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Boil up the rest of the potion, carry it to the kitchen, and put it into the water they use to wash dishes."

"I'm not sure Cook will let me in there." The doctor imagined the Cook brandishing a cleaver, threatening her life if she invaded the kitchen carrying anything.

The voice in her head explained, carefully, as if speaking to a child. "You need to get there while the staff is taking a break. Don't wait too long."

"All right. I'll get started on it right now." She busied herself with her work, happy to be

doing something, not waiting for an injury, a drunk, or some other minor thing that did not make use of her skills. She hummed a little tune, one with words in a language she did not recognize, but it gave her a rhythm to do the work and get the potion ready to deliver.

She had no idea how to convince Cook to let her in the kitchen, but she would figure that out when she got there. It was too much trouble to think about now. It was too important to find out how to make this potion and what it could do for the women she took care of. Her mind hummed with energy even so late at night, and not with the edge that Elvira's tonic produced. She was exhilarated and focused, so much so that she didn't notice immediately when Zulie entered her lab.

"Get her to help you," the voice said in her head. "She will be a wonderful asset."

## Madame's Office

Still tied up in her office, Elvira let her mind wander for a bit, trying to ignore the nausea and body pain of withdrawal. Zulie said she would come back, but it felt like hours sitting motionless in the dark. She fought back the bile that rose in her throat.

Betrayed by the very woman who claimed to love her. Zulie had never been a whore—a hitter, a bodyguard, even an assassin, but never a whore. What could she know of that vulnerability, that illusion of control in seduction?

Elvira could not remember the last time she felt grass under her bare feet and warm sunshine on her body—a risk she did not permit herself often, feeling much safer in the air. She had not even gone to the promenade for more than a few moments at a time, always so much more to plan, to invest, to send out to the network, encoded in such a way that no spy could read it, not even her own women.

They were whores, after all, good ones, hardworking, smart, and available if the price were right, but always for sale.

Just like her.

For all the money, the power, the influence she had and she wanted, she was still just a whore, and one who could be bound by a client, even made to disappear with hardly anyone the wiser or concerned. Just another whore, used up, after her beauty was gone.

Zulie must have waited too long for her to fall in love. Didn't she understand that Elvira did not, could not love any anyone? After all these years, Zulie had given up on her. Like everyone else. Elvira didn't blame her, only herself for not at least pretending.

Elvira leaned her head back, stretching to pull her shoulders back, to release the tension

that ratcheted up her neck into the back of her head. She breathed in, and slowly, pushed all the air from her lungs, bringing her arms in close to see if she could loosen the rope around her body even a little. Her corset was not tightly laced, but tight enough that she could not bring in her ribs much more than they already were. Still, as she rolled first one shoulder and then the other, the rope slipped down a quarter of an inch here, a tiny bit there. If she could get the rope down to her corseted waist, she might be able to get her hands free enough to work her elbows loose.

An hour later, sweating and exhausted, she'd made little progress. She wondered why no one had come to check on her, but then, no one cared. She was tied up like a parcel and would have no choice but to wait for their convenience. Could she feign sleep, even unconsciousness? Even rest from her struggles? Stiff from sitting, she would not be able to spring up from the chair even if someone cut her free that moment.

She sagged in defeat as much as she could against her bonds. She swallowed hard against the bile that rose in her throat. She shivered in withdrawal, cold, thirsty, exhausted.

She looked back on her life. She had built her business on the money she'd stolen from her master, keeping her figure by her meager diet and scraping every cent into whatever investments she could manage. She'd lost money a few times, but then learned to read the story behind the story in the papers and to listen to the old man ramble on about the news of the day, whom he had seen, and what they said. She soaked up tidbits like sponge, never letting on what she did with the information.

She hadn't been unkind to the man who bought her, and he had certainly been generous with her until he was old, running out of money while she saved and invested, a mill

here, a distillery there, each time adding a piece of the puzzle that would be her empire. Now those thieving bastards would take it from her, and she could not so much as lift a finger to stop them.

She had never felt so powerless, and she hated it even more so now. Betrayed by her best friend and lover, imprisoned by her allies, and now she was at the mercy of the Mauverton Detective Agency. The only person who said he was on her side was a double agent she had tried to kill and who said he wanted to work for her, a white night for the evil queen. She didn't even know where he was, or if his story about the client was the truth.

But was she any different? She'd lied, cheated and stolen on occasion, had killed a man or two in self-defense. But she had done good too, giving women jobs, having their children taught to read and figure, paying a living wage—didn't that count for something?

She manufactured her own goods, and the money did roll in, as did the information from her belles. What she sold kept them warm all winter long. She was different, and not just because she was a woman and a whore. She was smart, she paid attention, and she moved swiftly to act.

How could she get the ship back under her control before they got to Charles Towne? There could not be that many Liberians aboard, but if Zulie were among them, if she was in control, then it was Zulie's ship and not her own any more.

Sad, she thought, not to fly through the skies, but she could get another ship, perhaps in San Francisco, still wild west enough for traffic but elegant enough to want the very best for the gold miners and the vultures who fed off the miners.

*I am not like them. I am better. I am better at business. I am better at gathering*

*information, and I am a better whore. I will beat them at their own game.*

Suppose they thought she was harboring fugitives: Jonas and Golden, whatever his name. She had bet everything on this cruise, everything on getting the ambassadors to agree to meet in a secret place, to work out their differences away from prying ears and eyes, other than hers, of course. She wanted a deal with Texas, but she wanted free trade, not a tariff every time she flew across some intangible boundary. Trade was good for everyone, and war was bad.

She needed to know who was out to get her, because she didn't think it was a government—more like some corporation. Velvet had said something about a shadow client...poor Velvet dead.

Zulie was right about one thing—she needed help, and the network needed to be more autonomous. The belles might try to circumvent her security, putting themselves at risk, but if they had more authority, if she made a council of some kind, maybe she could find someone else to manage, leaving her only the figurehead.

She didn't mind so much being a target, but she didn't want her organization to be a snake whose head could be cut off at any moment. She wanted a true network where communication could not be cut with one throat or one æthographer station.

What she had achieved must live on, and to see that happen, she too had to live.

She'd been alone before, even when she worked the old man who kept her, and even when she started each of her businesses. She made sure to have back up plans and guidelines for the women in her network who kept their mouths shut about just what they did for her.

She was weary. Her last dose of tonic was over an hour ago. It didn't last all night as it used to, and her body craved its relief. She knew she was taking too much, but she had one

more night to get through. It would be dawn soon. She needed to get the ship back under her control by then.

She could not let the ambassadors think she was weak, so she needed a cover story they would believe. At this point, however, she was desperate enough to tell them the truth.

The main thing she needed to know was where Zulie stood, and she could not know that without confronting her directly.

A slender hope. Some of her women, surely, were still loyal, and a few of them did not have clients tonight. She'd have to see how to contact them, get them together for a plan

She been betrayed by one of her own—two if she counted Yvonne. Where was the third time to break the charm? Dixie? Brandy? Someone else?

Zulie was right. They both needed to escape, but where would they go? California? Paris? Would Zulie even go with her?

Who could help her? Sir Winton? No, he lost power at court, and she was more benefactor to him than he would be to her. The Texican could hardly speak civilly to her. Right now, her best option was the Pirate Queen of Liberia, Mpenzi Okoro. She was the one with the power, but would she even consider working with a whore? What could Elvira offer her that she didn't already have?

## **In the Lift Shaft**

Golden paused in the lift shaft, where he thought the madam's office should be. No light filtered through where he thought the door would be,

He risked lighting a match to see where he was. The lift opening was closed, but there had to be some kind of controls for the lift for her to have it sent up to her. He pulled the lever to open the panel and struck another match.

"Who's there," Elvira said, her voice dry and whispery.

The last thing he expected was to see the madam tied up in her own office. He slipped inside, looking for some kind of light switch. He did not want to alert anyone outside. He felt the dangling wires of the comm device, tried a third match and found the lights beside the door.

"You're not one of my people," Elvira croaked. "Who are you? Untie me." Her face was pale, almost green, her eyes glassy, and her cheeks sunken.

Golden laughed. "The Magnificent Madame Elvira. I will consider rescuing you, but first I need to access the safe. How do you get it up here?"

She stared hard at him. "I can't. I call the loading dock, and they send it up." She nodded toward the comm unit. "That is out of order thanks to our Liberian hosts. Are you one of them?"

"Hosts?" Golden considered her meaning. "You didn't plan for piracy, then? How unprepared. You have the reputation for arranging everything." He picked up the comm unit. The circuits seemed simple enough. He pulled a tiny tool kit from his pocket, selected a screwdriver, and disassembled the unit. With the cover off, reconnecting the wiring was simple

despite a bit of sting from the æther when the wires connected. He realized that the system was up again, which left him no other options but to disable the ship in a way his employers would not like, but first things first.

"Call the loading dock and have them send the safe up here."

Elvira shook her head. "You must be Mr. Golden. You killed one of my women. I will not help you."

He raised his hand to slap her, but thought better of it. His employers did not want her harmed, and he wanted to get paid in full.

"Then I will not free you." He jerked the comm unit loose again, in case she did want to interfere. She must be lying, he thought. She's not the type to wait around for someone to do her bidding. He searched for some kind of panel inside the office, tapping the walls.

"I will kill you," Elvira hissed.

"You will have to get loose first, and I will be long gone by then." He turned and grinned at her.

Her face was red with anger, but she sagged against the ropes that bound her.

He wondered how long she'd been there...maybe since the Pirate Queen came aboard. A good reason to make sure the Liberians never got hold of the Texican's technology.

He slid the panel open and found the controls, 4 settings, which he decided were the four places the lift could be set to go...2- where it was now, 1- the loading dock, 4- the hidden place on the deck above, and 3...Madame's office. He set the control and waited for the lumbering mechanism to bring him his prize.

In a few moments, the lift car arrived with the large, iron safe that nearly filled the

space. First he tried the door, as it might not be locked. No such luck.

"You won't find anything in there," Elvira whispered. "You are setting yourself up to be caught."

"Are you telling me the Liberians already cleaned you out?" He shook his head. "You just don't know who to trust these days."

"Yes, they took everything." She glanced around the room. "As you can see, there's nothing here. If you want your things, they have them."

He leaned his ear against the door of the safe, near the combination lock. "I'll just see for myself, you lying bitch." He hadn't cracked a safe in a while, but he still time to do this and get away. She didn't try to distract him while he listened for the small sounds as he turned the lock.

A thought buzzed through his mind. If the madam were ill, why was she tied up, not in an infirmary or her quarters? She looked like ten miles of bad road. Maybe his employers had competition, or they might be planning to hang him out to dry if she were not delivered in the pink.

Finally after agonizing minutes, he heard the final tumbler drop. He stood, stretching his cramped neck and knees. Then he swung open the safe. Inside were portfolios, satchels, and boxes, each of which might be a trove of information. After glancing into several of them, he knew he would not be able to carry much with him. Just one caught his attention, one marked WR...with a crown...Sir Winton's papers. Those would be worth ransom, but he didn't have time to go through everything to find more valuables or trinkets.

He turned to the madam, who appeared to be nearly unconscious. He bent over her and

kissed her forehead, insult to injury. "Thank you for your cooperation, Madame. I shall certainly recommend your services to my employers."

He made a sling for the satchel, slung it around his shoulder and lowered the safe to the #2 point. Then he climbed up the access ladder to retrieve his kit.

One more hour to his freedom and payday.

## The Infirmary

Zulie went downstairs to check on the doctor. She passed the infirmary, but the door was open. No one was there. Where were her guards? Where was Yvonne?

Zulie closed the door, cursing the lack of outer locks, and moved on to the lab. Maybe the doc thought she could clean it up before they landed. Stupid woman didn't listen—educated beyond any sense. Zulie doubted the doc had any training in the ways of magic and superstition, and therefore, she did not respond to common sense.

The floor outside the lab had been mopped clean of the green slop, but the energy still felt malevolent. Zulie knew the feeling of going into a dangerous place, ready to fight, but she wasn't sure what she would be fighting here. The doc was small, thin, and too busy to keep herself in shape, always puttering with her potions and equipment.

She knocked on the door, but it swung open with the pressure of her knuckles. A green fog began sliding out the door at floor level, a dark, oily miasma. Inside, she could see the doc working, ankle deep in the stuff, not even a mask over her face—breathing the substance as she mixed and heated something over a flame. She hadn't noticed the door opening. Usually observant, she was oblivious...not a good sign.

Zulie stood outside the door, working to remember everything she'd ever been taught, how to deal with sorcery, how to deal with someone possessed, even second hand. She had no tools: no salt, tobacco, sweet grass, or sage. She noticed the stain of the grease from the boiler room ritual. Not much good that ritual had done for them, as everything had gone to shit in a hatbox. She rubbed her thumb against her fingertips.

"If you're there," Zulie whispered into the air, not wanting to alert the doctor. "I could

certainly use some help."

The doctor saw her and picked up a flask of thick, green glop and dashed out into the hall with it. "I've made some new tonic," the doctor said, grinning, her wide-open eyes with tight pupils. "Have some. It will make you feel a lot better." She pushed the flask almost into Zulie's face.

That was not the kind of help Zulie was looking for.

"You have tried it yourself, then?" Zulie said. "No, thank you. I'm good."

The doctor seized her arm, her fingers clamped down like the talon of a vulture. "Drink it."

Zulie reached for the flask, but the doctor pulled it away. Zulie pulled her closer, but she did not let go her grip.

"No, I'll hold it for you." The doctor snarled. "You wouldn't want to drink too much, now."

Jerking the doctor off balance, Zulie grabbed the flask, covering the doctor's small hand with her own. She grappled, working to keep her balance against the unexpected strength of the smaller woman. She began to push, forcing her back against the wall.

Once they were inside the lab, the door closed. The green miasma began to fill the room. It was as cold as a mountain stream on her legs, and it stung like alcohol on a wound. The doctor's grip on her arm tightened. They squirmed and twisted in a macabre dance, until Zulie pushed the doctor against the back wall, shattering the heavy flask and slathering glop over every surface. Still gripping the broken neck of the flask, the doctor slashed at her, unmindful of the pain she must feel from the stinging glop.

An emergency shower was built into the corner of the lab. Zulie dragged the doctor there with her, rinsing them both until the cistern emptied. They struggled, Zulie holding the doctor in the spray until the green slime cleared from the water circling the drain. After a few minutes, cold and drenched, the doctor released Zulie's arm, dropped the flask, and collapsed. Zulie hoisted her up over her shoulder and made her way out of the lab.

"Some help you are," Zulie muttered at the fairy cogmother. "I thought you were on our side."

She carried the dripping doctor to the infirmary, stripped her, and laid her on a cot. She found a blanket to wrap her in, and then tied her in the cot, outside the blanket and around the framework. She searched the infirmary stores for extra clothing, but there was none. Just as well. She would not send anyone back into that poisoned lab to clear it up, and she had to secure it to keep everyone out. She made a mental note to recommend Elvira to hire a second doctor, an assistant, though this one had rarely been needed, but at this point, the doctor needed a doctor.

Zulie looked around the infirmary for something to make a sign--Keep out!--and hope that would be enough to make do until they got to Charles Towne. She had never wanted a cruise to be over as much as this one. She took the sign to the lab with some pins to attach it to the door, but when she got there, the door was open and the green glop had disappeared. Broken glass lay on the floor but the dark, poisonous energy was gone.

She didn't know whether to be relieved or completely flabbergasted. "If you did this, fairy cogmother, I thank you."

She took the pencil that she found still in her hand and drew several symbols on the

sign. She'd learned them as a young child and now they seemed most appropriate as an offering to the magic of the place. For a moment, she wondered if she were hallucinating, if the hoodoo and the potion the doctor splattered on her had deranged her senses. She could still hear the ship's vibration, the soft sound of air rushing past its sides. She checked on the doc, again, still tied up in the infirmary.

