



Cheése Stands Alone

by Pat Nolan writing as
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Chapter I

Captain Lydia Cheése (pronounced *chase*), one hand ungloved, read the memo with a frown. Her airship, *Orinoco III*, had been grounded. An *Aerosud* cadet stood by at attention in a blue glossy visor cap and the impeccable dark blue company tunic with the distinctive sky blue piping at the collar. Lydia placed her thumb on the bio wax pad of the message board and then pressed her print at the bottom of the white message square. The cadet knuckled a salute. Captain Cheése returned it perfunctorily, and with a sigh. She watched the young woman exit her suite at Doyle House as she peeled off the other maroon porskine glove. “Pshaw,” she said with gritted teeth. G. B. Pshaw was her supervisor, nemesis, and constant irritant at *Aerosud* HQ. She caught a look at herself in the mirror above the marble mantle of the faux hearth as she unfastened the gold frog at her throat and sloughed off her *Aerosud* officer’s tropical dress tunic.

What she saw did not please her, a fringe of auburn hair, brow knit into a frown, grey eyes staring back in anger. Not again, she thought. Two groundings in as many weeks, and her suspension only just overturned. Tossing her tunic onto her grandfather’s *vraisther* smoking chair, she glanced at the stack of documents on the side table. In particular, she eyed the communication she had set aside the day before when she had been too preoccupied with preparing for her flight out of Lesser London to give it much more than a cursory glance. Addressed to her, handwritten in green ink, that in itself unusual, on what felt like a slip of parchment. “Parchment, really?” she said aloud. It was just one of the many come-ons and false leads she had received since she advertised a reward for information as to proof of life of Commander

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Jack Cheése, her father and the brilliant airship engineer who had disappeared many years ago, around the time she had entered the Air Academy for the freshman term.

The slip of parchment, or faux-par, she wasn't going to believe that it was actually real, gave an address on Baker Street, Old London, current day, and specifying two in the afternoon. As it was almost four, she grabbed her walking coat and went quickly to the door. "Impulsive!" she imagined her mother saying. But no, not impulsive, an intuition she felt compelled to act on. The preciseness of the hand that had shaped the words "I can help you" tipped her in favor of the certainty of her hunch.

The elevator man gave a bow of recognition as she stepped on, and slid closed the door grill. A quiet whirr of machinery brought them down to the main floor lobby. Off to one side, framed by potted finger palms, was the entrance to the lounge frequented by her fellow lighter-than-air officers. Collectively they were known as *litharians* and the ships they flew were commonly known as *lithairs*. She would have been welcome at any table or congregation of hale fellows well met as she was known among them for her cutting wit and outrageous pronouncements as well as the sincerity of her companionship.

Doyle House, where Lydia Cheése maintained a permanent suite, was a hostel catering to the Navair trade, especially their officer class. Crews of ships officers, pilots, navigators, drive engineers also known as chemists represented dozens of navair companies doing business at the aerodrome on the far western edge of Lesser London lodged at Doyle House on layovers from continental and trans-oceanic flights. They flew passenger rigids and cargo semi-rigids, rigs and semi-rigs to those in the trade. Their companies were from all over the flown world. Large luxury passenger transports like Rajair and Anglair. Canamair operated both trans-Atlantic passenger and cargo service, as did *Aerosud*, Lydia's employer, based out of Sao Paulo. They offered service to the major ports in Greater London which included Paris, Amsterdam as well as Lesser London where Lydia was now feeling, in a word, ruffled and in no mood for companionship.

The doorman greeted her opening the door, and she crossed the threshold into the torch orange glow of phosphorescent plasma lamps lighting the perpetual brown haze of Lesser London. Her grey walking coat was cut to the knees of the darker grey of her uniform

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culottes. Her boots were pointy, at heel and toe, and made of supple maroon psuedo, matching her porskine gloves, and fastened along the calf by large pearlite buttons. They made her appear taller, and she was already tall. On her head was a jaunty little cap of ribbons and silk made to look like a tiny bird had nested in the soft pile of auburn hair. She strode down the wide granite steps to the cobbled walkway where the carriages for hire and their drivers waited. She chose one at the head of the line and spoke the address on Baker St.

“Would that be Baker St. West, mum, or would that be Baker St East?” the driver asked over his shoulder, whip testing the haunch of the blocky beast of burden, an equalone, specifically bred for urban drayage. Like mules, they could not reproduce and their life span was less than five years. Small as a pony but as strong as a full grown natural equine, they were cheaper to maintain. Unfortunately, as they approached their end date their pace became slower and slower, signaling a reluctance to hasten their passing.

Lydia glanced at the address on the parchment impatiently. “It just says Baker St.” she said as if that settled it.

“Well, mum, Baker St is a very popular name here in Double L, Lesser London to you, and as I said, there’s East and West Baker St as well as Baker St South, Baker St North, and South Baker St North. Of course there’s also Upper Baker St and Lower Baker St. Upper Baker St Southwest. And Old Upper Baker St. If you understand what I’m saying, mum.”

Lydia restrained herself from knocking the man off his bench. “Take me to the intersection where all these Baker Streets meet!”

“Ah, yes, mum, Baker Square.” And under his breath, “should have said that in the first place.”

After what seemed like an interminable time, the plodding near death equalone carriage brought a fuming Captain Lydia Cheése to Baker Square, a rather nondescript roundabout, so not literally a square, from which each of the various Baker Streets radiated like the spokes of a wheel. The driver hunched over, shoulders to his ears, as if feeling the heat of her rage.

She disembarked and paid him. “Here you are, sir, a five Victorine, and not a Regina more. You have hindered me long enough.”

Baker’s Square was hemmed in by blocks of apartment dwellings designed to look like rowhouses, stacked one atop the

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other. They were all the same whichever way you looked. Their sameness caused her a momentary claustrophobia.

A figure approached, steadily, methodically. When it stepped out of the shadows she saw by the cut and buttons it was a constable.

He smiled and saluted her. “Be of any service, mum?” He was a big man. Lydia looked directly into his eyes. She knew what the tattooed lines radiating from the corner of his left eye meant.

“Yes, perhaps you can. I seem to be unable to find this particular address.” She showed him the parchment. “Is there not simply a Baker St without any of the bothersome directional appendages?”

The constable studied the square she held out to him and scratched his chin. “Yes, of course there is.”

“Then please be so kind as to direct me.”

“In Old London.”

“Old London, but. . .” It then occurred to her. Old London, not Lesser London. Old London, underground London, the London that Lesser London was built upon.

The Constable pointed to the iron gate set in the granite base of the monument at the center of the Baker Square roundabout. “Tours to Old London just now closed up for the evening. Too dangerous to go down there now, without a guide, and you being a lady and all.”

“Constable, I will have you know that I served as an ensign at the siege of the Bushwhackers. I know what danger is!”

“Aye, mum, I was in the PanAm Wars meself.”

“Yes, that is evident from your eye tat. You were with. . .”

“The Lost Brigade, yes, mum.”

“You are one of the brave, and I respect that. However, I must to Baker St. I am already late!” Lydia strode toward the iron gate.

“It’s not safe, mum,” he called after her.

Chapter II

At the bottom of the concrete steps joining the cobblestones of Old London the bacterial-sodium lamps lit dimly shades of grey and black as flat as house paint. A man in a dusty worn gray shirt, pants, and shoes stood against an almost identically gray wall beside a weathered gray real wood produce cart upon which were displayed row upon row of bright though somewhat desiccated illegal Valencia oranges. Lydia was about to ask directions when she saw the street name in plain view attached to the side of a dingy gray brick facade. Real brick, not that faux coral that was used now almost exclusively for building exteriors. She'd always been under the impression that Old London was shuttered after daylight hours yet a goodly press of people, all dressed in the varying shades of gray, black, and brown of their surroundings, shuffled past like shadows, busy about their business. Brighter light splashed out onto the cobbles from storefronts, and distantly, music and singing could be heard. There were also clots of men clustered around porn boxes listening to the endearments of courtesans. Others stood in doorways and eyed passers-by.

Lydia proceeded down Baker St searching out the house numbers, peering into alcoves and letting her eye follow the buildings' truncations as the support to Lesser London. At least here you could see some of the sky bathed in the rust orange of plasma light between the roadways and the avenues joining the elevated sectors like the bridges over the fabled canals of Venice.

Her forward progress was halted somewhat by the throng of dingily attired Old London denizens in the thrall of street entertainment. A bear on a chain rolled a large red ball with its feet wearing a red Phrygian cap strapped under his chin. A tall African in a flowing ostrich cape led the furry apparition around in a circle as if he were holding a magnet in his extended hand. Lydia paused to observe, a bit distracted by the unusual show. Live animal acts had been banned aboveground for decades.

As she turned to resume her quest, she was confronted by two coppers. They had been keeping an eye on the crowd and had noticed her. She was out of place. They were young, one barely out of his teens, a tense meager set to his jaw that was trying to pass for determination. The older one with the light fuzz of lip hair spoke. "Your papers, mum."