She had no time to think of that now. She made her way to the loading dock to get two crewmembers to guard the doctor. Then she had to find someone to find Yvonne, then get the ship back, and then strangle Elvira for getting her into this mess.

How many hours to Charles Towne?

**Madame's Office.**

Elvira sat motionless, saving her energy while Golden rifled the safe. She'd managed to loosen the ropes around her chest a little, and she could move her arms and hands. She did her best to appear unconscious, hoping for some kind of chance to change the situation.

When he bastard kissed her, she managed to pick his pocket, retrieving his small tool kit. It was tricky getting it open with one hand, but he did have a small blade there. Just as she had her fingers on it, the kit slipped on to the floor. She cried out in frustration, bringing both sobs and a heave of whatever was left in her stomach. Vomit flew from her mouth as her body convulsed. She struggled to breathe, beating her arms against her legs as tears ran down her face and into her cleavage.

Again the bile rose, forcing her forward. She clutched at her throat. Her hand brushed the front of her corset. The ropes had slipped down enough that she could move her hands. She grappled with the busk of her corset, loosening the top two fasteners. Riding the next wave of nausea, she forced her body to bend as much as it could. She dragged her dagger out of its hiding place between her breasts.

She was weak. She was sick, but she sawed at the rope to free herself.

Zulie said she would be back, and she might be at any moment. Elvira must get free, get away, get a plan. She needed her tonic, as much as it made her sick, but she'd not make the night without it.

Minutes passed, one for each strand of the bond. But at last she was free. Nasty, stinking, and nearly too weak to stand, she was free.

Just for a moment, Elvira stopped to breathe and rest. She considered taking the lift and

risking getting caught. Golden had climbed up and he might still be there. If she could get to the æthographer's nest, she could call for help. But that would be where the Liberians might find her. Guards were posted on both sides of her office, so she could not get out that way.

She brought the safe back to her office. It was still unlocked. She took off her ruined frock, and then scooted the satchels and portfolios out of the way and on top of each other to make a small spot for her to crawl in. She wedged one satchel in the safe door, to keep it from locking her in. She reached her arm out to the inside controls, and moved the safe to the fifth location, a space on the same level as the mechanicals deck. The panel was hidden from the outside, but it would open from inside, and she hoped she would be strong enough, conscious enough to move it.

When the lift stopped, she waited for a moment, listening for any noises other than the rumbling of *the Elephant's* drive train. She squeezed out the door of the safe, pressing against the inner wall of the lift box. She could not get to the panel lever with the safe door open, so she had to wriggle back in, move the satchel, and get back out, closing the safe door...locking it.

Now to get the door open, slip down the hall to the escorts' dressing room, and find some clothes. Then to make her way up to the Pirate Queen and throw herself on her mercy.

She passed the flight of stairs, but on the landing Yvonne was crumpled in the corner, crying.

"*Je tué M. Axe,*" Yvonne moaned, her arms wrapped around her knees, rocking herself with her head bowed. "*Il est mort par ma main.*"

No, The First Nations ambassador could not be dead. Elvira's reputation could never survive the death of a client at the hands of an escort. It took a few moments for Elvira to

realize that Yvonne was awake, not tied up in the infirmary, and that the people guarding her had let her go. Where were they and where was the doctor? What should she do with Yvonne in the meantime? Did she dare even talk to her, touch her? Who else might help? What would the Liberians do if they found her? Where were they anyway?

She reached out to touch Yvonne, gently, taking her hand. Yvonne pulled away, lost in her weeping.

Where to take her? The infirmary might not be safe, and with the Liberian guards in the loading dock, that was out too.

"Yvonne," Elvira said, making her voice firm but quiet. "Pull yourself together. You can't stay here." She took Yvonne's arm and pulled her to her feet. "Look at me. Do you know who I am?"

Yvonne lifted her face, and her eyes widened, bloodshot all around the dark, dilated pupils. "M...Madame."

Elvira grasped her arm, pulling her to her feet. Yvonne straightened herself up, and stood there, shaking.

"Come with me, up to the dressing room." Still gripping Yvonne's arm, Elvira pulled her up the stairs. "I do not think Mr. Copperhead is dead. I will check on him." She wondered where her watchers were and if anyone checked this stairwell. The Liberians must not know about the surveillance room because they had not yet come after the woman, though they might be on their way. Yvonne sobbed, half-stumbling as they went down the hall.

"Be still," Elvira said, "Calm yourself. Stand up straight. You can do this."

Yvonne nodded, taking a deep, shuddering breath. They turned the corner to the

women's dressing room, the only room on that level, as the rest housed the second story of the great machines that propelled the ship and made the steam that kept them in the air. Elvira hurried them towards the door.

She was reaching for the handle when the door swung open. Dixie stood there, a knife in her hand, the bandage on her arm stained with blood. She stared at them, unfocused and confused.

"Dixie!" Elvira said, releasing Yvonne, who screamed and ran back down the corridor.

Dixie pushed Elvira out of her way, knocking her to the floor. Dixie ran after Yvonne. "I will kill you!"

Elvira scrambled up and launched herself after Dixie. All three ran down the hall, Dixie gaining on Yvonne.

Elvira stumbled and nearly fell. With a great effort, she recovered her stride and leaped, grabbing Dixie by her waist, bringing her down. They fell together as Yvonne fled to the end of the hall.

Kicking and yelling, Dixie struggled to get loose, trying to roll over and swing the knife. Elvira sat on her, grabbing her hair to pull her head back. Not bound by outer clothing, she outmaneuvered Dixie, keeping her pinned in her bustle and skirts. Yvonne cowered in the far corner of the passageway.

"Hush," Elvira said, dodging the knife and pinning Dixie with her knees. "You have to calm down before the Liberians get here to take you away."

"Bitch, get your ass off me," Dixie said with a Texas twang, all traces of her persona gone. "I will kill that French whore and then finish her job on the Indian."

Elvira grabbed for her arm and wrenched it behind her back, twisting her wrist to make her drop the knife. "You will do as I say. You will stop now."

Dixie struggled despite the pain, as if she felt nothing. She was out of her mind.

Elvira couldn't let Dixie go, and she strength was waning.

Yvonne got up, looking around as if she didn't know where she was, or how she got there. She stared at Elvira and Dixie, working out what was going on, and then ran towards them.

She grabbed Elvira, dragging her off Dixie, all the while yelling, "No, no, no, no!" She threw Elvira against the wall, and picked up the knife. "No kill my friend."

Elvira scrambled to her feet. She blocked Yvonne's knife thrust and ducked under her fist. She swung a right cross to Yvonne's jaw, and jabbed her solar plexus, but the corset protected Yvonne from the full force of the blow. Elvira knocked the knife loose from Yvonne, kicking it away from her.

"Stop!" she yelled, but Yvonne did not react. "Help me. Help me. Anybody, please."

Dixie crawled behind Yvonne to get the knife, but Yvonne kicked her, and then spun back to punch Elvira. But Elvira ducked, spun around, and kicked Yvonne's hip, knocking her off balance. The knife went flying down the stairs. Dixie went after it with a grunt of rage.

Elvira heard running, heavy feet coming up the steps. She pushed Yvonne headfirst into the wall. Dixie let loose a growl of rage. There were shouts of "Hold her" and "get the knife." It sounded like her crew, so she had to risk a glance down the stairway. Khaki uniforms, not purple, half a dozen or more Liberian troops. She had to run.

Elvira opened the first panel across the passage to access the machine room to escape.

She had to get to the æthographer's nest, and send a message. She could let the Liberians have the ship and maybe negotiate some kind of deal to get the ambassadors to Charles Towne.

She would face the Liberian Ambassador and beg for her help.

She slipped out of the mechanical room, hoping that Yvonne and Dixie were enough of a handful that the Liberians would not notice her. She ran to the dressing room, now empty of raving escorts, and found a dress she could wear. She threw it on, and then cleaned her face and hands as well as she could.

At the door she listened for any other commotion. Someone might be waiting for her outside, but that wasn't the Liberian style. She slid out the door and to the stairway to get to the client lift. At the junction with the hall way, she stopped and listened again. Everything was quiet. Maybe Zulie had gotten all the clients in their beds.

Elvira ran to the lift, got in and raised it to the officers' deck.

Eight more hours.

## **Bridge Deck**

Zulie made her way up to the bridge to tell the commander that Yvonne was wandering the ship somewhere, probably in bad shape, and that she wanted his help finding her. The client Golden or Coontz, still had not been found, and she hadn't seen Jonas either. IF they were working together, she would see them both hang by her own hand.

Still, she needed to check on Elvira. Maybe her lover would be so tired from ranting and sick from withdrawal that she would agree to go to her quarters and rest.

## **Mpenzi Okoro's Quarters**

Elvira walked out of the lift and toward the Pirate Queen's quarters.

She spoke to the guards outside the ambassador's quarters, next to her own. She couldn't tell if anyone was in her quarters or in Zulie's, and the soundproofing was good enough that the ambassador would not likely know either.

"I have a message from Madame to deliver to the ambassador," Elvira said, looking down in respect. "I was told to say it to her directly, and anyone she allowed to hear it, but only to say it to her."

"So your Madame has escaped? Interesting." The tall woman blocking her way smiled. Elvira couldn't tell if she recognized her, and it didn't matter at that point. She'd get in one way or another.

The guard knocked softly on the door, which was opened by a third guard inside. The first guard nodded, and the door swung open enough for Elvira to slide through. They allowed her to pass the screen they had set up between the door and the ambassador's tea table, where she sat with her personal servant and her escort.

The ambassador beckoned her near, and laughed. "I'm surprised you let your crew dress so slovenly, Madame Elvira." She pointed to a chair across from her. "Let me pour you a cup of tea."

"Thank you, Madame Ambassador." She did not deny who she was or explain her subterfuge. The escort tasted the tea before she drank it. Having Elvira's woman test it was as much a test of her own nerves and poise as it was of whatever the ambassador might have used to dose the drink.

Elvira sipped politely, thanking her escort.

"Now tell me this very important message, Madame, and why you are so foolish as to come to me in the situation where you find yourself?"

"I am concerned with the safety of my clients," Elvira said, "and I have come to ask for your help to deliver them to their destination."

"Are we not headed there now at all due haste?" She handed a biscuit to her servant, who broke off a piece to eat. "My people are quite good at navigation, which you may not realize."

"Before the communication system was destroyed, my æthographer learned that the Mauverton Agency plans to confiscate the ship when it reaches the Charles Towne Sky Port." Elvira set down her cup very gently, hoping not to rattle it, as she felt very shaky. The chances were that the ambassador would just have her tied up again, and laugh in her face.

"Now that it is in Liberian hands, such a move would be a mistake."

"I agree, of course." Elvira clasped her hands in her lap. "Could we find a way to deliver the clients directly to the courthouse and avoid the sky port? The Mauvertons are after me and my ship, I am certain, and while I prefer not being captured by them, I am much more concerned about my clients, my women, and my crew."

"An interesting dilemma." The ambassador sipped her tea, with dainty movements despite her big hands and heavy jewelry. "What might you offer for my help?"

"You tell me." Elvira sat poised, calm, and keeping the guards in her peripheral vision. "You want something from me because you did not have your people take me back to the commander. As you said, we are not the deepest of friends."

"You suggested that we might become so." The ambassador set her cup down and folded her hands. "What if what I want *is* you, your knowledge and expertise, working for me?"

A price. Elvira could deal with a price. "I'm a whore. I've always been for sale. I do reserve the right to negotiate price, but I strive to meet the client's desires." She did not allow herself to think about losing all she had built, not yet.

"What about your friend, Zulie?"

"She speaks for herself." Elvira kept her face calm and serene. If Zulie wanted to go with her, she would, or she might rescue her, or any other scenario. Not salient at this point. Only reading the ambassador, who was even better at negotiation. Right now Okoro was testing, probing for weaknesses.

That was Elvira's strength. She had nothing to lose but her life, and it looked like that was gone already. Things could only get better.

"You will need to convince her," Okoro said, "Make her see that she is necessary to the success of the operation." She glanced at one of the guards, who left the room. "You have some skills that may be very beneficial to several projects that I have undertaken. The safety of your crew and passengers is a high price, but one I believe we can agree on."

"And the contract? I like things in writing. There is less misunderstanding that way."

The Pirate Queen laughed, her jewelry jiggling. "Do you get a pre-nuptial agreement from all your johns? That must be cumbersome."

"Yes, at least I have done so since I launched *the Elephant*." Elvira smiled and kept her voice pleasant. "I am worth it, even if I am getting fucked."

The door opened, and Zulie walked in, her face stern but otherwise expressionless--her

"I'm working" face--not a bad sign. Relief, surprise, anger, or any other emotion would be a danger sign, but as long as she kept her poker face, Zulie was in control. The ambassador beckoned and pointed to a space at the table, which one of her women quickly supplied with a chair.

"Please join us," The ambassador said. "It's not a tea party without all the guests."

"Thank you for your hospitality." Zulie made a sign of respect to the ambassador, and then she turned to Elvira. "What the hell took you so long?"

Elvira stared at Zulie, not sure what she was feeling, or how to react. "I was tied up," she said, keeping her voice even. "Golden got into the safe, and then I got loose. I sent Jonas to stop him and bring him in." She waited for a reaction, but got only a nod.

Zulie turned to one of the guards. "Send someone to look for Golden and Jonas. Bring them both to one of the private rooms and keep them there, secure. They are both dangerous."

The guard turned on her heel, not even checking with the ambassador, and left. There was a connection there, and Zulie was on the Liberian side.

Zulie sat and accepted a cup of tea from the ambassador.

"The ambassador has a question, concerning a plan I suggested to keep *the Elephant* safe and deliver the clients to their public meeting on time." Elvira paused for a moment. "She would like to leverage my skills and knowledge in trade, and wanted to know if you would be willing to be part of the package. I hope you will join me."

"Has a contract been drawn up?" Zulie asked. "What skills and knowledge are on the table?"

"No contract as yet," Elvira said, clasping her hands together in her lap to keep them

still. "No details finalized."

The ambassador smiled and waved her women away. "I will give you a few moments to discuss your positions." She sashayed out of the room, leaving them alone.

"You know about the Mauvertons in Charles Towne, waiting to confiscate the ship?" Elvira asked.

"Yes, the æthographer told us. How did you find out?" Zulie kept her working face composed, a mahogany mask, showing nothing of what she might be thinking.

"From Jonas. I don't know when he found out. Maybe he knew all along." Elvira knew she would not get a better opportunity. She reached across the table to touch Zulie's arm. "I apologize. You were right all along about this cruise, and everything you objected to has happened, and more besides. I was pig-headed and stubborn, and I did not listen. And here we are, on opposite sides of the table." She hung her head for a moment. "I want you to be by my side, always, but I understand if you don't feel the same. I have not treated you like the best friend I have ever had."

"And where do you think I am now?" Zulie maintained her unreadable face.

Elvira had seen her in action, dealing with some obstreperous client with the same cold expression. "You did nothing to stop them tying me up."

"You were out of control, high on that tonic of yours." She crossed her arms and leaned back. "Better they do it, than me, especially in front of the crew."

Elvira nodded. She really hadn't thought of it that way, how she was at fault for losing control before the very people who depended on her. "So what now?"

"What exactly does the ambassador want from you?" With no expression, Zulie had not

yet said no. There might be a chance.

"I don't know yet," Elvira said. She clasped her hands to keep them from shaking as last of the tonic wore off. "She enjoys playing cat and mouse. I can't offer her the ship—she already has it. The women and the crew need to be paid and taken care of, and the clients have to be delivered. I'm willing to share a lot of information for that."

"And if she just wants you for a hostage?" Zulie did not give up the slightest hint of what she was thinking. Was that why Elvira had always taken her for granted?

"Who is likely to ransom me, especially if you are along?" Elvira shrugged.

"You have deep-pocketed enemies. She might sell you out." Zulie took a sip of tea, appearing as unconcerned as if they were discussing where to eat tomorrow.

Elvira felt her control slipping away again. She could not go on much longer. "She could just let them take the ship when we land, if we are still headed to Charles Towne. Or she could ransom them to start a war."

"There's nothing in that for her." Zulie's stare was unflinching.

"Please, say you'll come with me. At least listen to what she has to say." Elvira pleaded.

"I'm not a whore. I am not for sale." Zulie sat back with her arms crossed.

"I would never ask that of you." Elvira felt a shudder of horror. How could Zulie think that?

Zulie shook her head. "I'm no pimp either."

"You have always been my best friend, my lover, a voice of sanity when I am crying in the wilderness." Elvira laid her forearms on the table and leaned on her elbows. "I have neglected you and not taken your advice, and you have always been right." Elvira wrung her

hands together, leaning towards her partner. "Please just listen to what the Ambassador has to say. I will follow your choice, whatever it is. Please."

Zulie smiled. She reached across the table to clasp her hands. "I thought you'd never ask."

## Mpenzi Okoro's Quarters

After a moment, the door opened, admitting the Ambassador and her guards. Zulie and Elvira stood until Okoro seated herself.

"Please, sit," Mpenzi Okoro said, after she made herself comfortable. "You have come to an agreement?"

Elvira glanced at Zulie.

"We have," Zulie said, "Madame Ambassador, what is it that you want from us? How can we be your leverage point?"

The ambassador leaned back. "Things are moving quickly in the world below us. Loyalties are shifting, and I need reliable information. Can you provide that?"

"Yes, as long as we have access to our sources," Zulie replied. "We will have requirements of our own to maintain those sources."

Elvira sat still and let Zulie do the talking. Despite her fatigue and her gratitude for being able just to sit down, she observed the negotiation, clearing her mind of anything but the present moment. She needed to spot Okoro's weakness, her need, her leverage point.

"You and your people will be looked after," the ambassador said, "If I wanted only the ship, I could have had you both killed on my arrival. Too messy, causing with other problems."

"So you always planned to take *the Elephant*?" Elvira said softly, a thought she had not considered.

"It was an option." Okoro clasped her hands and laid them on the table. "I have information that you will likely find interesting as well, so let us begin to work out the details..."

The outer door opened, admitting one of the women warriors.

"We have all five in custody, at your leisure, Ma'am."

"Very good." The ambassador stood. "Please come with me, as this requires both your presence and your assistance. We will continue the negotiation later. Captain Zulie, can you direct some of your people to assist my women in clearing the meeting room?"

"Certainly." Zulie stepped out of the room.

"Now you have another problem that needs to be solved," Okoro said. "I will conduct a ritual to help break this hoodoo on your ship. Burning the poppet was good, but this is a much stronger curse. I will need your cooperation."

"Of course," Elvira said. "My people need to be safe."

"As do you, Madame." Okoro went to her luggage to retrieve a white nightshirt. "You will want to wear this so as not to stain your costume."

Elvira was helped out of her costume by one of Okoro's women. She felt oddly naked in the nightshirt.

In a few minutes, Zulie joined them, also donning a nightshirt.

Elvira accompanied Okoro to the meeting room. With the help of the loading dock crew and the kitchen staff, the meeting room had been cleared. Sprinkled patterns of salt marked sections of the floor, and sweet grass burned to remove negative vibrations from the air. Five washtubs were arranged around the room. A large stockpot of blue liquid sat near the center of the room within its own circle of salt.

The ambassador created an altar on a low table with a number of items from her collection and some fruit, meat, and drink from the kitchen. She lit candles of various colors and placed them around the room, assigning her warriors to maintain the flames. When she was

satisfied that all was ready, she sent word to the Liberian commander to bring the participants to the room. Barefoot, they all wore only knee-length nightshirts.

Dixie and Yvonne looked much worse for the wear after their fight, scratched and disheveled, but conscious and willing to participate. The doctor had been sedated and bound. Axe Copperhead and Sir Winton were escorted in by Liberian guards. Copperhead leaned on his guards for support, his complexion gray and his eyelids drooping. Sir Winton, Lord Randolph, bound and gagged, struggled to get free of his guards like a large toddler who didn't want to go to bed.

The guards secured the participants in chairs inside the washtubs. Once they were in place, Okoro poured a ring of salt surrounding each tub. she marked a symbol in the salt on the floor in front of each washtub, keeping the circle intact, and said another charm for each person. As she spoke, each one stared entranced, their expressions blank.

Mpenzi Okoro placed Zulie and Elvira to the right and left of the altar, respectively, and then splattered them with a limp brush dipped in the blue-tinted liquid. The ambassador began an invocation, speaking in a language that was neither English nor Gullah, like nothing Elvira had ever heard before.

As the ambassador spoke, Elvira began to see shadowy images abound the room, hovering over each of the people in the washtubs, swirling, like dark smoke. She glanced at Zulie who stood in an aura of darkness. Though she could not see it, she knew the darkness surrounded her as well.

The ambassador's chanting grew louder as she raised her hands and spread her arms. A shimmering light surrounded Okoro like rainbows reflected in a spray of water. She stood still

for a few moments, chanting, as the light grew more substantial, like a glowing mist.

After a time, she handed Zulie a lighted candle and a stick covered in some kind of aromatic spice, which Zulie lit from a candle. The incense stick gave off a greasy smoke with notes of tarry stink under the rich cinnamon and pepper scent.

Then Okoro gave Elvira a bucket of the blue liquid and a cup. She beckoned the two to follow her as she moved to the chair where Yvonne sat.

"Pour a cup of the blue water over her head," Okoro said. "Then, Zulie, let the smoke flow around her."

Zulie nodded.

Elvira dipped the cup into the liquid. The warrior behind the escort put her hands on Yvonne's shoulders to hold her down. Elvira poured the liquid into Yvonne's thick hair, letting it run down her face and onto her body.

Yvonne screamed and squirmed, trying to get away, but the warrior held her firmly.

"Again," Okoro said. The ambassador began chanting again, nodding to Elvira.

Elvira poured again, and Yvonne passed out, dripping with blue stains.

Zulie waved the incense around Yvonne so that the smoke surrounded her, and the dark aura melted away. The ambassador's escort brought a lighted candle on a saucer and set it on the floor in front of Yvonne, inside the salt circle.

They repeated the ritual for each person, until all of them were unconscious but clear of the darkness. The ambassador returned to the altar and picked up a poppet.

She carried it around the room, showing it to each unconscious person. Then she tied the poppet and Yvonne's hairpin with a red ribbon, chanting a different phrase, one that

sounded threatening and ominous. She made a circle of salt in the middle of the room and placed the poppet inside it. Then she made a line of salt from each of the circles to the center circle, like the spokes of a wheel. With a last word, she touched the salt with a candle, and a flame flashed all around.

A scream came from the middle of the room as if the poppet were in pain. Elvira dropped the bucket and cup to clap her hands over her ears. The screaming stopped, but she felt herself falling, falling, falling. She opened her mouth to scream but no sound came out.

In the darkness, she was alone, suspended or still falling, she could not tell. As she reached out her hands, she saw the smudge of grease on her hand for the fairy cogmother glow bright blue, and spread out to enclose her whole body, a soft blue light, as warm as if she was floating in the sky on a summer day. She thought it must be like this to be dead. Finally, she could rest with no one depending on her...but no Zulie...alone...alone.

Alone.

## Under the Promenade Deck

Jonas climbed the ladder again to the top of the ship. He looked up, and he didn't allow himself to think of the nothingness below him. He would secure the safe if Coontz hadn't opened it yet, or stop him from harming the ship if he'd gotten it open.

Coontz had to be up here, because he wasn't anywhere else on the ship. In the darkness, Jonas saw a door open to the outside, some kind of repair access. He ran along the catwalks, not looking down, toward the silhouette of a man against the bright sunrise, crouched in the opening.

Fear clutched at his heart. Coontz was outside, behind the ear of *The Elephant*. Fighting to breathe, Jonas navigated the length of the ship, keeping his mind on the light ahead of him and not thinking about what it was.

When he reached the portal for the ear, he saw how large it was, and how far away Coontz had crawled. He also saw a huge kite-like structure laid out on the neck of the Elephant between him and Coontz. He would have to get around it to get to Coontz, and once he was out there, what could he do? A safety line stretched from the ear across the wide back of the airship, and Coontz was attached to it. He worked out on the shoulder, crawling on his hands and knees. Jonas looked around, seeing two places for harnesses to be kept, but none hung there. The other side of the ship would have harnesses, but by the time he got there and back, the damage would be done. He could not let that happen.

"Coontz!" he yelled, "Coontz!"

The other man looked up, staring for a moment, but then going back to work. Jonas recognized the length of gun cotton, and he understood Coontz's plan to blow a hole in *The*

*Elephant's back.*

The wind sucked Jonas forward as it whistled past the portal. He pushed away the thought of slipping off, plunging to his death in the backwoods of the rolling hill country. The ship was wide, he told himself, but it wasn't flat, moving forward at sixty miles an hour.

He crawled out the portal, hanging on to the cable that ran along loops connected to the ear structure. He forced his lungs to breathe in and out, and his legs to push him forward. Coontz was a good 30 yards ahead of him, crawling around, painting a circle of tar and sticking the gun cotton to it. Behind the man, the horizon faded blue into the sky still silvery with sunrise.

He struggled to breathe, frozen in place with a 60-mile an hour wind pushing, roaring to him to roll off into the open space below. He lay flat, gripping the safety line that threatened to cut his hand. He had no business being out here, but neither did Coontz. Jonas had to bring Coontz back in before he damaged the airship. He got to his knees again, and pulled himself along half a foot at a time. He'd figure out what to do when he got out there, but for now, it was reach, move a knee, move the other knee, reach, knee, knee, reach.

He didn't look right or left, but just ahead at the next place to put his hand.

The huge kite was just ahead of him, blocking his way, and Coontz many yards away beyond that.

They would all fall out of the sky if he didn't do his job.

"Coontz! Coontz!" He yelled, raising his voice against the wind. "Don't do this!"

Coontz turned, staring for a moment. He looked back at what he was working on, made a spark, and lit a fuse. He was going to blow up the ship.

Jonas struggled under the glider to keep his handhold and move forward. The other harness secured the glider to the wing, and it pushed him down, pinning him to the surface. He wriggled forward an inch at a time, while Coontz got to his feet and scuttled towards him. Jonas had no time to get the harness loose from the glider.

Jones dragged himself past the glider. Coontz would not get away. If they were both blown up, so be it, but Coontz would be right there with him. "Coontz," he yelled again. "You are better than this. Go back and cut the fuse."

"I'll kill you," Coontz answered, crawling now, pulling against his harness. "Coontz is dead."

"I know you. We worked together building the sky port." Jonas got to his knees. "You're better than this." To fight Coontz, he had to let go of the safety line. *The Elephant* is wide, he told himself. You could roll around on here all day and not fall off.

Self said, *then why is there a safety line?*

"Get away from my kite," Coontz yelled. He pulled out a Liberian ionizer and shot, but he was too unstable to keep the aim steady and the shot went wide. Coontz reached into his boot and pulled out a knife.

Jonas scrambled to his feet. He swallowed hard. He ran, crouched, toward the curve of the Elephant's back, beyond the range of Coontz's harness, and back towards the fuse.

Coontz shot the ionizer at the ring of gun cotton, but missed.

Jonas struggled to run with the wind pushing down. He fell, his feet sliding out from under him. He rolled over to get to his knees. He crawled, faster, but too slow. The fuse was burning fast, and he was too far away. With his last strength, he got back to his feet and leapt

toward the sparkling menace. Rolling across *The Elephant's* neck, he grabbed the fuse and pulled it loose, burning his hand. He flung it high to let the wind carry it safely away. With another breath, he pulled at the tarry gun cotton, ripping it off and throwing it into the wind as well.

That left only Coontz.

Jonas found his feet again and scrambled along the line.

Coontz had freed himself from the harness, which slid along the back and off the edge. He unbuckled the glider from the safety line and unfolded it part way to strap himself in, lying on his side to keep the wind from pulling the glider away from him and into the dawn.

Jonas fell again, rolling across the inflated fabric. He spread eagled to stop himself, and then rolled over and started crawling.

By that time, Coontz had gotten the glider unfolded. He stood, spread the wings and let the wind carry him away, rising above the ship and into the sky.

Jonas watched him disappear into the horizon. He collapsed on the warm fabric for a moment, exhausted, defeated.

A loud pop sounded behind him. He saw a flash of light, a flaming circle, and a billow of smoke. Coontz hadn't missed the gun cotton after all, but it had exploded behind the airship like a flaming fart.

Jonas crawled back to the rigging, dreading to tell Madame that Coontz had gotten away. At least he didn't have to explain a gaping hole sinking the ship or escape from burning hydrogen.

Jonas crawled back to the ridge of *The Elephant's* ear, hanging on to the safety line. He

rolled inside to the platform, out of the wind and into the dark. He lay there, shivering from exhaustion. He could rest for just a moment before figuring out what to do next.

"Get up." Someone nudged him with a foot, connecting with a previous bruise.

Jonas groaned, rolled away, where he saw the open space below him. It didn't matter anymore.

Someone grabbed him, pulling him to his feet. Four Liberian guards held him at gunpoint.

He raised his hands. He said nothing, saving his strength. He stumbled forward.

Two of the guards grabbed his arms and dragged him back across the catwalks and to a staircase. They went down to a platform that opened to the hallway to Madame's office.

The Captain was there with the Liberian commander.

"He was out on the back of the Elephant," the guard said. "The safe has been opened and some items removed."

"Get him a chair," the Captain ordered. "And some water."

They put him in a chair and tied his hands behind him, stimulating the pain from the every other injury of the day. Why couldn't they just knock him out and let him sleep?

A crewmember brought him a glass of water and held it to his mouth. He drank it, beginning to feel the coming down effects of the tonic on top of his previous adventures. With any luck, he'd just pass out.

"You can go now," the Captain said. "We have this situation under control."

The guards looked to the commander, who nodded.

Jonas faced his tribunal, wondering idly who was in charge, and if it mattered. As long as

he was breathing and had a floor under him, he was happy.

Five hours to Charles Towne.

### **Elvira's quarters**

When she came to her senses, Elvira lay wrapped in a blanket, in her bed in her quarters. She could not speak, so tired and so cold, taken away from the warm blue glow that had comforted her.

Mpenzi Okoro stood by Elvira's bed. "I know you are exhausted, but we still have to deal with the commander and hand him a face-saving offer."

Zulie helped Elvira out of the bed, and Ava helped her undress and get into the shower. They did not have time for an elaborate toilette, but the hot water and fresh clothing lifted Elvira's spirits. She realized how heavy the hoodoo was to carry, and how she felt so much lighter and freer without it. What had poor Yvonne felt? And Dixie?

Ava helped her dress in a sedate day dress of sage velveteen with a lace collar. She had no other adornment.

As Ava did her hair, a simple bun, Elvira itemized her concerns. "What will happen with my women and the doctor? Will they be all right?"

"Yes," Ambassador Okoro said. "They are being treated now, and I will take charge of them in my home. I have offered extended treatment to Mr. Copperhead, but he has not yet responded. I believe he is more concerned about getting to Charles Towne and disclosing Lord Randolph's treachery."