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Lydia reached into her pouch bag and retrieved her Aerosud identification. She handed it to him, "It's quite alright, constable, I have an appointment."

The copper nodded, "Captain Cheese, is it?"

Lydia narrowed her eyes, and for the hundred thousandth time said, "It's pronounced 'Chase'."

"Yes, mum. And I should be warning you about traveling the depths without an escort, mum. It is very dangerous."

The younger one nodded vehemently. "This lot here would think nothing of kidnapping an upper to sell on the fem market!"

A commotion at the other side of the gathered throng drew their attention and they hastened away. An explosion sounded, a pistol or fireworks. The crowd scattered pushing past Lydia caught up in the fleeing mob. She felt a tug at her waist where her pouch was slung. She looked down to see a young girl slip effortlessly, eel-like, through the press of legs, arms and torsos. The bag pouch perceptibly lighter, Lydia understood immediately that she'd been picked. She forced herself through the crowd after the young girl.

The girl moved away quickly on what appeared to be a crippled leg. She wore a gray crochet bonnet over dusty brown hair, her shoulders draped in a shawl a shade lighter than her hair, and one arm hooked through a large wicker basket indicating that perhaps she was a flower seller.

The pickpocket veered into the alley between two buildings with Lydia still in the tangle of panicked underdwellers. She kept her gaze fixed on the hobbling figure and once free of the mob ran swiftly to the entrance of the alleyway. The already inefficient bacso street lamps hardly penetrated the deep darkness of the cleft between buildings. Indignation overrode her sense of caution and she strode into the shadows. Slowly her eyes gathered the available light and sharpened to the dark. An oversplash of orange from the city above allowed her to discern edges and contours. The young purse snatch bobbed hurriedly toward the light of a parallel street at the other end.

Certain that she could easily overtake the thief, she hesitated for a beat. Someone had reached the girl first. Springing from the shadows a wiry figure grabbed for the girl's shawl. The undersized shape stumbled. The much larger outline pounced on the fallen child. It occurred to Lydia that a thief was robbing another thief, one that seemed a little more formidable than a crippled girl. By then

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Lydia had caught up to them. She just wanted her wallet back. Instead she got the attention of the crippled girl's assailant.

He was a narrow dagger of a man, drawn emaciated face, stubby hard shoulders extending boney brittle arms and long fingers. "Now we have ye," he gargled a mirthless laugh.

Lydia had been taught well. As she flipped forward she extended a hand and placed it on the attacker's rib cage, the momentum and force of her acrobatic maneuver was enough to give her thrust the power to unbalance the man. As she landed she swung her right leg and tapped the man's chin with the toe of her boot at exactly the right spot, rendering him instantly unconscious. She made all these movements effortlessly as if simply slipping an arm through a sleeve or brushing back a fall of hair.

The young flower seller, now unburdened of her empty basket, scrambled around the corner of the building and out to the lighted thoroughfare. Lydia stepped over the fallen man after her. As she emerged into the light, the young thief was nowhere to be seen. Lydia hurried past a young couple sauntering ahead and then turned and hurried in the opposite direction, their startled gazes following her. She glanced across the street beyond the hack stand and the motionless equulones. The girl had disappeared.

Lydia strode to an iron railing on the other side of the alleyway. She leaned over the bar railing and stared down into the stairwell that led to a basement door. The door itself seemed to sway slightly as if it had just moments before swung closed. Lydia trusted her instincts and leapt down the stairwell. The door pushed open easily and once again she was in pitch black, this time with not enough ambient light to gather for sight. She turned back the piping on her coat sleeve and massaged the phosphene activator until the piping emitted a faint green glow like low viz string lights. It was a purely decorative feature of her garment, but it had enough phot, 33 lumens per centimeter if she remembered correctly what the salesperson who sold her the coat had claimed. She moved her arm in a slow arch across the front of her body to illuminate the bare edges of the light's reach. A passageway opened up in front of her. Attenuated by the lack of the visible spectrum, she heard the whisper of shuffle steps ahead. She hurried and almost ran head on into the wall where the passageway turned sharply left. The rhythm of the foot falls changed and, after almost tripping, she was now following steps leading up and toward a light, a pale narrow splinter at the edge

of a doorway. Without the slightest hesitation, she flung open the door with such force that it slapped against the inside wall of a small room lit by the soft glow of an oil lamp. The bear confronting her made her catch her breath.

Chapter III

The large hairy beast pinned Lydia's arms to her side before she could take evasive action, crushing her face into a chest of greasy smelling fur. She brought her leg up and kicked at the bear's instep with the heel of her boot. The thought occurred to her, do bears have insteps? The bear spun her into the middle of a low ceilinged room and let her go as if she were a dancer given a twirl.

Lydia crouched in a defensive stance, the training she had received as a young officer in the Admiralty's Aerocorps returning to her tensed body like a remembered presence. She faced the bear, turning warily, sensing others in the shadows of the oil lamp's mute orange glow. The flower girl sat on a very large ornately decorated trunk, feet dangling in picturesque innocence. She was the one Lydia wanted. About to demand her wallet back, she caught a third figure at the periphery, moving toward her. Tall, muscular, a dark skinned man with a crop of white hair and narrow, also white, iron jaw

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whiskers held his hand palm up in the universal gesture of no harm. On her guard, she turned to keep all three of them in her field of vision.

The bear did indeed have an instep, large blocky brogans, and appeared only half dressed not to mention headless. The head had been set aside on a large colorful round hat box. The bear costume pantaloons flopped like thigh high furry boots next to it. The large man, still wearing the bear fur shirt, had a head of shaggy gray hair and a silver tinged beard that covered his entire face except for the coal black eyes and the red tip of his large square nose. From the way his beard uplifted at the cheeks he appeared to be smiling. The girl too appeared to be smiling, a pale oval face with the sketchiest of features.

And now the tall man spoke. "Please forgive Vlady, he is such a playful child at times." Lydia understood Vlady to be the bear man and that he was harmless. "And Serpina, please return Captain Cheése her property."

The young girl extended the wallet and Lydia snatched it, returning quickly to her guarded posture. She searched the tall man's dark eyes and gauged the frankness of his serene gaze. "At least you know how to pronounce my name. I demand to know the meaning of this."

"No need to be alarmed, Captain Cheése. . . I am Doctor Jean-Pierre Serre-Pain, herpetology is my profession," he said indicating what Lydia now saw as rows of glass faced enclosures in which writhed long narrow beady-eyed shadows, "and may I presume to call you Lydia?"

Lydia swallowed. She could handle two legged creatures, maybe even four legged creatures, but cold blooded no legged critters transfixed her with uncertainty. In other words, snakes gave her the creeps.

"I don't care for any of your presumptions, Doctor, an explanation is what I require in these circumstances." At least the slithereens were behind glass. For the moment. Now the cool, faintly acrid dankness revealed its source.

"Surely you know why you are here, don't you?"

The man she now realized was the African she had seen with the trained bear currently removing the remainder of his costume and seeming to be chuckling to himself over something he deemed frightfully funny.

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“Please have a seat at the table,” Doctor Serre-Pain spoke leading the way to the small table from which the oil lamp radiated its dim flicker of light. It and the vague green light from the piping on her sleeve comprised much if not all of the visible spectrum.

Cautiously, Lydia approached the low wooden chair, tracking the bear man and the young girl and then settling on the African. “What do you want with me?”

Serre-Pain smiled, sitting, indicating that Lydia do the same. “Are you not seeking your father, Commodore Jack Cheése?”

Lydia sat slowly, throwing a glance of caution at the other two. “Yes, I am looking for my father. How did you know?”

“I, like anyone else who reads the personal advertisements in *The Greater London Times*, the faux food gourmet magazine, would have come upon your notice. You thought to disguise your quest by placing a notice in an obscure publication read only by gastronomists, bacteriologists, yoghurt culture specialist, and possibly the pathologically curious. Would that be to keep your search from coming to the attention of IOTA?”

Lydia directed her full attention at the snake doctor. “Yes, you have read the advertisement correctly, and my intent to keep my undertaking from coming to the attention of the Investigative Office of The Admiralty. Since my father’s disappearance a dozen years ago, I have been preoccupied with finding out what became of him.” She took a breath and dropped her guard down a notch. “Only recently have I decided to become more aggressive in my pursuit of an answer. At first I made public notice of my intention. As a result I was paid a visit by the gentlemen in the dark hats from the Investigative Office. Much to my surprise, rather than assist me they sought to hinder me. My employment as a Captain with Aerosud’s passenger fleet was put under a cloud. I have been placed on disciplinary probation for trumped up infractions, my command of airships is under scrutiny and my flights are regularly canceled. I believe that someone high up in World Air Power Operations is trying to thwart my efforts. I have had to consider going underground.” Even as she said it, she realized that she was underground.

“Your father, Commodore Cheése, was outspoken about the abuses of bacto-research by the big air power companies. He sounded the alarm that there were not enough industry safeguards against virulent strains of energy life. He warned of another Chordin

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that might possibly eat whole swaths of the planet down to its mineral base before self-devouring. Unrestrained heat energy from selfdev bacteria is as wasteful as it is dangerous. What if the breach had occurred in a populated area as they believe happened at Sunyata Station? What became of the inhabitants there has never been completely revealed. Certainly the relocation camps have never been open to public scrutiny. If they even exist.”

“Everything you have said is merely idle speculation, the stuff of paranoid conspiracy theorists. My father is a misguided delusional man. His claims are based on nothing concrete and fed to him by those who wish to disrupt Her Majesty’s government— anarchist, revolutionaries, anti-bacterialists and icers, with the aim to undermine the Pax Victoriana that has been in effect these last one hundred and eighty years. My purpose in finding my father is to provide him with a caring safe environment where he can live the remainder of his days free of the anxieties that afflict him.”

Serre-Pain’s chuckle was low and melodious. “You father is indeed fortunate to have such a devoted daughter. But what of IOTA? They may well have an abiding interest in finding The World Order’s most vocal critic. Even now, tracts, pamphlets, voice box cylinders ostensibly by Commodore Cheése continue to circulate and criticize TWO and its cooperators among the commonwealths. If you found him, how could you ensure his safety?”

“I have the means to keep him incommunicado if that should prove necessary. Once his mental state has been officially declared diminished, I can apply to have him cared for by a staff of trained professionals on my husband’s plantation near the source of the Orinoco. We have friends in high places at the palace in Sao Paulo.”

“A worthy project, and ambitious, though not one I’m sure Commodore Jack and his followers would approve of. How can you expect to accomplish this rather grandiose plan?”

“That is none of your concern, Doctor. If you can aid me in discovering the whereabouts of my father, I am prepared to authorize payment of the advertised reward. Otherwise, I must conclude that our discussion is over.”

“Please, Captain Cheése, don’t be hasty. I have information.”

“Then speak up, Doctor. Tell me and I will make the authorization as soon as I can access a World Bank kiosk.”

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“I’m afraid it is not all that simple. For one thing, monetary remuneration is not what I am asking for in exchange.”

Lydia noticed that the young girl had dropped from her perch on the large trunk and was busying herself with packing things into a large carpet bag as if she were getting ready to leave. Also that her limp was no longer discernible. The large man called Vlady was stacking the long glass faced boxes into a brightly decorated double door cupboard with wheels. She could see that there were several such containers of different sizes, some with wheels and some without.

“What do you want, then? My resources at present are limited.”

“I need your assistance. It would require your skills as a pilot.”

“What, you want me to fly you somewhere? Unauthorized flight would draw the attention of IOTA in a zygote. You would be intercepted before the last guy wire dropped. Impossible! Not to mention that I risk my pilot’s license being revoked. If you have information, I will pay with coin of the realm, Victorines. Otherwise, I will seek my answers elsewhere.” She stood to leave though the only exit she could fathom was the way she had entered and a large trunk had been wedged in front of it by Vlady. A spark of panic made her catch her breath. She had been in tighter situations, especially at the siege of the Bushwackers, but then she had been with compatriots of her Aerocorps Intel Battalion.

“Please, Lydia, hear me out.”

She read the earnestness in his bearing and again, despite her agitation, lowered her guard.

“As I said, I am a herpetologist. I deal primarily in the venomous variety, cobras, mambas, North American rattlers.”

Lydia gave a shudder at the mere mention of their names.

“I travel the world collecting specimens for the expressed purpose of making anti-venom to counteract the deadly effect of snake bites. My anti-venom can save lives, Lydia. There has been an infestation of poisonous adders in the Horn of Africa Republic. . . .”

“HOAR? HOAR is a non-aligned state, Doctor, are you mad? It is a country overrun by pirates, revolutionaries, subversives, and worst of all, icers and their preposterous coming of the Ice Age creed. I have no intention of going there and. . . .”

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She was interrupted by the sound of heavy boots clambering on the floor above them. The footsteps were accompanied by loud voices announcing themselves as Agents Of The Admiralty, AOTA, IOTA's para-military enforcement arm.

Serre-Pain was now standing, alert. "We appear to have visitors, Serpina. You know what to do."

The young girl started across the room toward Lydia who immediately crouched in a defensive stance though how much of a threat could a tiny girl present. Distracted for that moment she felt Serre-Pain's hand brush her neck. She turned to focus on him as the greater threat. The blow was entirely ineffectual yet something was wrong. Her lips began to tingle as did her neck where he had touched her. Her legs itched and her vision blurred. She realized she was falling.

"Quickly, quickly now," she heard Serre-Pain say. "Vlady, hold her up. Serpina, the lid. Now gently, gently, lower her down."

Lydia was immobile, paralyzed, her entire body coursed with a fiery itch yet conscious of being lowered into a musty smelling box and a mesh cloth placed over her. Then snakes, a tangle of slithering vipers, were dumped on top of her prostrate form. She tried to scream but her vocal cords were affected as well. She heard Serre-Pain's voice, a soft soothing whisper, "Please forgive me, Lydia, but it was necessary to prick you with a small dose of octopus venom. You will be immobilized for about twelve hours. You will remain conscious but unable to speak though you will be able to move your eyes. Don't fret about the snakes. Since you can't move, they won't bother you though they will be attracted to your body heat. The mesh will protect you. Now I must deal with our visitors."

Chapter IV

Livid, Lydia lay limp as soggy linguini unable to lift a limb. Her anger was causing her heart rate to soar and claustrophobia was making her hyperventilate. To someone accustomed to freedom of movement, her present situation was intolerable. As an airship pilot, soaring among the clouds had become almost second nature. Yet she was confined underground in a vile airless snake pit. Her skin felt aflame with a burning itch as if she were enveloped in a cocoon of raw home spun wool, or worse, biofiber.

She calmed herself with a thought. She thought of her mother. Her mother, Adeline, a child prodigy gymnast who had run off to join the circus to become a trapeze artist, calmed herself before each performance with a breathing exercise. Lydia had learned it at her knee as a young child. She concentrated, regulating her breath blocking out all other distractions, the shouts, the threats, the stomping of big boots on the floor planks, the slithering of scales rubbing up against the mesh of her protective veil. She visualized herself outside the gaily decorated main tent, its multi colored pennants and streamers snapping in the ocean breeze, and nearby the hissing garishly painted steam calliope, the crews of men and women setting up stalls and positioning wagons in the vacant field at the edge of a village on the Normandy coast, a pale sun emerging from the dark clouds and splashing streaks of gold onto the undulating metallic gray waves. Her breathing fell into sync with the rolling rhythm of the sea. Eyes closed, she would have drifted off but for the harshness of the voice pulling her back, a demanding voice.

“Where is she? She has to be here somewhere! Search the place!” It was an unpleasant voice, a voice used to giving orders and making demands, a woman’s voice.

Then Serre-Pain’s voice, soothingly, answered. “Please, Chief Inspector, I beg you to be careful with my specimens. If you would just tell me what, who you are looking for, perhaps I can be of some assistance.”

Chief Inspector? Lydia’s eyes snapped open. IOTA! IOTA was out there beyond the glass. Bright biotorches cast large shadows flickering at her peripheral vision. She could hear the scrapping and

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shuffling of large objects being moved around accompanied by Serre-Pain's pleas for caution.

The woman's voice again. "I will need to see all your papers as well as your captive creature permits."

"Of course, of course, Chief Inspector, I assure you that they are all in order. But please advise your men to be careful. Some of these snakes can become very excitable when disturbed, and some are quite venomous."

That voice, Lydia thought, I know that voice. She tried to move her head but her body would not obey. It had been quite a while since she had heard the voice. Then it was in the Academy gymnasium in her last year there. She was leader of the Aerosud team as each of the big Navair companies sponsored their future officers in the Admiralty Air Academy, Triple A as it was known to most, even though they would be required to serve the Admiralty as junior officers for a requisite two years of service. Once they were released from active duty they would be reemployed by their sponsors. The occasion had been a martial arts competition. The underdog Aerosud team had bested all the others and was slated to go against the Aeroskya team, the favored defending Academy champions. The bleacher seats were crammed with cheering rowdy cadets and high officials from all of the competing Navair companies. Their top combatant was a tall blonde woman with high cheek bones and narrow intensely electric blue eyes. Everyone who had gone up against her had been resoundingly defeated. The Aerosud trainer, Master Mo Han Yan, had more or less hinted that they resign themselves to a silver medal in the competition.

Lydia remembered stepping to the mat to face her. The hubbub of the crowd settled to a low murmur as their names were announced, and finally, after four years, they finally got hers right. That was a victory in itself. As she circled her opponent, taking her measure, looking for the opening, she was taunted by the blonde woman with the merciless eyes. That voice, those same arrogant tones, belonged to the same woman. Her name was Karla Kola.