"They have been allies for many years," Elvira said. She stretched her neck and rolled her shoulders to relax. "A new actor is on the scene, one we must learn about and find a way to avoid or leverage. I did not see the signs before, but now they are all too clear. "

"I sent escorts and crewmembers to help Copperhead get cleaned up and ready for the

meeting," Zulie said. "He was gracious, as always."

"And Sir Winton?"

"He is still unconscious." Zulie smiled her dangerous smile. "I plan to keep him that way for a while."

When Ava finished with her hair, Elvira stood, feeling more secure on her feet.

"Thank you," Elvira said. "As soon as we negotiate with the commander, I want to see to him, ask what else I can do for him. We will need his cooperation to do what we have promised."

"That just leaves the doctor." Elvira thought of the green fog in the doctor's lab and shuddered at the thought of being surrounded by it.

"She is still unconscious, watched by my women. She will be treated, but for now she is under guard." Mpenzi Okoro shook her head. "It is a bad business."

"What of the Texican, Brandy and the others?" Elvira brushed her lips with a knuckle. "Is everyone else well and safe?"

"Yes, they are fine, at least for now. You can check in with them later," Zulie said, her hands shoved in the pockets of her uniform. "Are you recovered enough to speak to the commander? Do you need more of your tonic to keep going?"

Elvira thought for a moment. She felt clear-headed and did not want to lose that for a few minutes euphoria, fewer each time she had taken more. "No, I am fine, for now. There is no time to lose."

The ambassador sagged into a chair by Elvira's side. "Give me a few minutes, and I will be ready to face the commander."

"Of course, Ambassador. Can we get you something—tea or water?" Elvira had forgotten how to be the hostess, not thinking of the client first instead of herself.

"Why should we trust you, Madame Elvira?" The ambassador dropped her expansive persona, showing herself a tired, old woman carrying a great responsibility. "We need a good reason that a man will understand."

Elvira remembered the darkness, being tied up in her office. "I've got a wider perspective--the whole of the continent. I am a better negotiator, and I have as much or more to lose than Liberia." Elvira straightened her back and aimed a hard look at the ambassador. "I'm a better whore than you are, and I know what I'm selling."

The ambassador smiled. "Yes, you are very good, and your hard honesty will strike fear in to his heart." She called to her warriors. "I believe we are ready." She pushed herself up from the chair and motioned her women to come close. "Hold out your right hand and stick out your thumb."

All the women did as she asked, and each woman grasped the thumb of the woman to her right, making a circle of hands like the spokes of a wheel.

"Together we are invincible, my sisters," the ambassador said, meeting each one with a glance. "Now comes the time to show our strength in peace and in community." She raised her hand slightly, bringing the circle up, and then down, like a handshake. Then she released her hand, and the circle broke apart.

"Let us go then," Okoro stood, straightened herself, and put on her bright smile, her working face, just like Zulie's scowl, and equally able to hide whatever she might be thinking.

The women marched to the bridge, encircled by the ambassador's personal guards with

Elvira and Zulie in the second row, and the ambassador with her escort behind. When they turned the corner, two male Liberian guards joined them.

When they asked permission to go on the bridge, the commander came out and suggested they meet in Elvira's office. He glanced at Elvira but gave no indication of what he thought.

The only furniture there was the chair where Elvira had been tied up, and it was currently occupied by Jonas, who blinked when the light came on, but nodded to Zulie and Elvira without attempting to make any kind of struggle.

The commander sent two men to get chairs for the four of them to sit. "What is your wish to discuss, Ambassador?" The commander ignored Elvira and Zulie.

The ambassador smiled and waited for the men to return.

When the chairs appeared, the four leaders sat, each with a Liberian warrior woman at his or her back, except for Jonas, who was against the wall between the Liberian commander and the Ambassador.

He nodded to Elvira, with more of a bow to Zulie. He leaned back and closed his eyes, as if nothing were relevant to his position. He could rest.

Elvira had gotten them all here, and now she had a job to do.

## Elvira's office

"Now that we are settled," the Liberian commander said, "What is it that you want, Ambassador?"

"We do not want a war with the European colonies," the ambassador said, crossing her arms and leaning forward, "This cruise was engineered to avert that possibility, but other factions are not so peaceful."

"I am not afraid of war, certainly not against these...women." The commander leaned back and crossed his legs. "The formidable whore was tamed quite easily, and I expect no more from her allies."

"Do you expect so little?" Elvira said. "Are you willing to give up your women and children to men who only want to sell guns to both sides and make a few bucks from the deaths of thousands?" Elvira looked him up and down, curling her lip and giving a slight shrug. "But I guess you are like any other man, got to piss further than anyone else. Maybe you can, but what are you going to piss away in the meantime?"

The Commander stopped smiling. "You are not begging for your ship?"

"No, you have that, despite the terms of our agreement." Elvia bowed her head slightly. "I apologize for my previous unladylike behavior."

"Then what do you offer for our cooperation?" He turned to the ambassador. "What have you offered them?"

"I have made them an offer for their intangible assets." The Ambassador smiled.

"What assets? Surely you do not need a..." He stopped, remembering to show respect to the ambassador.

Elvira spoke up. "She wants access to my network of informants. Trade agreements with other colonies, skilled jobs, and education for your people if they need it, markets for your goods, and leveraged buying of raw materials."

"Why would you do this?" The commander leaned toward her. "Do you think you know more than a whole country?"

"I need help, and Liberia has the upper hand right now." Elvira shrugged. "I am diversifying my interests. We both want trade with California, and now it's within reach. I have people who are ready to move goods and information across the continent, goods that will bring gold back to the eastern seaboard, away from those who would sell us all out."

The Liberian spoke to Elvira. "Liberia is strong, but we are not welcome in the midlands and uplands of the east. What could you do about that?"

Elvira turned to her. "I have factories and shops in every decent sized city in the British colonies, and they need good artificers. I can use factory workers, shopkeepers, teachers, and cooks—people who are willing to work and to keep their eyes and ears open to what is going on around them. I hire architects, scientists, and inventors who can build new devices and improve on the machinery of industry. You have some of the best minds in the continent. I would rent them from you, house them, feed them, and pay them well to build a truly new world."

The commander laughed but without humor. "You think you can do all that?"

"I can start. If nothing changes, then nothing changes. It will not be easy, but nothing ever is. One of my women is working here to make enough money to be a stock broker, and I'll pay for her to get her license and then pay her to teach others." She waited for them to think

about her offer for a moment. "But if we have to spend all our capital on protecting ourselves from warmongers, where can that inventive spirit go—into more guns, more bombs, more forts, more armies? Neither of us can make any profit from that."

The Liberian officer looked at Jonas and laughed. "This is what we will be fighting? A turncoat. Spy. Traitor."

"Yes, I know which way the wind is blowing," Jonas said, "and I've seen where the profits are. I see who is betraying whom, and I chose a better side." He forced himself to relax and smile even as he felt a knife blade press his throat from the guard beside him. "You haven't thought this through."

Jonas shook the ropes from his arms to show that he had been free from the bondage for some time. "Someone wanted to stop these people from reaching Charles Towne badly enough to hire the Mauverton agency and freelance agents to boot." Jonas shrugged.

The commander stared at Jonas. "What do you say to this fanciful dream?"

"I'd say someone was powerful afraid of Madame" Jonas said, "and what she might be able to do, maybe even enough to trick you into turning against her."

The Liberian jerked his head to the guard, who took away the knife. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

"What do you want to know?" Jonas asked. He did not give up easily nor did he give anything away.

"Where is your primary loyalty? To the Mauvertons? To Madame Elvira? To yourself?"

"To Madame Elvira." He glanced at her, to see if he should say more. She gave him a curt shake of her head.

Zulie spoke up. "I have bought his indenture, and I will keep him with me."

The room was silent, with hardly the sound of breathing to be heard above the sound of the engines and the wind.

Elvira continued. "And now we know that the Agency plans to take *the Elephant* by force, once it arrives in Charles Towne. How can that possibly be good for international relations?"

Jonas spoke up. "The communications system is down, but one or two of your technicians could certainly repair it. The Mauvertons won't back down, but you could offer them a trade—me for example."

"Can you vouch for him?" The Liberian captain asked. "He may be bluffing or lying. What has he to lose either way?"

"What has he to gain?" Zulie asked. "He's continued to search for the saboteur. He is dogged in his resolve, even risking his life for the airship."

"Maybe he can't afford Madame." The commander released a humorless chuckle.

"Perhaps. But do we risk war started by people who do stand to gain, while we will all lose?" Elvira wanted to deck the commander and stomp his soft spots, but kept her temper, holding it like a snake by her will.

The captain regarded Madame with a cold stare. "Perhaps you just want your ship back, and you will do anything to get it."

"Of course I want my ship back, and I want to get all the passengers to Charles Towne safely." She leaned forward, almost in the man's face. "I have a plan. We can offload all the ambassadors when you take yours back to your ship, and they can be delivered safely through

your channels. I don't know your routes, so I seriously doubt the Mauvertons or their clients do."

He did not respond, only staring away from her, as if she were not there.

She continued. "There is more, a new technology in Texas, something we have not seen before. I want to broker a deal with them that will include you, and your expert technicians."

She stopped, waiting for a response, but got none. "The Texican aboard is not the best negotiator. He's loud, rude, and arrogant, a typical buckskin. But he can see the value of working with people to get what he wants, even if he doesn't know how to talk nicely."

The commander still looked away.

Elvira stopped for a moment, giving him a bit of space. "Will you listen to his proposal after the passengers are delivered, and we figure out how to offload my employees? We're talking about more than 60 lives here, all dependent on me. Without my reputation, without my ability to guarantee their safety, you have not lived up to your side of the bargain, for which your governor has been well paid. Where does your honor lie?"

The commander still did not look at her. "We have heard rumors of a new gas that will lift more than steam, and can be used over and over. Is this true?"

She did not let her rising hope show on her face. "Yes, as near as I can tell, it is. It's the bargaining chip for the Texicans to gain membership in the international community. Can you imagine flying to California with no stops for refueling?"

From the look on his face, it was clear he could imagine. He spoke to Elvira, then, rather than in her general direction. "We are still more than four hours away from Charles Towne. It will take some time to get your people to come with us. They may need to think you are being

kidnapped." He smiled, a wide grin but with no smile in his eyes. "We could certainly arrange that."

She nodded. "But I still have the rest of the clients and my people who have to get to Charles Towne on time, and not be blown out of the sky. Do you think anyone would dare fire on your ships?"

"Not more than once. However, we have some backup vessels on the ready...we have our sources too, Madame. That is why we did not allow our ambassador board your ship in New York. We still control these skies, and we plan to keep it that way. One ship arriving at a well-publicized and normal time is a target, but six, eight ships, all carrying Liberian colors, that would not be so easy to manage, and we can send messages to people on the ground."

"I can help with that," said Jonas. "They won't recognize me immediately, I think I can spot the leader there, and get him to call off the action. They will have some kind of signal, but if I can use one of your shuttles, then I can help with logistics on the ground."

The black man looked even more amused. "Yes, you will go down by yourself and be the hero. No thank you."

"I am unarmed, and I will happily lead your people where they need to be, under your orders." The glare between the two men, the unfathomable black of one set of pupils against the green of the others did not waver, like two cats ready to start yowling.

Elvira spoke up, wishing she had a broom or a bucket of water to make them refocus. "We need a plan, fool-proof and devious enough that the sky port ground crew does not know what has hit them."

Elvira turned to the Liberian ambassador. "Can we begin to draw up agreements now?"

Okoro leaned back in the chair. "Yes, I believe we are close to an understanding."

"Commander, please have your men bring in a table and writing materials." Elvira faced the commander. "Have you any other concerns?"

"Many, but I am willing to hear your plan." He spoke to the guards outside to bring in the furniture and then returned to his seat. "Ambassador Okoro, I hope you know what you are doing."

## Dallas's cabin

J.R. Dallas paced the small cabin, restless at being asked to stay inside. They had given some kind of sedative, as he had slept past dawn, something he never did at home. Blast these women.

Using her special knock, the madam was at the door, and Brandy let her in. A crewmember guarded the couple, one of her own people. Glad that he was already up and dressed, he thought again about how his every move was watched. It was disgusting, and now there were these Liberians to deal with.

"What have you done with...Dixie?" Dallas asked. "There was some kind of ritual?"

"She is being treated for a wound she received earlier," Madame Elvira said. "I assure you, she is being well treated, and she will be fine."

"Why should I believe you?" Dallas regretted again ever coming aboard this elephantine whorehouse.

"Are you ready to make another pitch?" Madame said. "The Liberians are ready to hear about this new thing you have and how we can all make more money with it. They have the best artificers on the continent, and if you can show them respect, they will listen to you. They are engineers. "

"What is your cut, then?" How had he let himself get connected to these two?

Elvira stared up into his eyes, meeting his gaze with a steely one of her own. "If you would look at this as a business proposal instead of a philosophical debate, we could both find ways to make each other's goals happen on a strict timetable. You are outmanned, Mr. Dallas, you are out-thought, and you are out-gunned."

"The house gets twenty percent." Brandy smiled sweetly. "I told you, Mr. Dallas, that we did not know each other well enough for you to take me from all this, although I might have negotiated a better deal for you if you had listened to me. "

"So, Mr. Dallas, what would you like to see happen?" Elvira brought the conversation back to the point.

"I want to see transcontinental flights," Dallas said, propping his hands on his narrow hips. "I have to wonder why you haven't thought of that yourself. Building a railroad through Indian Country without any military support is not possible, as we've discovered. Without the Texas Rangers, we'd be slaughtered."

"I see, and how would you negotiate with the Dons of California?" The madam held out her hand as if she held them for ransom. "They don't like the British colonies any better there than they do in Florida."

"No, but they like English goods," Dallas said, "and they don't have the shopkeeper mentality to figure out how to make them. You might like to add a few of those chili pepper girls to your...menu."

"I have found those women to be very well behaved and well-worth a premium price when I have contracted with them. I agree that this is could be a most beneficial arrangement. I can provide ships if you will provide helium."

"Out of the goodness of your golden heart, no doubt." Dallas sneered.

"As you continually remind me, Mr. Dallas, I'm a whore. I believe in getting paid up front." Elvira matched his akimbo stance, and then opened her hands as if offering a deal.

"What do you plan to charge per shipload? Let's say 500 pounds sterling. The helium is worth

about what the ship is, especially a ship that would carry cargo across three times the length of this trip...3000 miles, correct?"

Dallas nodded. "Roughly that, 1500 miles to New York, another 1500 to San Francisco."

"One solution would be to do be in partnership, but since you don't consider me worthy, I propose to negotiate a deal with the Liberians, who build the best ships, by far, for which you will pay me, and then I shall buy your helium from my profits."

"And for all this generosity, what would you require?" Dallas asked.

"A woman of high social standing in Texas, wealthy, widowed, educated, and respected, to be my representative, the Belle of Texas."

"You are a hard woman, Madame." Dallas sat in the one chair, deciding that this was no lady who deserved respect. "I don't want your kind."

"Don't you? Didn't you tell my Brandy that she would not last a month on the prairie? That she could not survive floods, droughts, blizzards, or coyotes? I would think that would make any woman who did survive a hard woman. That's exactly the kind of woman I want watching over my interests. I would insist on at least one cruise a month to Dallas--that is what you are calling your capital city, I presume? I could make it an express from Charles Towne or even from New York with the right amount of helium and a larger vessel."

"I could simply take your vessel, gut it, and use it myself." Dallas crossed his arms, stretched out his legs, and crossed his boots. "You can get another, but this would put me in business immediately."

"Yesterday, you might have had a shot at my ship, Mr. Dallas," Elvira said, her hands behind her back, which emphasized her figure. "Today, Liberia has it. If you negotiate with them

now, with me as a partner, there's an opportunity."