Chief Inspector Karla Kola of the Investigative Office of The Admiralty. When they were both assigned their compulsory service, Kola had been given a post in the Investigative Division at headquarters in Greater London. Ensign Lydia Cheése had been posted to Alamo Station in Greater Houllas, in the Republic of Texas, capital of the United Slave State Republics. Her cover was

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Transportation Officer, in charge of the dirigible pens as well as securing modes of ground transportation for the Embassy. In reality she was a junior intelligence officer. ROT, as the Republic was known, and the USSR were not affiliated with TWO, The World Order.. They were responsible for the hostilities that had led to the PanAm Wars. She was lucky to be alive after the siege of the Bbushwhackers.

“Where is the woman?” that same voice demanded.

“I’m sorry, Chief Inspector, I’m not sure I know what you’re talking about.”

“She came to an appointment at 221B Baker Street. This I know.”

“Excuse me, who? This is 221C, B is upstairs and over one.”

“Lydia Cheesecake!”

“Cheesecake? You’ll see that we have no cake here. Only my collection of herpetological specimens. We were just packing up my samples. I have an engagement in Old Orleans and it will take a few days travel what with my wagon and equipment.”

“You keep snakes? What useless creatures. What can you possibly do with them?”

“I extract their poisons.”

Lydia detected hesitance in the pause.

“And these poisons, you use them how?”

“I use it to make anti-venom medicine. I milk them of their poisons.”

A gruff voice interjected, “You must have to sit on a very tiny stool, then.” A titter of laughter spread through a number of the assembled agents.

“Enough, Cogan. Have your men completed their search?”

“Yes Guv, everything except for the large trunk in the corner.”

“Careful, please.” It was Serre-Pain. “That contains the Marimba mamba, even more venomous than its black relative.”

Lydia could see the shadow of the torchlight pass over her. Then the lid slapped shut. She was trapped in a box with the most dangerous snake in the world and there was nothing she could do about it.

“Nothing but snakes in there, Guv, big ‘uns.”

“Interesting. I see by your papers you are proprietor of Madame Ophelia’s Ophidiarium and Traveling Medicine Show.”

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“Yes, chief inspector, we are, my associates and I, an educational enterprise, traveling the countryside and providing education and entertainment. I am Doctor Jean- Pierre Serre-Pain, at your service.”

“Doctor Pain, is it?”

“Yes, it is pronounced *payn*, the *n* is barely vocalized. It means bread in my native language.”

“And in World Wide Standard it means exactly what it says, Pain. Tell me, Doctor Pain. Have you ever been bitten by your poisonous pets?”

“Yes, I have several times.”

“Yet you are still alive.”

“Fortunately I had the anti-venom at hand. Or I was very lucky.”

“I would think you would need to be more than just lucky with these lethal overgrown worms.”

Chapter V

L ydia awoke, eyes throbbing, temples pulsing, moaning through the dry stickiness in her throat. Even her eye sockets registered pain. And shifting on her back, her hips, her knees, as she pulled them in, warned her, creaking with ache, to be more tentative about her movements. It seemed safer where she had come from, a silky wispy world of subdued light, a tangerine streak on tattered clouds hovering over a severe dark blue horizon. A woman, parasol held over her head, dressed in a shimmering pearlescent tutu skipped along the ledge of a tall building overlooking the acute angles of a pastel cityscape vying with the colorful atmosphere. It could have been London except for the throbbing green of jungle beyond so it was probably São Paulo. A man in a white tunic with gold epaulets of the Admiralty Medical Corps stood with his back to them. He and the woman with the parasol. Who was he? Who was she?

A large rectangle of light hovered nearby and she turned her head toward it. It was a window set into the severe slant of an attic

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room. Now she was aware of the vague itching of her legs, her torso, into her armpits and around her breasts. She scratched at the tiny tingles of pain on her arm and cleared her throat again. She blinked, focusing on the light at the window. It was maddeningly indistinct. A shadow crossed the brightness and she tracked it, her head heavy as lead and painfully molten as she moved it.

“She’s awake” a high voice spoke and was answered by the scrape of a chair across a floor.

A taller shadow joined the original one accompanied by a bright object from which she felt the need to shield her eyes. Sensation returned to her body and she struggled against her covering.

“There, there,” a voice spoke soothingly, “let’s untangle you from the quilt.”

She stared at the gray bearded dark face uncomprehendingly, panic joining her renewed sensitivity. She tried to sit up but her body protested. Dimly, it was a familiar feeling, but the circumstances were shrouded in insubstantiality. Her self-awareness was missing something. Who was she?

The dark face frowned, the light source that no longer bothered her as much held closer to her face.

“Lydia? Lydia Cheése?”

It was clear he was speaking to her. Lydia was a name, her name perhaps. She tried answering but her tongue wouldn’t listen to her. It rattled against her teeth and allowed guttural air to pass unaffected.

“Serpina,” the dark face spoke, “Fetch me my bag, quickly.”

The urgency in the voice alarmed her. She struggled to sit up in the bed and managed it. The dark arms belonging to the dark face assisted.

“ Lydia, it is Doctor Jean-Pierre Serre-Pain, Lydia, how are you feeling?”

She said the word this time, “Pain.”

“I understand, yes, that’s to be expected. You are experiencing nerve shock from the venom. But it was a very low dosage and you will recover.”

The smaller shadow returned. “Good, now Serpina, find Vlady and tell him to begin loading the barge immediately.”

Chapter VI

The River Loire lapped at the stone quay where the barge rocked gently in the wake of passing river traffic. In the harbor copper hulled transport ships bobbed at anchor. Clouds like a mountainous gray escarpment over the expanse of sea further out provided the backdrop for a horizon hyphenated by the oblong shapes of Navair traffic. Lydia, wrapped in a dark blue carriage cape with the hood pulled close around her face, struggled with her still reluctant muscles, putting one foot in front of the next. Serre-Pain hurried at her side and indicated the stone stairway down to the large barge moored at the quay. Serpina laid hold of her other arm as she swayed looking down.

The large man called Vlady hopped among the stacks of tarp covered containers on the deck of the barge securing them with ropes. He glanced up and gave his master a nod to indicate that things were proceeding as planned. Lydia turned her head back to the street they were leaving, fretful, as if she had left something behind. She had no past thus far, the hasty steps across the acid eaten cobble of Vieux Quartier Nantes accompanied by the furtive and cautious snake doctor, collar of his great coat pulled up around his ears. As if to get some sense of bearing she glanced at the street name, a corroded brass plate affixed to the side of the column leading to the quay, *Boul Verne*. The name like a shadow flitted away as she returned her gaze to the path ahead and her future. Ever since awakening in the attic bedroom she had been trying to reorient herself. It was difficult at first since she had still to get a grip on who she was. And then as if a mist thinning, but selectively with whole areas of identity obscured, she began fitting the pieces together.

Her name was Lydia Cheése, pronounced “chase,” and the butt of hilarity practically her entire life. She’d answered to it when the doctor spoke it. She was a senior pilot, captain for the Aerosud fleet of luxury airship liners. She was married to. Wait. She was married. Of course. To Seignior Professario Cornado de Belize Gutman, a member of the royal court in São Paulo. Nado. How long had it been since she’d seen him? Six months. Longer. Easily. But that was not so unusual. He was often ensconced at his research farm near the headwaters of the Orinoco. And she, even though she could have taken her place at his side as Doña Lydia de Belize Gutman-Cheése, loved to fly. As a child she had been fascinated by stories

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of the Admiralty Air Corps told by her father, Commadore Jack, and her grandfather, Harvey Thomas, stories about her great grandfather and hero of the First World Pandemic, Pandem I, in which nearly a quarter of the world's population was wiped out by the persistent Black Mold virus. Colonel Bartholomew Cheése had been an army doctor on the front lines of the scourge that swept the world. Her ambition was to emulate and follow in the footsteps of her illustrious, and notorious, ancestors. And, yes, it was because of her father that she was in her present fix.

Mother always said that Lydia's father was a soft-headed idealist. But what of mother's life choices? Give up a promising career as a ballerina to become a trapeze artist in a flea bitten French circus? She had to face it, both parents were a little loony. And she had tried so hard to be normal. First as an air cadet, then her tour of service with the Admiralty Air Corps, her marriage to Nado, and her employment with Aerosud, thanks to Nado's sister, La-la, and her influence at the Brazilian Royal Aeronautic and Science Society. She would not allow herself to be a rogue as her parents had been. She would fly the course according to the flight plan. It was those odd instances of impulsive mischievousness that led her to worry about her self-control and brought her to the attention of her superiors, that and her intractability in the face of coercion even when confronted by her own error. She did not like to be wrong. Or be told what to do.