"That is not acceptable." He shook his head. "I will not be seen as a lackey of a whore."

"Consider a swap of resources, greatly to your benefit." She leaned forward, trying to distract him. "You would not be 'in bed' with me at all, only an adjunct to my network. Few members of my network are familiar with the other members."

"So you just pull all the strings to make your puppets dance."

The madam sat on the bed, and patted it for Brandy to sit as well. "Lots of buckskin sympathizers all across the colonies don't have the wherewithal to manage a trek across the First Nations, much less to bring anything with them. There's money to be made there, both with indentures for the poor ones, and mortgages for the others. Front them travel and a stake, and then charge them interest for the rest of their lives as they build your new nation."

"You've done a lot of thinking about this." He begrudged his growing admiration

"I have spoken with the First Nations ambassador, Mr. Axe Copperhead," Elvira said. "He is anxious to get those who want to come to Texas a means of getting there. He would like to speak with you before we reach Charles Towne."

"So you work with anyone, not just those of civilized nations."

"I have my reasons," Elvira said, "As native money spends just like any other. My representative will have other reasons--education, health care, work skills. No man or woman should have to be a work slave or a whore."

"What sort of education? Who needs more than reading and cyphering?"

"Think of yourself, Mr. Dallas. How will you know how much money you are making if you don't have it piled up in gold coins on the table in front of you?" The madam patted

Brandy's shoulder. "She'll be an accountant, probably a tax lawyer, eventually, as she is much greedier than your average whore. You have completely underestimated her."

He could see the ambition in the young woman's face. Her smile was sweet, but her eyes were as hard as the madam's in her soft, young face.

The madam continued. "If she had a bit of incentive--say, ten percent of your increases along with a decent salary, you would soon be a rich man. If you added a bit of competition—say against one of my accountants—she would amaze you with her ingenuity."

"How could you know how she is doing?" He could not believe what he was hearing.

"My representatives can, at their careful discretion, allow small notes of information to be released through secure channels. If you really want a view into my business, your Texas Belle can hire Brandy—she has a street name, much less gilded—and let her work for you on retainer. She would provide you with information about my network."

"You'd trust me with that kind of information?" He squinted, amazed at her audacity.

"You'd also know about my business."

"Very quick, Mr. Dallas." She smiled. "Hiring your own woman whom your miners might not realize is as smart as she is, might make you appear a bit weak, but then you'd have information that your rivals and competitors do not have—if you pay enough for it."

"So you are a solicitor as well? He laughed. "Everything has a price, doesn't it?"

"Yes. I've stated mine. What's your price, Mr. Dallas? Your pride or Texas?"

## **Æthographer Shack**

In the æthographer's room, Jonas watched Woz use the various controls. While he seemed genuinely interested in the set up, he was most attentive to the æthographer, who was scribbling on her notepad.

The æthographer looked up, a frown on her face as if the large earpieces were squeezing her skull together. "Word on the æther says that the new Queen's minister has already arrived at the meeting in Charles Towne." She jumped up and laid her earpieces on the console. "I've got to tell Madame."

Jonas put his hands on her shoulders. "No, I'll tell her, but we need to let your people know we have the other guy, now." He waited to see if she heard him. "That'll be a mess for sure if the two of them show up at the same time."

Woz nodded. "The Mauvertons are coming for the ship. Work up a message in Mauverton code that we have the impostor aboard." She handed him the notepad and a pencil.

"The Agency is always listening, just like you do." Jonas said, "Send a clear message to your people, and the Agency will pick it up. They might even pay more attention to it if they think they intercepted it."

Woz put her headphones back on and worked the console for a few seconds. She listened for a reply. "Message received. The Liberians are sending one too, from their ship."

"Good. That should stir things up on the ground." Jonas smiled. "It won't keep them from coming aboard, but it will give them a way to save face and look good for the Queen."

Woz looked around, wistful. "I will miss *The Elephant*. It's been my home for some time."

"I understand that Liberia is offering training to any of Madame's people who want it," Jonas said. "Good, experienced operatives are always at a premium." He looked around at all the equipment. "I'll help you pack up anything you can take along."

"Are you going to stay with Madame, or go back to the Agency?"

Jonas sighed. "I'm going back to the agency to explain about Velvet and to see what I can find out about the local situation."

"I hope I can get some training with the Liberians." Woz pushed her headphones further back on her head. "They make the best stuff, but I hear they don't like white people."

"All I know is that Madame has made some kind of deal with the Pirate Queen, so that all her crew will be paid and given jobs, if that's what they want. I'm sure she'll put in a word for you." He smiled. "Madame wants the best of everything for her crew."

"I hope I get to see you again." Woz winked at him. "I want to hear all your thrilling adventures."

"I would like that, telling them, that is, not having them." Jonas hoped that he would see her again, too, in less thrilling circumstances.

## The Gallery

At the crack of 10 am, Elvira called all the passengers, escorts, and her crew into the Gallery, except for those who were locked up under Plato's care. Some of the clients had just been awakened, and even the smell of hot cinnamon rolls, coffee, and bacon did not soothe their ruffled feathers.

"Guests and crew, I must apologize for disturbing you so early in the morning."

A murmur of irritation and a few grunts rumbled under her voice.

"We are taking you to Charles Towne by a different route, as we have received word that this ship will be boarded at the Charles Towne sky port." She scanned the faces, hoping to find out if anyone else was aware of this arrangement. If so, the emotion was well controlled.

"You will be offloaded in Georgetown, and then taken directly to the place of the meeting, getting you there on time and safely."

More rumbling.

"You will be reunited with your belongings as you disembark. Your escorts are at your service until we reach our new destination in about two hours. At your discretion, they can escort you to the meeting place. In addition to their other skills, they are well-trained body guards."

She waited again, using her most stern voice and face, brooking no argument, and silencing a few of the grumbling clients with a baleful stare. "I realize that this is inconvenient, but we believe that the detainment of *The Elephant* is designed to keep you from reaching the meeting and from doing any serious business there. I have promised to deliver you safe and sound, and this is how it will be done. I leave you to your breakfast."

While the ambassadors ate, complained to their escorts, or took a plate of food back upstairs, crew boss Plato Kewa approached Elvira. "Madame, shall our crew not stay on *The Elephant*? We're ready to protect her."

"Thank you, Mr. Kewa. I am well aware of your talents, and rather than your protection, I have another scheme in mind. It will require cunning and subterfuge. Sound interesting?"

A bright smile split the dark face. "Cunning and Subterfuge are my middle names, Madame," he glanced at the small group of workers standing in the hallway of the Gallery. "And on my crew there are Trickery, Flimflam, Miss Direction, and Surprise. I believe we can meet your needs efficiently."

"I thought you would say so. Do make sure they get a good breakfast, while I outline what I have in mind for the brave agents who plan to detain and search my ship."

\* \* \*

The ambassador from New France approached Elvira. "I would like to take your woman Yvonne back to New Orleans with me, once we have conducted our business in Charles Towne."

"Thank you for your concern, Madame Ambassador. That will not be possible." Elvira did not like the other woman's tone of voice or her sweetness. It seemed out of character. "Yvonne will be treated under my care. It is part of her contract, and that treatment is owed to her."

"But I insist." The ambassador smiled. "We have excellent facilities and doctors trained in France for the people of the new capital. She will receive excellent care, and we will provide also for her sister."

"Thank you for your kind offer," Elvira said, nodding not quite a bow. "It is most generous, and I would especially hope that you will care for her sister. I must fulfill my

obligations to my women. She will be free to travel to New Orleans if she wishes, when she is well. I may even transport her myself."

The ambassador's smile froze on her face, becoming a showing of teeth. "Frankly, I do not trust your motives, Madame Starr. I have heard that she attacked her client. Surely you will end her employment for this crime." She dropped her pretense at friendliness. "I believe you want to put her under the influence of some Liberian sorceress."

Madame also stopped smiling, though she kept her tone even. "I have reason to suspect some other people's motivations, Ambassador, and I intend to protect my employee from that influence."

"Are you accusing me?" She clamped her lips together as if to avoid saying more. Her cheeks turned red against her pale face. She tapped her cane against the floor and leaned toward Elvira.

"Certainly not." Elvira crossed her arms and drew herself to her full height. "You have shared your concerns with me, and in an exchange of frankness, I have shared mine with you." After a second of staring, she dropped her arms and gestured to the hallway behind the ambassador. "Will you need assistance with your personal items, Ambassador? I will be happy to send someone to help."

"No, thank you. I will have none of your people handling my things." The ambassador's tone was curt. "You are not welcome in New France." She turned on her heel and walked away, her silken skirts rustling under her shaking bustle.

Madame glanced at the corridor, but the watchers were mostly involved in getting everyone ready to leave the ship. No one else heard the conversation, one word against hers.

She would find Zulie and make sure that Yvonne was safe. If the ambassador wanted her so badly, it could not be a good thing for Yvonne.

Her party to Liberia was getting larger by the moment. She wondered whose hospitality would be strained by the extras and what sort of reception they would get. She wanted to curry favor with the Liberian ambassador, but now was greatly in her debt with little in the way of the kind of coin she would need to pay her way out.

One more item to add to her list of problems. Did the ambassadors deal with this kind of issue all the time? Or had she stumbled onto a level of treachery and deceit that was far above her own skill level? The next few hours would tell.

Did the French have the military strength to take the Texican helium resource? Would they risk turning their backs on Spanish Florida and Mexico to fight both the Texicans and the Western First Nations, war on three fronts? Surely not.

She'd hoped to place a belle in New Orleans this year, but the New France ambassador would be a major hurdle to that plan now. Yvonne was definitely out. Once under the spell of a hoodoo, she might be susceptible again, and her family appeared complicit. Yvonne would need retraining and relocating to some less sensitive position, if there was such. She wasn't a street urchin to put in a factory, and her family, the Mauvertons, and others would want to pump her for her knowledge of the network. Yvonne was a liability, but one who to be both protected and leveraged.

Four hours to Charles Towne, with luck, at least for the ambassadors.

## Passenger Cabin Deck

The ambassadors disembarked from *The Elephant*, most of them quietly and in the company of their escorts, who were filing them in on the information they had from Charles Towne. California shared a ride with Florida, hoping to make mutual friendship along the way. Most of the ambassadors were calm, some a bit shaken about the change in transportation, but most were concerned to get the meeting and get their business done. Elvira stood by the guest lift, greeting and reassuring each couple as they were lowered to their new transport. Jonas guarded Elvira, while Zulie worked with the Liberians on the ground. The women who were not escorting clients helped with the distribution of luggage. Velvet's body was inside a steamer trunk, to be returned to the Mauvertons when they arrived in at the Charles Towne sky port.

One ambassador, however, was unhappy and very vocal.

The Haitian ambassador carried his briefcase and an umbrella, which he used to punctuate his complaints by stamping it into the carpet. "This has been the worst night of my life. Haiti will never allow you to land in our country, Madame."

His escort stood by his side, "Monsieur Perusse, please," she said, pulling back on his arm. He angrily shook her loose.

"I am sorry to hear that," Elvia said, keeping her voice calm though she wanted to kick the ambassador in several tender places. "I would like to make it up to you at another time, perhaps."

"Never," the man said. "You have jeopardized all our lives and for what? This buckskin balderdash?" The Haitian ambassador pushed his escort back and dropped his briefcase. He lunged at Elvira with the umbrella.

Jonas ran at him from the side and pushed him away, knocking them both down on the floor. They rolled around like two little boys, until Jonas managed to pin the other man down, sitting on top of him until he stopped struggling. The Haitian was taller than Jonas, but he was not used to street fighting.

"You will not have my vote," the Haitian shouted, "and I will have you arrested for this attack." He writhed under Jonas, but could not get up.

"I'll help you up if you are ready to calm down," Jonas said. "Lucky for you, I was here. The Captain would have killed you and been done with it."

Captain Dahomey showed up just in time to hear what Jonas said. "He's right, Mr. Ambassador. This detour has been explained clearly, so unless you cooperate, we will have to assume that you are part of the anarchist plot."

The Haitian cursed in French and several other languages, but Jonas did not move.

"That will do, Mr. Jonas," Zulie said. "I will escort Mr. Perusse to his shuttle, where his things are waiting for him." She nodded to the escort. "You need not accompany him."

The escort nodded and backed away toward Elvira.

Jonas scrambled to his feet. He held a hand to help the other man get up, which the other man refused.

"You will be killed for your insolence," the Haitian told Jonas. "I will not be treated so."

"Get in line," Jonas said. "I think I can work you in on Tuesday." He picked up the umbrella that the man had dropped and inspected it. The point was sharp enough to do serious damage. "I think we'll keep this. We don't want you to hurt yourself."

Zulie pointed an ionizer at the ambassador. "You will accompany me, and you will do so

quietly. You will be in Charles Towne in half an hour, or you can be taken wherever you can convince your pilot to take you."

Jonas made sure to stay between Elvira and the Haitian, who looked at him closely, memorizing his face.

"Irish trash," the Haitian said, pulling his dignity back together and peering down at Jonas.

"Nobody is perfect," Jonas agreed. He stood beside her and watched the ambassador leave the ship.

The escort picked up his briefcase.

"I'll take that," Elvira said. "I'm sure he meant for me to have it. They do not need his presence for a quorum."

The woman handed it over. "What shall I do now?"

"You will accompany me when we leave the ship," Elvia said, "and brief me on everything you have gathered from your client."

"Yes, Madame. I...my things..."

Madame turned to Jonas. "Go with her to retrieve her belongings from the Haitian's shuttle. Don't assault anyone on the way."

"Yes, Madame." Jonas nodded to her, and held out his arm to escort the escort.

Most of her guests were now off-loaded. The last few clients were lowered to the landing field, followed by the Liberian commander.

"The ship has been secured, Madame, with the help of your ingenious Mr. Kewa." The commander said. "I have personally escorted your belongings and your guests to the

ambassador's ship."

"Thank you very kindly," she said.

"Certainly." He smiled, something she did not think he could do. "I believe the Mauverton Detective Agency will be schooled in diplomacy today."

"I am sure you are the man for the lesson." She put her hand on the nearest wall, stroking lightly. "Do take good care of *The Elephant*, Commander. She has been very good to me. How late will you be arriving in Charles Towne?"

"A few minutes, if at all." He smiled again. "Once we spoke with the automatons and assured them that we meant you and the ship no harm, they cooperated and trimmed the ship nicely. A bit of fairy grease does much to make the ride smoother."

Elvira thought for a moment she saw a blue light hovering over the Commander's hat. "I daresay it does."

### **Sky Port, Georgetown, Liberia**

As Elvira reached the ground below her ship, she saw that most of the personal airships had already lifted off with the ambassadors and most of the other clients as well. She would send a message, worded carefully, over the æther to warn them. Even if they did not quite understand, they would be on guard.

Just as she turned to oversee getting the clients packed up, Axe Copperhead approached her. She had no idea what else she could say or do for him, between the attack and the ritual, which had been as hard on him as on her.

"Ambassador Copperhead," Elvira said, "I am so glad to see you. Please be very careful around New France. They may have had a hand in Yvonne's attack."

"What of Yvonne?" Copperhead shook his head. "I am concerned about her going back to her people in her condition."

"Mpenzi Okoro has assured me that she will be treated and cleared of the effects of the curse." Elvira stared up at the tall Native. "I understand that she offered you treatment as well."

"Yes, but we primitives have our own ways." Copperhead smiled. "I'll be tended to quite effectively, I assure you." He took her hand and patted it.

"Whatever I can do, I will," Elvira promised. "Can you contact your people, and warn them as well?"

"I will do so. Therefore, you must also be careful, Madame Elvira. I understand you are returning with Ambassador Okoro." He looked very tired and gray. "I appreciate the gesture of the ritual, but I am most concerned about your safety."

"I will be all right, but thank you." Elvira touched his arm. "I hope I may ask for your

counsel in the future?"

"Of course." He paused. "Mr. Dallas and I spoke privately, a good conversation. I understand he will be going with you."

"Yes, that is the plan. He will speak with the Liberian engineers and artificers." Elvira smiled. "One of my lean and hungry women is going with him to help negotiate. I expect any nation that does not recognize Texas will find helium extremely high priced."

"No doubt." Ambassador Copperhead glanced around the room. "We may not have another chance to speak, so I must ask my favor now," the ambassador said. "My wife is interested in your information network. She wants to know how to apply to be your Cherokee belle."

Elvira struggled to keep her smile while her jaw wanted to fall to her chest. She could not believe he would trust her now. "I would be honored. Does she understand the nature of the network?"

"She has a network of her own throughout the First Nations." He made a crooked smile, rueful and amused. "She wants to supplement her information with yours, and she is willing to share."

"Why would she want to work with me?" Elvira could not imagine a woman of standing in her community reaching out to a whore in another community. Perhaps the Cherokee had very different ideas about relationships.

"You will have to ask her that, and answer to her if serious harm were to befall me." He smiled again. "She is quite as formidable as you are, Madame, and she drives as hard a bargain, but I think it would be a good alliance."

"I would be most happy to accommodate her, if I can, once I leave Liberia." Elvira looked away, not sure how much to share with him. "I may be out of communication for a while, but as soon as possible, I will notify my people to contact you."

"You may inform Ambassador Okoro of this alliance, if you believe it will help your cause." Copperhead kissed her hand. "A pleasure, Madame, as always. Until next time."

*Be careful what you wish for, Elvira thought. You don't know what it might look like when you get it, but be thankful when it comes.*

Three hours to...but she did not know where she was going, when she would get there, or whether Zulie would still be with her after *The Elephant* landed.

**Sky Port, Georgetown, Liberia**

Zulie watched as *The Elephant* settled on the ground in a large field, its legs tucked into its body, and its ears flat against its great head. Around it, like a school of minnows, several dozen personal craft clearly marked with Liberian colors, waited for their new passengers. Each ambassador was escorted to a vessel, introduced to its pilot and crew, and then taken aboard. When all baggage was stowed, each craft lifted into the air and headed south along the sea island coast.

Zulie supervised the offloading, smiling to herself. The Liberian crews would be more afraid of the escorts than their clients. Madame's reputation was legendary. Zulie had been known to elaborate her story, even suggesting that she herself was under a spell that bound them. She had no logical reason to be in love with a crazy woman, and there would be a reckoning, but first, she must see Elvira safe.

Elvira came to her on the way to the Pirate Queen's ship. "Are you sure you should stay here on the ship?" Elvira took Zulie's hand.

"They won't know me from any other Liberian." Zulie squeezed her hand. "We have our plan. I'll do better knowing you are safe."

Elvira glanced around the cargo bay with sadness. She put her hand on the wall. "I feel like I am abandoning her."

"Nonsense." Zulie grinned. "I don't plan to let you get used to being without me by your side."

"Yes, of course," Elvira said, her hand resting on the wall of the ship. "It's been a good run, don't you think?"

"The run's not over yet, but it's out of your hands now." Zulie put her arm around Elvira supporting her, but hurrying in her along as well.

"I mean," Elvira said, "not just this cruise, you were right about that, but the whole thing."

"Let's get this one done," Zulie said, "before we do any counting of chickens. I want to see all the eggs snug in their nests tonight."

"I promise I'll listen to you from now on," Elvira said. "I should have listened all along."

"Don't tell me that lie." Zulie did smile at that. "You'll be ready with the next hare-brained scheme as soon as you get a good night's sleep."

From around one of the shuttles came Sir Winton Randolph, red-faced and panting with exertion, carrying his coat. "Madame Elvira," he called out. "I must speak to you."

Elvira moved toward him, "Are you quite well, Sir Winton?"

"Yes, but I've learned that a man has to do his own dirty work if it is to be done right." He stretched out his arm and pointed a derringer at Elvira.

"No," Zulie cried. She pushed Elvira away as Sir Winton fired. She fell down, shot. She heard Elvira screaming as her world went dark.

\* \* \*

Elvira screamed, incoherently. She fell to her knees and scooped her lover into her arms, pressing against the wound with the folds of her skirt to try to stop the bleeding that stained the Liberian uniform.

Zulie was limp, her eyes rolled back in her head, and her mouth gasping for air.

"Help! Help!" Elvira yelled, "Find a doctor!"

Another shot zinged by Elvira's head, missing them both. She looked up to see Sir Winton wrestled to the ground by several Liberians. He cursed them and the madam, promising his friends would provide him with revenge. The guards dragged him away, silencing him with a blow to the belly.

"Zulie, stay with me." Elvira could not leave Zulie, but they needed help. Where was the doctor? On her way to Savannah for treatment with Yvonne and Dixie. Where were her people? Where was Okoro? The commander?

Jonas ran up to her. "Madame, I'll stay with the captain. You need to get to the Ambassador's shuttle, safe, out of the open."

"Go get a doctor. Find Okoro. Get some help." Elvira clutched Zulie tighter.

Jonas ran to the nearest shuttle. Maybe he would bring help. She had to trust someone.

Zulie's face faded from its rich mahogany to a dark gray.

"Stay with me. I need you," Elvira crooned. "You can't go now."

Three of the Pirate Queen's personal guards ran to Elvira, followed by the ambassador's personal assistant.

"We will take care of her, Madame," one of the women said. "Let us get her inside."

One of the guards slid her arms under Zulie's body while another pulled Elvira away, so they could pick up the captain.

"Let me go with her," Elvira begged. She struggled to get away from the strong Liberian warrior.

"I can't do that." The guard held her firm, despite her struggles. "The Queen wants you on her shuttle immediately. Your friend will have the best of care." She held Elvira's shoulders and began to frog march her away from the ship where Zulie was taken.

In a few minutes she was in Okoro's shuttle. Everything in the ambassador's personal

airship was elegant, rich brocades on the walls, touches of brass, brightly polished, but small enough not to weigh the ship down excessively. Electric lighting made the space comfortably bright without being dazzling. Elvira was led to a sitting area with comfortable wing chairs that were flanked by small tables, discreetly attached to the floor for stability. Their deep magenta velvet looked richly inviting. Elvira's feet reminded her how long she had been standing, and that some rest was certainly required.

Dallas and Brandy were already there, their heads together over some paperwork, a quiet but lively discussion. They did not see Elvira, and she was not announced.

"Would you like to refresh yourself?" The crewmember nodded to the next doorway at the other end of the cabin. "The room is there, and if you do not find what you require, please pull the bell to summon me."

"Thank you." She rested her hand on the chair to steady herself. "You are most kind."

"Just doing my job, Madame." He bowed slightly. "Refreshments will be served shortly. Is there anything else I can do for you at the moment?"

She remembered to smile. "I am quite comfortable. Thank you again."

"Very good, Madame." He returned to the bow of the ship, where Ambassador Okoro met him and gave a few quiet instructions.

The ambassador came up to Elvira before she could sit down, relieving her of the need to stand again so soon. "Welcome aboard. Please ask for anything you need, and we will take care of you."

"Thank you," Elvira gripped the chair a little tighter. "Is Zulie all right? Did she survive?"

"My personal physician is tending to her. While the wound is serious, it is not life

threatening." Okoro patted her shoulder. "We will know more once we get to my apartments."

Elvira nodded, trying to smile. She felt faint, reaching out to steady herself by clutching the chair. "My women? Are they safe? The ambassadors?"

"The reports are sent to my office in Savannah. We will know more when we arrive. The Pirate Queen waved to her servant. "Now you sit here and rest." She whispered to the servant. "I'll find out what the engineer and the accountant have conjured up."

The ambassador joined Dallas and Brandy at their table, but Elvira felt that she could not think clearly enough to negotiate further, no matter the stakes. When tea was brought in, she let a servant bring her a plate of cake and savories, but she could not eat. In her teacup was a tablespoon of tonic, which she drank to fight off the tremors of withdrawal. She filled the cup with tea, and waited for her hands to quit shaking enough to attempt to drink it.

Could she survive without Zulie? Had she just sold out her entire network to a woman, a country she only knew as pirates?

***The Elephant* lands in Charles Towne**

Jonas was glad that the trip from Georgetown was uneventful and quick. He and the Liberian commander watched as Pilot Atwater brought *The Elephant's* belly to rest just above the sky port, dropping the safety lines, but not lowering the long elevator legs. As the ground crew tied off the lines, the belly port displays showed a dozen Mauverton agents armed with rifles, three waiting at each corner. It looked like they expected a riot—good thinking on their part.

Jonas and the captain stood in the now empty loading dock with only a steamer trunk that held Velvet's body.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" the commander said. "Sir Winton and Velvet are enough to give them. We have our people and the madam's to spy on them."

"New York will be after me in any case." He grinned. "It will look better if I bring the body to them and tell them what I know. It will give us a chance to find out Velvet's mission ...maybe Coontz's, too."

The commander nodded. "If they don't just lock you up."

"That's a possibility." He offered to shake hands.

The commander shook his hand. "Good luck."

Jonas nodded to the Liberian guards beside him. "Let's do this."

They locked him in shackles.

The commander lowered the ramp to the roof of the platform. A dozen operatives met them, with only five Liberians between them and taking the ship. Several crewmembers escorted Sir Winton Randolph in shackles, much the worse for his long night. He glowered at

them but said nothing, being gagged as well as bound.

Six Mauvertons strode up to the end of the ramp. "We have come to arrest Elvira Starr." The agent in charge held his rifle at the ready, but not pointed at anyone, yet.

"She is not aboard." The Liberian commander swung the muzzle of his blaster in an arc across the agents. "Her lease on this ship has expired. She is in Liberia."

"I have my orders." The agent glanced at the others. "We will search the ship to find her."

"Only Liberian nationals are aboard this ship. It is Liberian territory." The commander had not lowered her blaster. "You have no jurisdiction here."

"We have jurisdiction anywhere we are hired to go." The lead detective stepped forward. "We are not a government agency. Step aside. We will see for ourselves."

The Liberian commander waved to the guards in the loading dock. "This man attempted to murder her, and shot one of my crew, but we are remanding him into your custody. We believe your Queen's Minister will want to speak with him." The commander aimed his ionic blaster at Lord Randolph. "Take him off Liberian air space."

The guards pushed him toward the agents, who took him away. The ambassador wasn't put in one of the paddy wagons, so the locals might be working for Randolph's people after all. Not a good sign, but not completely unexpected.

Then the Liberian guards Jonas down the ramp, making a show of shoving him with their ionic weapons towards the Mauvertons. He'd warned them that the Mauves would have no problems shooting them, and that they would insist on searching the ship.

The Liberian nodded at Jonas. "Take your spy, too. Maybe you can get use from him.

You will want to question him about another of your operatives, a man called Golden, and his conspirator, whose body you will find here."

Two more guards brought the steamer trunk forward.

The commander continued. "These people are all associated with Madame Starr. We are investigating her, but these people worked for your agency, so we return them to your jurisdiction."

Another jab from a blaster urged Jonas forward, hobbling in his chains. The Liberians pushed Jonas down the ramp, where two agents grabbed him by his arms. Jonas hoped to find an operative he would recognize, but none of them were familiar to him as he had never traveled outside New York.

The lead agent glanced at the operatives holding Jonas. "Take him back to headquarters and get his story."

"Move on then," said one of the agents, punctuated with a thump from his rifle butt. "Let's get you squared away."

Jonas shuffled ahead, knowing Elvira and her crew were safe. He kept his eyes on the roof in front of his feet. He still didn't like the feeling of all that space around him with no balonets holding him up. Down and down they walked, flight after flight of stairs. He figured the Mauvertons didn't know how to work the cargo lift, and that suited him fine.

On the ground, he was loaded into one of several waiting paddy wagons. They'd expected to detain more than just Elvira, but for now, he took the chance to rest. Jonas didn't try to keep track of the turns or twists of the journey, but only wedged himself into the corner and let himself doze as the tonic had long since run its course. He knew the drill as well as

anyone, and he had his part to play. In the meantime, he'd take whatever sleep he could get.

Later the agents dragged him out of the wagon and pushed him into a windowless room inside a warehouse. At the back was a cot. They unshackled him and locked him in.

As soon as the door was shut, Jonas felt his way to the cot, gratefully sagged into it, and slept.

## Okoro's airship

Elvira was finally able to hold her tea cup and take a few sips. She nibbled on a small cake, but it threatened to lodge in her throat.

When everyone else had eaten, and the service was cleared away, the ambassador suggested that her guests turn to the view port, which opened as she spoke.

The guests gasped.

Ahead of them was a huge sphere that appeared to be made of glass, surrounded by airships, large and small...the Crystal City of Savannah. It glittered like a topaz in the late afternoon sun, golden light reflecting and sparkling over its entire surface.

As they flew closer to the sphere, the enormity of it amazed them. It was more than a mile across, eclipsing everything else long before they arrived, and they encircled it several times in the pattern of traffic. The triangular shaped prisms of the surface were mirrored, but how this was possible on such a scale boggled Elvira's mind. No one had anything to say; only their faces expressed the awe of experiencing what few non-Liberians had ever seen. Such floating cities were rumored to exist, but no one believed in them. Yet here it was.

"We shall be landing in half an hour," the ambassador said. "Your things are already arranged for you, so you can enjoy the view as we approach."

"It floats?" Dallas gaped with his mouth open. "How is that possible?"

The ambassador smiled. "Mr. Dallas, we don't tell all our secrets on our first meeting, but you will be allowed a tour, if you wish."

Elvira sank back into her chair, knowing that no matter what information the ambassador thought she might have, or how deep the pockets of her friends or enemies, she

and Zulie, and likely Dallas and Brandy would never leave this space. She had stumbled into a much larger pond than she realized, and now she was indeed a small fish.

At least she was still alive, and they were treated well.

"Madame Elvira," the ambassador said, "I would like a word, please." She walked to another section of the ship away from the common area, another sitting area with a couple of comfortable chairs upholstered in fine cotton brocade in geometric patterns which matched a bright wallpaper of an African design. A soft light glowed from a jeweled lamp.

Elvira followed, holding on to her dignity as well as possible.

The ambassador nodded at a chair. "Please sit and make yourself comfortable." The ambassador poured them each a cup of tea.

"Thank you," Elvira said picking up the saucer and cup. She was thankful that they didn't rattle

The negotiations would begin now, or the actual costs of the deal she had made would be revealed.

The ambassador settled in the other chair. "Are you somewhat recovered? You have had quite a lot of adventures today."

"Yes, thank you for your kindness." Elvia did not relax, and her sense of danger warned to be alert.

The ambassador smiled. "Neither of us is the brass-balled bitch we are reputed to be, or rather, we are, but only when necessary. Do you agree?"

Elvira smiled too, still wary. "Her reputation is the sole asset of a woman in society."

The ambassador laughed. "So I have heard. Has it occurred to you yet that enhancing

your reputation would enhance my own?"

Elvira had not considered that possibility in any way, but her tired mind offered up a suggestion. "Perhaps we could add copper corsets and golden gauntlets to our accessories."

Again the ambassador laughed, her bangles jingling. "I will enjoy having you with me, Madame Elvira. Is your friend as amusing as you are?"

Elvira hoped that meant her partner was still alive and on her way. "Zulie has a much different sense of humor."

Still smiling, Okoro's voice changed, not quite so much the escort. "An interesting name. It is short for Erzulie, is it not?"

Elvira nodded. "Yes, Erzulie Dahomey." Time to sip tea, make nice, and wait for the meaning to be spelled out.