Chapter VII

Lydia counted two days passed in confinement on the barge slowly being hauled up the River Loire toward Older Orleans. She could view from the round ports on the barge cabin the undulating hillsides shimmering with tentative purple hues of biocrops still struggling to take root long after the Great Mold Devastation early in the previous century. There were dead spots that would never regenerate, she knew, yet the Commonwealth spent untold Vicotorines in trying to regenerate vast areas of the continent that had been sanitized in a misguided effort to eradicate the Black Mold. The lethal unproven bactophagic bug did eradicate the black mold and large swaths of the Northern Hemisphere's flora down to mineral soil as well. It was her great grandfather who had pioneered the lactobacto that brought the bacterial scourge to an end. She remembered that one of her biostory professors in Pandem 101 at the Academy had said. "After Darwin came Mendal, and then the whole world changed."

A pale haze hung low over the self-pollinating fields, the bee population almost nonexistent at this latitude. Tank farms and spinning turbines blazoned with the ubiquitous Freud Werke logo dotted the expanse. An old wood pulp powered steam six wheeler hauled the barge along the towpath from one lock to another on their slow progress up the river. They were in a line of barges and boats being pulled along by a variety of steam powered mules, some with the standard bio turbines or the newer bio batteries. All, loaded with wares, performers and sightseers, were headed for the annual Victorianaissance Festival in the old regional capitol.

Madame Ophelia's Ophidiarium and Traveling Medicine Show would be participating in the festivities. Lydia tried comprehend just what Doctor Serre-Pain was suggesting. When she first felt completely conscious in the darkened cabin after the venom had left her system and had regained her wits about her, he had been there to calm her and to explain her predicament. She had struggled at first but both Serre-Pain and Serpina were able to hold her down as the snake doctor, his soothing hypnotic voice earnest, convincing, had explained that she was now a fugitive. IOTA had broadcast an all points fugitive alert on the coney frequencies for one Lydia Cheése, Aerosud Airship Captain, also known as Doña Lydia de Belize Gutman-Cheése. They were monitoring all the NavAir

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terminals leaving Greater London as well as roadways, ports, and borders. It was imperative that she remain incognito until they had passed the next lock. And the inspection station, ordinarily a minor provincial obstacle easily bribed to look the other way, was swarming with Agents of IOTA. She really had no choice but to pose as Madame Ophelia if she did not want to be found out. Of course, she could refuse and she would be arrested, as would he and his associates, the snakes impounded and undoubtedly destroyed. They would all be taken off to Rouen for questioning. Nobody wanted to go to Rouen, even for the cathedral and the fact of Flaubert, as it was the central headquarters of the Admiralty's World Intelligence Tactical Services and home of the infamous Beau Vary Interrogation Center, the BVIC, where all the dissidents, rebels, radical icers, doomers, and bio insurrectionists were held, and from whose confines very few left alive.

Justice under the Admiralty was the removal of obstacles to a smooth operation in the Clockwork Victoriana Commonwealth, and of its client and aligned states. One of those obstacles was her father, Commadore Jack Cheése, the outspoken ex-Admiralty Officer, vocal critic of the bio corporations and the nav industry, questioning the validity of the Holoqueen, and the succession to the throne by the Rejuvenates, and those who sailed under the black flag of IOTA.

Lydia knew that. She was a citizen of the Empire of Brazil, and although the Empire was one of the non-aligned nation states, their security apparatus and IOTA worked to each other's advantage. In other words, she couldn't count on the Empire's intelligence service, the Royal Intelligence Bureau, the RIB, also known as the Liège, to get her out of this fix.

They had fed her because she had to regain her strength and because she was ravenous. She'd raised an eyebrow at the crude unprocessed nonsterile comestibles grown in natural organic materials. She had balked at first, remembering her first contact with unprocessed native grub for a festival for the villagers at Nado's research station at the source of the Orinoco. The retching revulsion at the smell, the vomiting and cramps afterwards, all for the sake of diplomacy and propriety. The fare on board the barge was not as repellent and certainly much more flavorful than the bland biomeal that was an accepted standard for a civilized Victorian cuisine. It took some getting used to and she knew she would have to get

a thorough probiome purge at the first opportunity. But it gave her time to think. And to observe. And plot her escape.

Chapter VIII

L ydia not only had to escape the captivity of Serre-Pain's snake show, but she also had to elude the notice of IOTA's spies and informants she would undoubtedly encounter in the occupied countryside of Former Burgundy now under direct grip of Greater London. Her resources were limited. Her friends were mostly across the corrosive Atlantic on another continent in the uberburbs of Amazonia. And they were all intellectuals. They certainly could be counted on to write letters and demand her release from Admiralty custody, but beyond that, their activity did not venture far from the comfort of their domed tropical bubble.

Lydia was the adventurous one, commanding double hulled luxury superships, flying to exotic locations such as Neumonrèal, the intellectual capital of the Joul Republic, the wild ocean coast of Newer New York and the Jersy badlands beyond, Alta Morocco, and of course the popular Islands of Birds and Bees with their lush exotic interior jungles of pre-Dev flora and fauna. Winged creature had

been steadily declining in the northern latitudes if one were to believe the Ice Age prophets of doom. Flying insects and the birds that feed on them were scarce. The poles were cooling, they said, the icepack thicker and creeping down the latitudes from the frost encased wastelands.

For most of her youth at prestigious private schools in Rio, the exclusive enclaves of Lisbon, and in residence at the family home in Amazonia, she had never had to experience the discomfort of prolonged cold. And only upon her enrollment as a cadet in the Admiralty Aerocorps Academy, the AAA, did she suffer bitter mornings on the parade grounds of the Hansiatic Campus, coming and going to classes, bracing against the gusts of frozen cinders and ash blown by fierce winds off the Baltic. She'd had to acclimate as well to the numbing cold of the upper atmospheres during pilot training in ancient unheated helium dirigibles. It was merely the condition of the northern latitudes she knew, and she had come to appreciate the vigor that brisk weather often initiated by the nip in the air, if for no other reason than to find some place warmer. She would always be a Glosud, or a lowcator, the warmth of days expected almost year round as opposed to a Glonor, or upcator, if you were of a vertical rather than a horizontal persuasion, and as they had taught in the Academy, *Top Down Is The Only Way*.

She had been warned not to seek her father. Still she persisted. She would bide her time, she decided, until the opportunity arose to make her move. Now they were approaching the locks and the inspection station and positioned next in queue. Serre-Pain had brought Serpina with him. From an oblong box they removed a mass of diaphanous material glistening with sequins shaped like half-moons, stars, and of course coiled snakes, and held it up for her to see.

“If you are to be Madame Ophilia you must dress the part.” Serre-Pain gave a slight smile, one that Lydia recognized, in the few days she had spent in his presence, as his ironic smile. She had the opportunity to get a closer look at the chief of her captors, an almost ageless African with the grace of wisdom whose dark skin was creased and scarred. Once she resigned herself to the fact of her abduction she realized that she had nothing to fear from him. She admired instead his calm demeanor and his honest straightforward judgements. In exchange for her help as a pilot, he would provide

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her with the means to contact her father and perhaps precipitate a reunion.

Everything was in flux he had explained. It would require the right circumstances and timing. Once the festival was over in the next few day they would be in touch with the LBFS, League bousculer française du sud, the anti-Victorian rebels, who would guide them on the next leg of their journey through the Massif Central. In the meantime, she had to dress the part and he would leave Serpina to help her on with the Madame Ophelia costume.

Serpina's hostility was not disguised. The young flower girl no longer seemed as young or as girlish in a loose fitting rust colored rough shirt and dark trousers of a heavy canvas material, definitely not bugweave, whose bottoms were rolled up at the ankles above a pair of wooden sabots. The girl's hair, close cropped and accentuating the shapeliness of her head, was blond enough as to be almost white and exposed her tiny shell-like ears. Her pale blue eyes narrowed in impatience as Lydia removed her outer garments. She smiled a thin lipped smile, tongue flicking out in sadistic pleasure, when the diaphanous chiffon caught in Lydia's luxuriant though disheveled red tresses, yanking it roughly down along the shoulders.

The musty perfumed scent of the dress made Lydia sneeze as she pulled the sleeves down to her wrists and gave herself a cursory glance. The spangled costume had obviously belonged to someone a size larger than her, and reminded her of the times she dressed up in her mother's old gowns as a child.

"What happened to the original Madame Ophelia?" she asked as she flounced the skirt and adjusted the waist.

Serpina seemed reluctant to answer, averting her eyes from Lydia's questioning look. She had reached into a round hat box to extract a large dark wig. "She is dead," she muttered finally, twisting Lydia's hair in a colorless scarf and tying it up at the top of her head to allow the big hairpiece to fit over it. Her slender fingers expertly tucked stray strands under the bejeweled headpiece and she stepped back to examine her handy work.

"Oh," Lydia said, "How did she die?"

Serpina's lips tightened in a half smile grimace, a mischievous sparkle to her blues. "Snake bite."

Lydia shivered, looking around and over her shoulder for any signs of slithereens.

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Serpina opened another larger hat box, this one with little holes in the sides and top, and set it next to Lydia. Coiled inside the box was a large headed python. “Madame Ophelia is never seen without her snake, Ophy.”

Lydia drew back with an intake of breath, the tension of her body making her shake. “No,” she gasped, “I can’t, I can’t!”

Serpina’s grin was diabolical. “Ophy, like Madame Ophelia, is dead.” She picked up the coils of snake skin and held it out. “He is stuffed with wool and weighted with sand.” She uncoiled a length near the head. “It is against the law to have human endangered animal interactive displays. According to the Endangered Animal Autonomy Act of Pax Victoria 130, all animals under the jurisdiction of the Clockwork Commonwealth are entitled to the dignity of their nature and shall not be deprived of that dignity by their interaction with humans.”

“Of course, so right!” Lydia cringed as the dummy snake was laid around her shoulders, the large head draped above her left breast. She was surprised by the weight and the peculiar clamminess of the skin exuding a rather moist earthy odor. Trying to get comfortable with the idea that she had to masquerade as a snake goddess to pass station inspection, she breathed a sigh to relax, taking a closer look at the imposingly powerful shape and intricate patterning of the scales of the python’s head. The large glistening orbs of its eyes, luminescent amber marbles bisected by vertical irises like cold cruel otherworldly suns, rolled awake. A thin naked tongue slithered out from the front lips and curled toward her, sensing the heat of her panic.

Chapter IX

Serpina was quite a practiced liar, and practical joker. Her laugh, a shrill whinny, was playful yet dangerous. Lydia had to reassess her assumptions about the young woman. Nor was she very talkative, and often inobtrusive as if she could make herself invisible. Orphy, the python, was kept soporific on a steady diet of who knows what, Doctor Serre-Pain didn't specify or explain after he had rushed into the cabin at Lydia's scream and had once again soothed her nerves with his calm, hypnotic voiced assurances, gently patting the blood back to her cheeks. His disapproving frown had caused Serpina to pout and after a long deliberate silence to mutter a reluctant "sorry." Lydia would not have to interact with the other snakes, Serre-Pain swore, with the exception of Orphy, and then only on briefly while they were at the festival.

The inspection official and two sinister looking men in black hats had roamed over the barge examining the cargo, and when they came into the cabin, stared wide eyed at her propped up in one of the bunks with the python wrapped over shoulders. Her terrified look might have suggested an otherwise haughty imperious annoyance at the intrusion. The station inspector apologized profusely, and the IOTA agents, not in the habit of showing deference to the general public, dropped their gazes awkwardly.

Once past the inspection station and well up the Loire River approaching Oldest Orleans, the doctor had Vlady bring in a big trunk into the cabin. She had not seen much of the large man on their journey up the river. He spent most of his time on the deck of the barge with Serre-Pain. In the light of day, without the bear suit, he was still an imposing figure with a thick mane of steely gray hair that hung down to his shoulders. His dark eyes seemed to laugh as did the large white beard punctuated by the red dot of an imbiber's nose. There was something unsettlingly familiar about his manner toward her.

"We have to change your attire," Serre-Pain was saying, "Your fashionable dress will make you stand out as a privileged Victoriante, especially where we are headed. In the trunk you will find clothing that might fit you and conceal your identity. Even if where we are going is technically outside of IOTA's jurisdiction, they have spies and informers everywhere. It is important that we avoid any hint of suspicion."

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Serpina stood back as Lydia lifted the heavy lid. The blouses befitting a snake priestess were laid out in layered trays, billowy sleeved embroidered with flowers, birds, animals, and snakes. Colorful skirts, long tasseled and tiered, none of which she felt she could wear with any conviction. Nor was it bioweave but actual antique cotton and silk. And could she ever convince herself to don someone else's underwear? Pulling away another tray, she uncovered on the bottom a pair of folded trousers much like Serpina was wearing, possibly wool by the feel of the material, and a robust rust fabric shirt with a wide collar, two items she thought she could live with. There were also several pairs of spangled gold slippers that didn't appear to be made for walking.

She pulled her hand back quickly when she felt under them. And she looked closer with Serpina peering over her shoulder and drawing a breath. For a moment she thought that it might be another of Serpina's tricks. Then she made out the sleeve and lapels. An overcoat. But one of snakeskin. Dark mottled scales outlined the sleeves, large turned back cuffs lined with dark blue satin, the three quarter length of the coat ending with a slight upturn at the skirt and fitted with large slant pockets. The row of ovoid buttons were of a faded amber. And Lydia recognized them. Orphy had an identical pair. Holding it out at arm's length, the scales seemed to undulate, tricking the eye with their meandering pattern. The coat lining was also a dark blue satin. A faded label sewn beneath the rear collar read SA I E RO and spoke of its antiquity. "This is gorgeous!" Lydia exclaimed in spite of herself.

The yoke fit comfortably across her shoulders as she shrugged into the coat, the sleeves extending a little ways past her wrists, the hem, past her knees. She was surprised, expecting it to be heavier. Her hand in the right pocket extracted a heavy dark blue cotton scarf. The left pocket was empty although it was shaped as if some object had had a permanent residence there. Lydia pulled on the lapels pleased by the way the coat fit. She felt something hard nudge under her left breast. Inside she found the pocket and the narrow object protruding from it. Throwing open the coat she extracted a long ornate double blade stiletto.

Serpina nodded her head, looking at the gleaming blade admiringly. "The fangs," she said.

Chapter X

The streets of Oldest Orleans were filled with rubble, dust, debris, and choking air. The Victorianaissance Faire was held in arcades along the perimeter of Place D'Arc. Outside the walls of the old city, in Older Orleans, vapors from the bioturbines of the factories warped the air adding a gloomy orange pall over the rooftops and the refracted rainbow sparkles of larger particulates gleaming like minor stars. Serre-Pain always staged his performances at dusk when the shadows were long. One of the Medicine Show wagons converted to a stage with a proscenium. At the back behind a red velvet curtain was a narrow antique settee upon which she was obliged to lounge with the coils of Ophy across her shoulders for several excruciating minutes while she was introduced as the descendant of an ancient Minoan queen who was in possession of the secret recipe for an antivenom elixir. Once the pitch was made, Serre-Pain would begin his lecture on the fascinating history and myths of snakes, and the reason snakes were believed to be immortal. By then the curtain had come down and Serspina would come to get Orphy off her neck.

In the side closet Lydia changed out of her priestess garb and donned the snakeskin coat, wrapping the dark blue scarf around her head and over her nose, masking all but her eyes. She stepped down from the wagon and into the space behind where she saw Vlady getting into his Bear suit. He was just about to fit the head on when he turned and smiled at her with such childish mirth that she felt compelled to smile back. It was the sparkle of his eye. Once the costume was complete he maneuvered his prop, a large ball painted with serpents and moons, ready to make his entrance at Serre-Pain's cue, and with amazing agility leapt to the top of the ball and rolled it with his feet to maintain a casual balance.

At the cheers from the crowd Lydia made her way out from behind the large ophidiarium on wheels that attested to Serre-Pain's claim of herpetology and proof of his knowledge, like an old library full of old books. The crowds had thinned out further under the arcade where merchants had set up their wares, most everyone wearing a face covering, and some, goggles, against the silicate laden air. Serre-Pain had asked her not to go out in public unaccompanied by one of them. She would appear out of place and thereby attract attention. She was willing to chance it. She had

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friends who might be able to help her slip back to Sao Paulo. Even though The Empire of Brazil had an extradition treaty with the Clockwork Commonwealth, she doubted that the Emperor's court would allow it over such a trivial matter as a Citizen of the World Order searching for her paternity. She would have to stay out of IOTA's jurisdiction which would make her an exile from the world hub of Greater London. She would certainly not be allowed to pilot airships outside of the Empire's zone of influence which spanned the southern hemisphere and the Atlantic to the inter desert zone of New Mali and Congola further south. She would no longer be an airship commander in the glamorous passenger fleets like Aerosud or Canamair. Most of the navair traffic in the Free Corridor of Cancer was freight and third class which meant much of the world's poor and retched, refugees from the camps adjacent the dead regions and the encroaching tundra.

A loud noise startled her and she turned to seek it's origin. A crowd had gathered in front of the stall from where the noise was emanating. She glanced over a shoulder at the edge of the gathering. She could see clearly a man standing in front of a square block of gray bioluminium that was vibrating to a low purr of its working. A propeller whirling at one end and a small tube emitting gray vapors at the other. She identified it immediately. An internal combustion engine. Icers. She didn't know why she was surprised. Many nonaligned nations allowed the development of petrol powered engines despite the scarcity of the fuel. The Scarce Resources Treaty of Pax Victoriana 80 had banned oil as a fuel source, with the exception of lighting. The bacteria that had been released to eradicate the Black Mold infestation of Pax Victoriana 75 unfortunately had had the characteristics of a petrophage and rendered practically the entire oil reserves of the Northern Hemisphere to a watery nonvolatile solution of less than seven percent accelerant.