"That is the name of a powerful Iwa, a name for a Nonmiton, what you might call an Amazon." Okoro mixed sugar in her tea before taking a sip. "I believe she was trained in childhood for that role by her enslaved mother."

Elvira shrugged. Zulie could tell her own story. "She does not speak of the time before she came to me, as I do not speak of my past."

"A wise arrangement." The Pirate Queen nodded. "You are, no doubt, concerned about why I want you here, but I hope that you will trust that I have both your best interests and my own in mind."

Elvira searched the other woman's broad, black face. "So what you are saying is that my people are not hostages."

"No, no. You are hostages, in every sense of the world," The ambassador said, smiling as

if that were a broad joke, "but I imagine that at some point, you will escape, or be ransomed, or whatever other cover story we decide is to our mutual benefit. The last thing I need is for you to be seen as my ally."

She crossed her ankles and peered at a large stone ring on her right hand. "Liberians as a group are suspicious of anyone who is light enough to pass for European. That is why I want you to appear in public as being my servant, to do my bidding, and in all ways to appear to have been coerced into doing so. I believe that you have the acting skills to make this convincing."

"I have done considerably worse." She sipped at her tea, glad to have something in her hands so that she did not have to keep from fidgeting. The ambassador certainly knew how to set a meeting and be in complete control of it.

"Know that I will make it worth your while," Okoro said, setting down her cup and saucer, "both in information and in connections that you would not be able to make for yourself. And I will expect the same from you."

Elvira nodded. "I assume you know my contact in Charles Towne?"

"Yes, although for obvious reasons, we have not been introduced." She picked up a dainty biscuit. "I will introduce you to contacts in Savannah, Jacksonville and possibly in Okracoke, when the time comes."

"Until then?" Elvira saw that the time might be a long time coming.

"I am concerned about the effects of the hoodoo on you, Mr. Copperhead, and your women." She glanced away from Elvira. "For the Cherokee, I can do little, but I have sent word to his wife about my suspicions." She ate a bite of the biscuit, letting the information sink in.

"Mr. Copperhead expressed his wife's desire to join my network," Elvira said, setting her

tea down and laying her hands in her lap. "I assume she is in touch with you?"

"She is as formidable a woman as we are," Okoro said, "You will benefit from her information. We have not met, but I respect her."

Elvira wondered if the Pirate Queen had any respect for her...or only for Zulie?

If Zulie died, would Okoro need any more from her? Had she given herself into slavery?

## The Crystal City of Savannah

Elvira stared at the viewport, which was filled by the glittering sphere of Savannah. She feared being on the ground, hated the feeling of being on the dirt, but here was a new world, one she did not know how to navigate. Zulie was always her tether to the earth, but now Elvira floated alone with the person who held complete power over her. She fought her panic to hear what her hostess said.

"In the meantime," Okoro said, "I am restricting each of you to quarters until I can ascertain what lingering effects the hoodoo may have. I also plan to wean you from your tonic, Elvira, as I don't allow that kind of servitude among my people."

"That will certainly give your people a reasonable tale to tell." Elvira drank more of the tea against the shivers down her spine. What had she signed up for, and what other choice had she had? The tiny dose of tonic was already wearing off. She hoped the tea would stay down.

"So far, there is no report from Mr. Jonas, but I expect to hear something when we land."

"And Zulie?" At the thought of Zulie dying, Elvira set down the cup, splashing tea on herself and the table.

A servant stepped forward with a napkin to help her dry her dress.

"I am so sorry." Elvira's voice cracked, her control lost. She put her face in her hands, fighting off sobs.

"She is still with the doctors. She was exposed to the hoodoo as well." Okoro set her tea aside and clasped her hands in her lap. "Do you have any idea who your enemy is?"

Elvira shook her head, unable to speak. She took several deep breaths to calm herself.

"We have heard rumors of a secret organization, one with unclear goals, calling itself The Incognitum."

"I have not heard of it," Elvira said, her voice low. "But Velvet...Velvet said she had a lead on some Mauverton client..." She swallowed hard. "Mr. Golden, I assume."

"Brandy told us Mr. Golden contacted Mr. Dallas for a group of investors," Okoro said, "but he would give no name to those who wanted access to this new technology."

"I have not seen any of the reports from my women," Elvira said, "and Velvet...." Velvet betrayed her, and Golden killed her. He would pay...and Jonas too, if he was part of the conspiracy. "Velvet and Jonas were both Mauverton agents. Perhaps this Golden was as well."

"We have people looking for him now," the Queen said. "Have you any idea what he wanted from you?"

"He said his employers wanted me and my ship, delivered in one piece." Elvira sank back into the soft cushions. "He took some papers from the safe in my office, but I don't know whose."

"Yes," Okoro said, her voice dark and menacing. "A bungled business." Her expression suggested Elvira was at fault.

"Mr. Jonas claimed that Mr. Golden sabotaged the airship—first the comm system, then an attempt to blow a hole in the outer skin. He says that is how Golden escaped, as he could not deal with both. If he is telling the truth, he is an asset to you."

"But I don't know who to believe," Elvira said, feeling bile rise in her throat.

"Be assured, your ship and you are safe, as are your people." Okoro reached out to touch Elvira's knee. "I can't yet vouch for Mr. Jonas, but he too will be watched."

"So the Mauvertons are after me, this Incognitum, and maybe someone else." Elvira sighed and tried to smile. "I always wanted to be in demand."

"Good, then we can see who will dig deep to ransom you," Okoro smiled too, her teeth very white against her dark gums. "Or to buy you from me."

Elvira tried to keep her smile, but she had never felt so hopeless.

The airship slowed to approach a dock that slid out from one of the prisms of the city. The ship docked, servants carried baggage, and the Queen's guests entered the floating city. The reception area looked like a posh hotel lobby.

Everyone followed the ambassador from the ship onto the landing area, and then into a reception area like a hotel lobby. A number of uniformed attendants met them with their baggage.

"You will each have your own private area," Okoro said, "but please stay there until we can orient you to our rather quaint ways of doing things." Each person was taken to a separate room lead by a porter.

Elvira stayed with the Pirate Queen. They took a lift and in a few moments found themselves gazing out at the sunset and the landscape from a window two stories high.

"My view," the ambassador said, "is not so different from yours, Madame Elvira. I am happy to share it with you. Your rooms are here," she pointed to the left, and I am across the hall. Please ring for anything you desire, except," she paused to smile, "more information. We shall speak tomorrow and begin making our plans then." The ambassador opened the door, and let her in. "Until dinner, then."

"Thank you for your kindness," Elvira said, keeping a firm rein on her self-control, trying

to appear merely tired and not distraught from withdrawal. "I hope we will find our visit mutually advantageous." She went inside. She heard the lock engage as the door closed.

Her room was spacious enough, with a high ceiling tapering to a point with the large window turning slowly towards the sea and away from the sunset. A bed, a wardrobe, and a water closet were available. The wardrobe provided several outfits and other necessities. A privacy curtain for the window wall was tied beside a wing chair with a small table and lamp. A few books were in a case by the wall, and a vase of flowers sat on top. She sat by the window and watched as the sun turned the eastern sky and sea pale colors. After a moment, she noted a small bottle of green liquid and a shot glass on the table. A note lay beside it:

*Dinner is at 8. When the dressing gong rings, a servant will attend you.*

*You may drink this, if you require it, for appearance at dinner.*

*I recommend that you wait at least until you are dressed.*

*This is your last dose. --M. Okoro.*

She looked long and hard at the tonic. She was already shivering, despite the warmth of the room, and her hands were shaking. That tiny dose would not hold her another two hours. She reached out for it, her hand shaking enough that she might not be able to pick it up without dropping it. Without it, she could not appear at dinner.

She was angry. She had not agreed to torture, and the Pirate Queen had no right...but she was right. Maybe after dinner, she could ask for something else, something to help her sleep, unless Okoro planned to keep her under the tonic's influence, despite her claims to the contrary.

Elvira would not allow it. She turned off the lamp and got up, fumbling with her clothing.

Her shaking hands threatened to rip her suit. Finally, she lay on the bed, fully dressed, and wrapped the silk coverlet across her, hugging a pillow. She turned away from the table and tried to sleep.

Her mind flitted like her stomach. Had she betrayed her employees? Was her Charles Towne network busy knitting in those dropped stitches to make sure everyone was paid, reaching out to all the network belles about the new plan?

She tossed and turned, each snatch of dream a worse nightmare than before.

At last, she curled up to see out the window. The number of ships circling the city dwindled, like chicks settling in for the night, only a few tiny ones, like gnats around a streetlight, floated in the twilight.

As the night sky faded to indigo, and then to black with stars above and nothing below, she nodded off, only to be awakened by the sound of a gong and a servant woman coming into her room.

"I'm sorry to wake you, Madame Starr, but I'm to dress you for dinner." She pulled the curtain closed.

Elvira unwound herself from the coverlet, and let the woman help her change.

She sat while her hair was done up, trying not to look at the tonic on the table. She was still shaky and cold.

"Ma'am says for me to give you this," the woman said, picking up the small bottle.

"Drink it slow, and then I'll take you to dinner."

The woman poured the tonic into the glass, and held it for Elvira to drink, letting her have only a sip at a time.

The tonic burned, something different from what she brewed, but it warmed her. Her body calmed, her hands stopped shaking, and her mind began to clear.

Her attire was a maroon gown overlaid with gold lace, with garnets on her neck and ears. The mirror in the wardrobe showed her a tired, aging woman. Why would anyone look at her twice, now that everything she had was gone?

"Have the others from Charles Towne arrived?" She asked.

"I don't know," the woman said. "I'm sure they will be brought in as soon as is convenient for them when they do."

Elvira wondered if the Incognitum wanted technology, or just her network? Why did the ambassador need her help, even with the appearance—the fact—of coercion?

What else did she not know that was pertinent to this game?

Would she ever see Zulie alive again?

### **Mauverton Headquarters, Charles Towne**

Minutes or hours later, though it seemed that he had barely shut his eyes, someone grabbed his arm and dragged him to his feet. "Well, if it ain't the Sleeping Ugly! Get your feet under you. Someone's gonna give you a nice kiss."

Groggy and sore in every cubic inch of his body, Jonas fought back, only to get a punch in his gut. "Come along quietly, now, girlie."

Half-dragged and stumbling, Jonas made his way into an office where the local Chief Detective leaned on his heavy oak desk.

The guard left him standing there with no other chair in the room.

The Chief Detective turned to Jonas. "Why are you here in my town, Mr. Jonas?"

"I needed to get out of the City—New York—in a hurry." Jonas stared at the floor, hiding his face in the case that his expression might reveal something—perhaps his level of pain, which would make him look as weak as he was. "This was as far as I could go. I didn't think I could be traced here."

"Yet, here you are." He leaned back, pointedly making himself comfortable. "Whom did you offend? Gambling debts? Someone's husband? The NYPD?"

"The Red Hares Gang took offense at my being in their neighborhood. Someone," he paused to look at the chief, "ratted me out to them as a Mauverton operative. I grew up in Five Points. They took my work as personal insult. They don't much like Madame either."

"So what happened?"

"I was a driver for Madame. The Hares took my load and worked me over. I knew *The Elephant* was leaving for the South, so I got over there and asked them to take me on."

The Chief seemed interested.

"But once they let me on the ship, they made it clear that they knew who I was, and that they would just as soon drop me right off *The Elephant's* tail."

"Why didn't they?"

"I don't know." Jonas knew that was true, at least. He'd bluffed his way in, and he still might be dumped here.

"And the madam and her people?"

"About halfway down, the Liberians took over the ship, and they stopped somewhere and offloaded the women and the passengers, everybody except their people."

"Except you."

"Yeah, me. They knew I was an agent, and one of the women was an agent too, but one of the clients killed her. They locked me up, and then handed me off to you."

"Did you kill her to keep her from burning you?" The chief leaned back in his chair, steeping his fingers.

"No, but I was the one who discovered that she'd been killed." Jonas stared at the chief. "I don't know her agency name, but she went by Velvet on the ship. Her client, Quaid Golden, was a man I knew back when the New York Sky Port was being built—Caleb Coontz."

That name got a reaction from the Chief, though he said nothing.

"I saw them together," Jonas said, leaving out every detail he could about the ship, "and I notified the supervisor that the woman should be warned, but they didn't get to her in time. She was found dead in the client's cabin, and he was missing."

"Missing on a ship in the air. How convenient." The chief tapped off the ashes from his

cigar.

"An airship is mostly space on the upper decks. There are lots of places to hide.

"Why did the Liberians take the ship?"

"I don't know." At least that was true. It hadn't made sense to him, but Madame had much better intel than he was privy to. "The man who killed the agent was trying to sabotage the ship, and nearly managed to blow it up."

"And you know this how? Why did he get away?"

"I had to choose between defusing the explosive or capturing him and get all of us blown up." Jonas swayed with fatigue. "Coontz has a man-kite that he used to escape from the back of the ship."

The detective was not buying it. "What about this woman, the body you brought along?"

"I recognized her as an agent, but I didn't know her or her street name." Jonas found it more difficult to think.

"Her name was Violet Daughtry. She was a good agent." The Chief Detective stood up and went out to the hallway. After a moment, he returned, sat back, and lit a cigar. "I've requested copies of your reports in New York. I want to see if they match what others are telling us." He stared at Jonas for a few moments, allowing a space of quiet to build up around them, showing he had plenty of time to wait them out.

Ten minutes later a man brought in a thin file. The Chief picked it up and began to flip through it, wearing Jonas down with silence and inattention. Jonas noted that the cigar was not Cuban, and the detective's suit was a bit shiny and frayed, not the new suits the New York Chief

wore. His estimation of the Charles Towne office much improved as he wondered why they weren't working for the New York clients.

Jonas was ready for about ten more hours of sleep, lying down, instead of standing, waiting. The fatigue wore on his abilities to observe. He was certain Velvet had set the Hares on his trail, and equally sure that she had not reported it, except to Madame. Should he push the issue here? He settled into a waiting stance, knees flexed, shoulders down, head up, breathing steadily, watching for any movement that might signal the next step.

"Aren't you just a fount of information?" The chief detective stubbed out the end of his cigar. "What didn't you tell us about her organization?"

He had to think what he did report. "She supplies most of what she uses on the cruises...mills, sewing rooms, breweries. I think Velvet reported to her more than she did to the Agency, but I don't have any proof."

"Can you prove you didn't kill the agent?" The chief laid the files on the desk.

Jonas shrugged. "I have an alibi, but anyone who could corroborate is in Liberia."

"Again, convenient for you." The chief detective stood up. "Mr. Jonas, I will let New York know that you have resigned from the Agency as of yesterday." He shook his head. "As you no longer have a job, what are your prospects here in Charles Towne?"

"At the moment, I have none, except to get some sleep and look for work tomorrow." Again Jonas swayed in a wave of dizziness.

The Chief turned to his file cabinet, took out a bottle and a glass. He poured Jonas a shot of whiskey. "I don't believe you, but I have no reason to hold you. Here." He handed the drink to Jonas, who downed it.

The Chief wrote a note on a scrap of paper and handed it to Jonas. "You might be able to flop here for the night. But know, I'll be watching for you."

"Thank you, sir," Jonas said.

The guard came back in and escorted Jonas outside. It was late afternoon, and he had no idea where he was.

"Can you point me in this direction," he asked.

The guard said nothing but pointed to the left. He went inside, leaving Jonas alone.

Jonas walked for several blocks, passing an alley where a man sat dozing on a wagon. As he passed, the man opened his eyes, nodded slowly, and glanced towards the alley on the other side of the street. He clicked to his horse and drove off.

Jonas crossed the street and continued through the alley, stopping every few minutes to lean against the wall and rest. The alley led to another street, narrower and not well-kept. Across the street was a two-story warehouse that covered the block.