She shouldn't have been surprised. The most standard motor source in the Commonwealth's zones of influence was the bug drive, the bio repro engine that powered everything. The giant factories that produced the bacterial strains, or seeds, were the same ones that were polluting the skies above Oldest Orleans and stretched further north up the valley past the precincts of Old Orleans. The waste accumulated in piles, attaching itself to the lifeless sands of the devastated deadlands, was blown about in the atmosphere by fierce

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hyperborean winds. The giant windmills erected around the perimeter of the old city on biostyl stilts were not that effective at deflecting the bitter cold of the poisonous sand storms of the north.

The man in front of her stepped back unexpectedly and stepped onto her slippered foot. He glared at her as if it was her fault after she had pushed back. She apologized. No need to draw attention to herself. She quickly moved through the throngs and clots to the end of the arcade where it made another turn paralleling the edge of the square. She could see the orange bacsodium lights of the medicine show and Serre-Pain leading the faux bear in the open space in front of the wagon. Serpina was likely in the tiny dressing space behind the stage fitting into her snake costume. The young woman's contribution to the entertainment was her hyperflexability. She could literally twine herself around herself, but mostly she slithered along the stage and up the wall and then provocatively curled around a projection overhanging the top of the stage at which time a red round object like an apple appeared in her mouth.

To this backdrop the snake doctor made his pitch. The little pamphlet he held high over his head contained the secrets of Madame Ophelia's most famous recipes for making antivenom, revealed for the first time, which he offered for a meager sum but within the affordable range of most everyone in a crowd of people who were not particularly interested in reading. As a bonus he offered free of charge with the purchase of Madame Ophelia's Secret Recipes, a sample bottle of one of her most potent antivenom elixirs.

After the entertainment ended and the crowds drifted away, the stretch of the Place D'Arc where the snake show had been held was littered with pamphlets but not one tiny bottle. Serpina had told her that the secret recipe's ingredients were a local fruit distillate mixed with cayenne, the "dash of snake venom" Serre Pain claimed in his sales pitch.

Lydia look down to see a women pointing at her slippers. She had stopped in front of a footwear stall. Arrayed on neat shelves were a variety of sabots, some painted bright colors, others with intricate designs burned into the particulated nearwood. They were quite popular in Greater London where there was a strong artisan market and certain guilds and houses were recognized by name, their products highly sought after. Along with the display of shoes, apparently locally sourced, was a collection of boots. They attracted

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Lydia's eye by their sturdy design, one pair reaching to calf length made of a stiff dark material, some kind of fauxhide. The boots had round pale buttons near the top and across the ankle. She was partial to that type of footwear, similar to the style she always wore but more rugged. She felt the dark material between her thumb and forefinger as the woman in the stall nodded approvingly. At first touch she realized that she had been mistaken. It was real leather, a forbidden pleasure as along with ivory and live animal pets, it had been banned by treaty among the states aligned with the CCCP, the Clockwork Commonwealth Cooperative Protocols that were at the foundation of the Pax Victoriana, hammered out over a hundred years ago. She fingered the buttons, tapping one with a fingernail. Bone, maybe ivory.

The woman nodded her head and spoke a single word in dialect, "O." And again pointed at Lydia's slippers seeming to infer how puny they were when compared to the rugged specimen Lydia was holding in her hand.

Lydia asked, "Is this real leather?"

The woman canted her head to one side as if making a calculation and then nodded. "Queer."

Lydia understood the problem. She had assumed the woman spoke Standard. She'd come across these language gaps before. Often they could speak Standard but chose not to in resistance to contempt that World Standard had for their native language that was thousand years in the making while WS was an Anglo-Saxon based universal language only recently seeded over the breadth and width of the Victorian Empire.

"Do you speak Standard?" Lydia was casting a practiced eye over the foot of the boot and at the same time removing her right foot out from the slipper.

The woman in the stall held up her thumb and forefinger to indicate how little, shrugging her shoulders in the heavy blanket coat covering her stooped figure. She too had a scarf wrapped around her head and pulled across her nose. She made agreeable noises as Lydia pulled the boot up around her ankle.

"How much," she asked, "How much do you want for these boots?"

"Katrevaindees."

Now it was Lydia's turn to calculate. She shook her head. "How much? In Victorines."

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The woman showed her a faded piece of paper. The number 90 followed by three zeros was written on it, and slightly below, the letters nfr, meaning New Francs.

“All I have are Victorines. Is there somewhere I can exchange them for the local currency?”

The woman looked over Lydia’s shoulder and held up her hand to wave someone over. “Iceepyare!”

A young man in a beret, scarf slung below his wispy little chin beard and showing the beginnings of a moustache joined them. The woman rattled off something to the young man while pointing at Lydia, the young man nodding in understanding. Suddenly Lydia felt very conspicuous.

“I can help you with the exchange.” He reached into his inside coat pocket and retrieved a large mouchoir enveloping a sheaf of cash. “You wish to buy these boots it will cost you one hundred victorines not counting the exchange fee of ten percent.”

Lydia was astounded. She couldn’t believe her good luck. She had paid twice that much for her cold weather zipper boots and the workmanship had been shoddy. She tried to cover her elation by negotiating. “Ninety, but I’ll go as high as one hundred victorines to include your commission.”

The young man shrugged and turned to walk away, returning the cash to his pocket and revealing the dagger in the sheath at his waist. Lydia was reminded of the stiletto in her inside breast pocket. At the fringes of the civilized commonwealth a knife fight would not be unlikely.

The woman in the stall implored the departing banker. He stopped and looked over his shoulder at Lydia. He had read her.

She sighed and nodded her acquiescence. “Very well, one hundred and ten victorines.” She had a thousand victorines in her wallet. She was an easy mark when it came to footwear. And they fit perfectly as if they were made for her. She admired how nicely they suited her, the square stubby toe and sturdy utilitarian heel.

The woman in the stall was delighted to make such a big sale, shaking Lydia’s hand as did the young man congratulating her on her purchase. He looked at her closely.

“You are not from here. A guest of the Victorianaissance Festivities, perhaps?”

Lydia pointed across the square at the snake show. “I am with Doctor Serre-Pain.”

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“Ah,” the young man raised his eyebrows, “The mysterious Madame Ophelia, am I correct?”

“At times,” Lydia admitted and at once realized that she might have revealed too much. She disengaged and moved swiftly away. She had acted frivolously and dallied too long. She was due back to the wagon for the finale of the snake show. Serre-Pain would raise the alarm and come looking for her.

Light spilled across her path from an alcove and she glimpsed the empty tables of a café from which emanated the sounds of Einstein’s first violin concerto, *Relativity*, her favorite, E in Minor C sharp. And it was the first thing in her flight from IOTA that beckoned to her with its familiarity. She found a table in a dark corner beneath some anti-IOTA graffiti, a common sentiment in the old city she had come to realize. It was time to consider her next step.

Having spent time in an Admiralty intelligence unit when she was stationed at the Commonwealth embassy in Houllas in the Republic of Texas, she knew that she would have to secure new papers if she were going to cross physical borders. And that she would have to avoid travelling by air. It would have to overland until she was safely out of the reach of IOTA. The Capricorn Free Corridor was her best bet. Surely there was someone in Older Orleans who could provide her with a passport that would escape detection, especially if she stayed off the main routes and avoided the busy checkpoints. The strains of the violin concerto had a soothing effect on her although at times she knew that it could also be quite stimulating. She closed her eyes for a moment, amusing herself with the fact that the President of the ISR, the Invincible Swiss Republic, was Albert III, the great grandson of the world famous musician. Unexpectedly her mental image changed, as often happens in reverie, to that of Vlady fitting the bear head onto his own and she realized then why he seemed so familiar to her. How could she had forgotten?

When she opened her eyes there were two uniformed men standing in front of her table. Their patches and canted berets identified them as local gendarmes. “Your papers, please,” the shorter one spoke.

Chapter XI

Startled, at first Lydia didn't quite understand the request, the policeman's accent being of a rough sort. She was still struggling with the image she had of Vlady, but he was not known as Vlady then, he was Samson Trismegistus, the circus strongman who had carried her on his broad shoulder as if she were nothing but a sparrow, a three year old sparrow, and even then only offered silent protection to her, her mother, and the acrobat troupe from their rivals, the clowns and the carnival attractions. That was the reason behind Vlady's mystifying and knowing smiles.

The short policeman emphasized his demand by speaking it louder and adding contempt to the twist of his mouth. "Your papers!"

Lydia stood, and realizing that she was in danger of being found out, echoed him questioningly, "My papers?"

The taller one leaned his narrow head toward her, "Are you under the influence of controlled substances?" Now they were both on alert. The short one had his hand out.

Lydia held up her own hand signaling she would comply and fumbled for her shoulder bag. There were only two of them, with her training and the element of surprised she could render them unconscious. She didn't want to have to kill them, the viper stiletto nudging against her ribs. But that would only complicate things. Her Aerosud Executive Airship Pilot's ID identified her as Lydia Cheése, Airship Commander, and if Doctor Serre-Pain's words were true, the authorities within IOTA's sphere of influence, as Oldest Orleans was, would be alerted to her fugitive status.