A dark-skinned woman came up to him. "Sugar, you don't need to be in this neighborhood."

He showed her the note. "Do you know where this is?"

She rolled her eyes. "You ain't from round here. You called Jonas? Come on."

She pulled him by the arm across the street to the warehouse. She knocked a tattoo on the wide door, which slid open only wide enough to admit them. The building was dark inside, with a partition hiding its contents. The woman stood still, waiting for something. A side door opened a few feet from them, through which two armed women approached. They held up electric torches to inspect Jonas, while keeping their own identities hidden.

"This is him." The woman held out her hand.

One of the women paid her, and she left. The other woman took Jonas by the arm and pulled him ahead to a stairway.

He followed them up two flights of stairs, all separated from the rest of the building, so that Jonas did not see anything that might give him a clue as to what was stored there or what other use it might have. From the second floor, they emerged on the roof, where a private airship awaited them, a sleek model apparently built for speed rather than cargo. A pilot waved him into a narrow seat. In a few moments, they were in the air, skimming the roofs of Charles Towne. No one spoke a word but by that time, Jonas didn't care. He was asleep.

### Crystal City – Pirat Queen's Sitting Room

In the Pirate Queen's sitting room waiting to go to dinner, Elvira watched as the pilot of another air shuttle approached the landing area. The ship matched speed in the traffic pattern, and then an arm extended from the ambassador's quarters to connect the two vessels. Once locked on, a flexible tunnel extended along its length to allow the two passengers to join the ambassador's party.

She could not see who came in, but she restrained herself from trying to run out to greet them. Her script did not include leaving the room unattended. The others sat, discussing plans for a new *Elephant*, or perhaps a phoenix-shaped airship with painted flames on the sides. She only listened, speaking when necessary, conserving her energy.

In a few moments, Jonas was brought in, none the better for wear.

Jonas looked gray, his usual smile flattened between tightly pressed lips. He carried a portfolio under one arm and steadied himself against the wall with the other. He stumbled, but recovered, neither falling nor dropping the portfolio.

"Welcome, Mr. Jonas." Mpenzi Okoro came to him.

Jonas bowed slightly, wavering slightly. "Ma'am."

"Are you ill, Mr. Jonas?" The ambassador asked. "Can I get you something to drink?"

Jonas shook his head. He appeared slightly recovered, his eyes focused, though his hand gripped the chair for balance.

"Please sit here, Mr. Jonas." She found her own seat across the room, so that the others would also sit.

Jonas sank into the chair beside him. His eyes drooped and his head nodded.

Okoro took the portfolio from him and flipped through the files. "Is this everything?"

He raised his head. "I don't know, Ma'am. It was given to me."

Everyone sat, waiting for someone else to speak.

A servant entered. "Dinner is served."

"Very good." Okoro stood. "Please accompany me." She led them to a dining room as elegantly furnished as might be found anywhere in on the European continent.

The guests arranged themselves around the large table. Servants brought in shrimp and grits, fried okra, collard greens, cornbread with butter and molasses, and sliced tomatoes-- a colorful feast.

"You may find our foods somewhat strange," Okoro said, "if you have not visited Liberia. They are safe and delicious, I assure you." She took a forkful of grits with a small shrimp, and ate it without requiring a taster. "Do not be shy."

"What can you tell us about the Agency, Mr. Jonas?" The ambassador asked, between crunchy bites of fried okra.

"They do not give up," Jonas said. "Clients determine the mission." He stopped to take a bite and get a breath. "The Charles Towne office does not appear to be working for the same client as the New York office."

Okoro asked, "Why do you say that?"

"The chief wasn't smoking a Cuban," Jonas said, "and his suit was worn. I assume Charles Towne is not on the payroll, yet."

"Have you any idea who that client might be?" Okoro asked. "This report mentions a group called the Incognitum."

Jonas shrugged, "I have no idea who might be part of such a group or where they are located."

Dallas spoke up. "One of your clients, a man named Quaid Golden, contacted me about a group that is interested in helium and any other new technologies Texas was able to develop, but they did not care about international recognition. They wanted to be silent partners without government interference."

Jonas, Elvira and Okoro looked at each other, cogs slipping into place. They had not shared Velvet's death with any of the clients, including Mr. Dallas. Surely that news could wait until later. They had plenty of time.

"That sounds like the kind of folks who would hire the Agency," Jonas said, to fill the silence. "They want what they want, right now, no questions asked. No quarter given."

"I'm not the type," Dallas said, "to do business with people who don't want me to know who they are."

The Pirate Queen chimed in. "Until now, some of them may have been Madame's clients, but unaware of the depth and breadth of her network of information." She shifted in her seat. "Now that you have involved governments, Madame, they want control. I'm sure the idea is to control you, not to stop you."

*Just as you have done, Elvira thought. And I handed you the keys to the whole thing tied with a silk ribbon.*

The silence around the table confirmed that everyone else had the same thoughts.

Mpenzi Okoro just smiled. "The advantages of an expanded network allow more information to be distributed for better influence as well as more profits. Don't you agree,

Madame Elvira?"

Elvira brought up her best courtesan smile. "It certainly makes more sense to cooperate than to compete. I sense that this Incognitum, by its name at least, does not wish to be discovered, much less to cooperate with anyone else in the information business."

"Then perhaps it is the next goal of our consortium," said the ambassador, "despite its having no interesting name, to find out more about this mysterious group, their aims, their goals, and their backing. Know your enemy."

"Always a good plan." Elvira raised her glass. "A toast to cooperation."

They all drank. Elvira wondered if there was any word on Zulie, and she wanted to leave the dinner as the last of her tonic was wearing off.

## The Pirate Queen's Apartments

After dinner, the servants brought in coffee. Dallas held his cup and savored the smell of the black brew. The others mitigated theirs with sugar or cream, or both.

"I can do business with a man who appreciates good coffee," Okoro said. "What do you drink out in Texas?"

"Mostly mud, Ma'am." Dallas smiled, more relaxed than he had been since leaving *the Elephant*. "I get coffee in Natchez, but we also roast chicory--it grows wild--and we mix them, especially when the coffee gets low."

"I believe this has a bit of chicory in it as well," she replied. "I have a coffee plantation in Costa Rica. Your new technology would make it much easier to bring it back home." She grinned at him. "With a quick stopover in Texas, of course."

"Yes, Ma'am, I believe you would have a good customer base in Texas," he smiled again, "even if it was just me."

Brandy held her coffee with both hands, not using the social etiquette she'd been taught, until the ambassador spoke to her, drawing her out. Brandy told of her dream to go to college and become a financier, eventually.

The ambassador was pleased, and she gave Elvira a slight smile and nod. "An intelligent young woman is a valuable asset. Mr. Dallas will likely steal her from you, if he's a smart man."

"I might just do that, ma'am." He savored another sip of coffee. "Good coffee and a good accountant would take a heavy weight off my mind."

Elvira sank back into her chair at the table, where she held a cup of the excellent coffee, and sipped at it, hoping it would extend the effects of her last dose of tonic.

Could the Incognitum have anything like this technology, or was that what they were after?

A quiet snort came from her left. Jonas had slumped into his chair, asleep. She had placed him perfectly as an operative for the Agency in Liberia, but perhaps Okoro had planned that as well, though the Agency thought him a renegade. On the other hand, perhaps the Mauvertons were playing their cards close to the vest, hoping to get a man in Liberia. They had released him easily.

One of the ambassador's servants brought her a message.

"Good news," The ambassador said. "The public meeting of the ambassadors convened in good order. My representative says that each ambassador arrived in good health and spirits, met by the new Queen's Minister." She glanced at Elvira. "Everyone was present, including New France and Haiti, and First Nations is recovered from his ill health." She stopped again to focus on Dallas. "No real business has been conducted as yet, but Texas's prospects are looking good."

A general sigh of relief circled the room.

Okoro stood. "If you will please follow me, we will soon be in more comfortable quarters, and you can all take your rest." She turned to the servant. "Please transport Mr. Jonas, without awakening him, if possible."

"Yes, ma'am." The servant left the cabin, to return with a wheeled chair and two assistants. They lifted Jonas into the chair. He hardly stirred, but Elvira saw his eyes open for a moment, meeting hers with recognition, and then close again.

Elvira stayed with the Pirate Queen, who walked with her through the sitting room and

across the hall.

"Thank you for your kindness," Elvira said. "I hope we will find our visit mutually advantageous."

"Zulie is recovering from surgery." Okoro's face sagged from its working smile, and her age and fatigue grayed her skin and made it droop. "You will be able to visit her briefly tomorrow, but tonight I suggest you use the sleeping draught I have had prepared." Okoro gestured towards their door, and waited for her to go it. "I will see you in the morning."

The bed had been made up. On the table beside her bed sat a small bottle.

A servant appeared to help her undress and in a few minutes, Elvira was alone, lying in bed. She got up to open the curtain to the night sky, and lay there in the dark, watching the world turn around her.

Rather than stare into the darkness, Elvira swallowed the draught, and rolled over to wallow in her guilt and remorse until it took effect...a rat in a gilded cage.

## Savannah Hospital

Elvira woke to warm sunshine on her face and body. She had no idea of the time, but it was sweet to lie in the bed and bask. Then she realized she was alone. All the events of the previous day came back to her, the moment gone.

She got up, stretched, and reoriented herself to her room, her luxurious prison. A knock came at the door, and when she called "Come," a servant brought breakfast and coffee.

"Would Madame prefer to be dressed after breakfast? I am here to serve you."

"Help me dress first, and then I'll eat." Elvira did not trust her stomach, but the coffee smelled good, and she could probably choke down a bite or two of croissant.

In a few minutes, she wore a simple frock of plaid cotton, similar to the servant's dress although with a more colorful design, and her hair was braided in a coronet around her head.

"Thank you," she said. "When can I visit my friend in the hospital?"

"The queen says you are to eat first, and then visit with her, and she will take you." The servant turned and knocked twice on the door, which opened to let her out.

Elvira sipped at the coffee, black, to see how well it would stay down. After one cup, she poured another and took a bite of bread with a bit of butter. Orange slices and grapes were also on the plate, along with some cream and sugar. She ate sparingly, but made enough of a dent in the servings that she would not have to argue about it later.

When she finished eating and pushed the tray away, the servant came back in. Surveillance was to be expected, so she dismissed it as part of the price.

"May I see the queen now, or is she engaged already?"

"She is waiting for you." The servant pushed the tray to the door, knocked twice, and

beckoned for Elvira to follow her.

In the sitting room across the hall, Mpenzi Okoro stood, waiting for her. "Madame Elvira, I trust you slept well?"

"Yes, thank you very much." Elvira made a small curtsey. "Breakfast was excellent."

"I am glad you enjoyed it." Okoro's expression changed from genial to stern. "On your ship, we were equals, but on mine, we are not. As we move through the city, I expect you to follow two steps behind me, looking down, not acknowledging anyone. I travel with my women, who will also guard you as long as you are directly behind me. They will consider any sudden movement on your part as an attack. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am." Elvira said, looking down.

"Yes, that's the right attitude." Okoro walked past her, and she followed.

As they reached the door, four women guards joined them, two in front of the queen and two behind Elvira. They made their way along the corridor and to an open plaza with a garden of flowers and vegetables lit by skylights. The people bowed to the queen but said nothing, going on about their work. Elvira kept her head down, but glanced out the corners of her eyes. The crystal city was a marvel, and she hoped she could soon actually tour at it.

They came to a lift, rode up several levels and exited to a different side from where they entered. They were admitted to a new area, and then taken to a room where Zulie lay in a bed, bandaged and pale, but awake.

The queen spoke to the doctor, getting a report. Elvira said nothing, as she assumed that she was still in character for any observer. After a few pleasantries, the queen left with two of her guards, stationing the other two outside Zulie's room.

Alone with Zulie, finally, Elvira asked, "Can you forgive me?"

"What for?" Zulie asked, propped up on a number of pillows, her face serious, and her arm in a sling. "Your stubbornness? Your insistence on doing things your way? Or your most unusual way of keeping your promise to take a vacation from the life?"

"All of it," Elvira said. "I've ruined everything—my reputation, our income and sources of information, even *The Elephant* is gone. You almost died. I am so sorry."

"Then I forgive you, as I always do." She reached over to take Elvira's hand, squeezing it tightly. "Tomorrow you can decide whether to forgive me."

"What is there to forgive?" Elvira clutched Zulie's hand. "What did you do?"

"We were always coming to Liberia," Zulie said. "I had to get you away from the business long enough for you to come to your senses."

"What? You engineered all of this?" Elvira dropped Zulie's hand and backed away until she bumped into the wall.

"The Pirate Queen only agreed to offer you a vacation...or take you hostage...to bring us here for a rest." Zulie shook her head. "None of the rest of it."

"I can't believe you would do this to me." Elvira collapsed into a chair, stunned. She covered her face with her hands and sobbed. Even her closest friend had turned against her.

Zulie reached out. "Please forgive me. I was afraid you would die."

Elvira shivered, suddenly cold, weak, exhausted. She leaned over and let herself go, weeping for everything she had lost...and for her one treacherous beloved.

## Crystal City Apartment

After recuperating for two weeks in the Savannah hospital, Zulie lay back on the wide bed overlooking the Georgia landscape of trees and a broad, brown river. Clad in a silk night shirt, she sipped a cup of excellent coffee from the breakfast tray. Silhouetted against the glassy wall, Elvira stood watching the hundreds of air ships that served the city. She seemed relaxed for the first time in years, not fidgeting or pacing, merely gazing. She had been sedated for several days as the tonic wore off, and the Pirate Queen left strict instructions that she not leave the apartment without escort.

Elvira, to Zulie's amazement, had made no objections. Elvira had not been happy to learn that Zulie and Mpenzi arranged the intervention with her tonic, but she had finally come to her senses.

Zulie watched her partner's body for any signs of stress. "Are you planning to hijack the Crystal City?"

"Not today." Elvira did not turn round, her hands resting lightly on the rail that cut across the wide triangle of sky and sea.

"I am holding you to your promise, Elvira." Zulie patted the bed. "You will put your bare feet in dirt before we go back to *The Elephant*."

"Since it won't be ready for a couple of months, I have plenty of time." She wrapped her kimono around her and came away from the window to slide carefully onto the bed. "They have gardens here in the city. I see no need to land just to get my feet dirty."

Zulie stretched out beside her. "I won't insist that you go today, not until the Queen says we are both healthy again." She slid her hand along Elvira's thigh.

"Fat, you mean with all this food they send in. What news of Yvonne and Dixie?"

"They are both recovering." Zulie set her coffee aside. "Mr. Copperhead has taken Yvonne back to the First Nations, to be a sub-wife, or some such. Dixie, or Mrs. Rachel Rutledge, as she is now known, has been meeting with Mrs. Pleasant from California."

"Excellent. Dix...Mrs. Rutledge will make a fine belle." Elvira stretched and then stretched across the silk sheets like a cat.

Zulie smiled. "What do you want me to do with Jonas?"

Elvira rolled over and embraced her. "I don't want you to do anything with him. Only with me."

"I am serious." She stroked Elvira's cheek. "I've assigned him to assist Woz with the æthography equipment."

"That should keep him busy for a while, or Woz will." Elvira took her hand and kissed it. "And then?"

"I think he can infiltrate the Hibernian society here. He's got a better chance to infiltrate this Incognitum than we have." Zulie spooned beside her, glad her partner was willing to cuddle. Right now, it didn't matter if Okoro would ever let them leave the Crystal City. They were safe, and she had Elvira all to herself. The Incognitum would wait, at least until Elvira got bored and started scheming on her next adventure, this time clear-headed and more ruthless than ever.

The End