"I'm afraid that I don't have them with me. How foolish of me," she said appeasingly and gestured toward Place D'Arc, "but I'm with. . ."

Now the tall one's eyes narrowed, "A vendor? Where is your vendor's permit?" And he nodded to his companion. "You will have to accompany us to headquarters so we can verify your identity. We have a plasmoviz there that will verify who you say you are." The shorter one emphasized, "It is unlawful to be in public without proof of identity." They each moved to encircle her to ensure her compliance.

Lydia had to act, and damn the consequences.

A voice hailed them. "Ah, there you are, Louise!"

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The gendarmes pivoted, annoyed. A rotund man in an elaborate topcoat and purple gray tuglemust was approaching with his hand raised. “Louise, there you are. We thought we’d lost you!” He had the jolly confident smile of man who often got his way, the latest gasket frame eyewear giving him an almost comical appearance.

The tall officer gave a nod of recognition, “Lord mayor.”

The other one looked perplexed. “Do you know this person, your honor?”

“Of course! Don’t you recognize her? This is Louise Bouchdor. An honored guest of the Victorianaissance Festival.”

The policemen looked at each other and then at Lydia and then back at the mayor. “You mean *the* Louise. . .,” said the one. “Bouchdor?” said the other.

“Of course,” said the mayor, “the porn box courtesan, nothing to be ashamed of. Her voice has titillated men the world over. I would ask her to give you a little trill but that would be very unprofessional.”

“So she is with you, your honor?”

“My party of guests. We were returning from viewing the entertainment by Madame Ophelia,” and he gave her a knowing look, “when she must have wandered off. The newly released bio-vintage is particularly pleasant this year, and perhaps unusually strong.” The mayor inclined his head conspiratorially to the officers, “Especially for fairer constitutions,” and they agreed with knowing smiles.

“Very well, lord mayor, if you vouch for her then we will be on your way,” the short one said magnanimously. He saluted Lydia with a little bow and a smirk, “Madame Bouchdor, always a pleasure.”

When the two patrolmen left to return to their rounds, the roly-poly man’s face angrily confronted her. “Do you know what you’ve done? You’ve jeopardized the entire plan!” He seized her by the arm with a surprisingly strong grip. “We must hurry!”

Lydia resisted, ready with a defense move. “Wait! Who are you? The mayor? Did I hear correct? You said I was a porn box courtesan?”

The mayor turned to her fiercely, “A mere diversion, I assure you. My apologizes if you are offended. That is of no matter now. Serre-Pain, and transporting he and his skills, is what is important. I

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am Leon. With the League Bousculier Francaise Du Sud. We are charged with getting the good doctor and his wagons to a rendezvous with an airship for which you are the pilot, if I am not mistaken. Lydia Cheése. daughter of the infamous Commodore Jack. A pleasure to meet you despite the circumstances. But we must hurry. They will have to report their encounter and will learn that Louise Bouchdor left Oldest Orleans a few days ago.” He led the reluctant airship commander down a narrow path between the towering walls of the old town. “This way,” he hissed.

A shadow separated itself from the stone wall around the next turn. Lydia recognized him as the money changer at the boot stall. He was clearly a confederate. Leon instructed him, “Take her to the cellar until we are ready to leave.” He gave Lydia a meaningful look. “I will return, with Serre-Pain.”

The young man motioned to her to follow unaware that she was looking for an opportunity to bolt. She was on her last nerve, and didn’t like the feeling of desperation that was creeping up on her. She took a breath, she would have to bide her time. The guide proceeded down steps under a narrow stone arch and to a large wooden door. When he shouldered it open, she could tell it was a wine cellar from the sour fetid air that escaped. He activated a small bacsodium lamp from inside and set it on a shelf by the rank of barrels. Lydia saw her chance and turned to leap back through the doorway. A large shadow crossed the threshold and a hand reached in to slam the door shut in her face.

Chapter XII

Lydia had the money changer by the throat, the viper stiletto to the point of his chin. “Open this door!” she growled through her gritted teeth.

The young man caught by surprise held his arms up in surrender. “Please, the door locks from the outside, there is nothing I can do!”

“You have the key! Give it to me!” she insisted, scanning his alarmed expression.

“No! No! The door is barred from the outside! I am in the same fix as you. This is what Leon wants.”

“To hold me prisoner? Why are you here?” Lydia had not let loose of his collar nor toned down her vehemence.

“To keep you company. You are not a prisoner. More of a guest of the LBFDS. And to keep you safe while Leon and the snake doctor come up with a new plan. The local security force works closely with IOTA. I have been shown a plasmovid bulletin with a description and a biosketch with a striking resemblance to you.” The money changer caught his breath staring down at the tip of the viper blade. “You are Airship Commander Lydia Cheése. I am a great admirer of your father, Commadore Jack. All my life I have wanted to be an airship pilot. Please, I mean you no harm, but we are here together until Leon returns.”

Lydia relaxed her grip and pulled the stiletto back but ready to strike. “You expect me to believe you?” She took in the low ceilinged cellar in the amber glow of the bacso lamp and saw that there was no other exit, merely rows of wine casks, a low bench and a crude table set against a stone wall.

“I can offer you a drink,” he pleaded, “Dried fruit, dates?”

Lydia released him and pushed him away, sheathing the viper blade. “Well, this is awkward,” she admitted, eyes still alert for any means of escape. She fixed his awkward smile with a hard stare and resigned herself to the situation. She was locked in a wine cellar with a not unhandsome young man who was offering her wine and dates. It was almost comical. She was going to have to make the best of it. And not let down her guard. Any drink might be drugged, any food tainted. “Sit over there,” she motioned to the bench, “Where I can keep an eye on you. And I should warn you I have

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been trained in combat martial arts and can disable you with one blow. What's your name?"

The young man let a relieved amused smile cross his face. "Pyare. And I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Captain Cheése, I much admire airship pilots. I myself have applied to the Admiralty Air Academy under the Affiliated States quota but unfortunately I did not pass the examination. I have studied aerodynamics and hydrodynamics, my understanding of reproductive drives is not great but I don't want to be a drive engineer. I want to be a pilot!"

Lydia was disarmed by his earnestness. She remembered her own enthusiasm in the pursuit of a berth at the triple A. Becoming an airship commander had been her singular goal, and she came from a long family line associated with the Crown and the Admiralty. "You can retake the exam," she offered and remembered that she had passed the exam on her first attempt.

Pyare shook his head. "I didn't realize how heavily the historiopolitical weighed toward the final grade. I don't understand what any of that has to do with piloting a double hulled luxury liner."

Lydia had heard that complaint often, especially among the quota candidates, and especially those without a sponsor. As a citizen of the Commonwealth and sponsorship from Aerosud, her own appointment had been assured. The reason for the grievance had been explained to her by a young Panafrika officer, a woman like herself, who was quite cynical about it. "They want to make certain that you believe what they want you to believe, their version of history, the Succession, the myth of Pax Victoriana!" It was all nonsense as far as she was concerned. She had no patience with conspiracy theories. The irony was that her father was one of the leading theorists of conspiracies

"The Admiralty takes history and politics very seriously. Piloting a luxury liner requires more than just knowledge of the ferro-mechanics. Comportment toward the passengers, the crew, and ancillaries is also part of an airship commander's job, and that is accomplished by a good working knowledge the politics of history."

"I'll bet you aced the WorldPol section of the exam," Pyare said sullenly.

Lydia could have admitted that she actually had. "Just the fact that you say you admire my father is a strike against you. Even

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if you had passed the exam, you would have likely failed the IOTA background check with opinions like yours.”

“You don’t know what my opinions are!”

“If I’d venture a guess, I’d say you dispute the Succession, and judication of the GSC, the Global Supreme Council.”

“I don’t care about any of that!” Pyare was getting red around the collar. “Politics doesn’t mean anything to me. Piloting is what I want to do!”

“You could always get a commercial license,” Lydia offered by way of appeasement.

“No, no,” the young man shook his head, “No rigs or semirigs for me, nothing less than full flex certified dirigible!”

“Navair companies will not hire you without Admiralty approved training.”

“Why would an airship company care if I could name all the Slave State Republics in the USSR? Aren’t they all under sanctions as rogue states?”

Lydia remembered an old history professor’s comment that the Northern Hemisphere’ west was a puzzle whose pieces were always changing shape. While the world was fracturing into numerous hostile states in the early years of the Pax Victoriana, the London Berlin Moscow Accords had forged a stable alliance that eventually became the foundation of the Clockwork Commonwealth. The old academic was well known for his pronouncements, particularly, “The Past will always revenge itself on the Future.”

“I speak Standard well enough,” Pyare continued his complaint, “I have skills, ambition. I would be a good airship captain! Just because I did not make the distinction between the Republic of Texas and the Republic of Tennessee. And what of the Panam Wars? Those border hostilities have been going on forever. Who can keep up? These are things in which I have no interest!”

Lydia nodded her understanding. “Yes, ROT and ROTN are two distinct entities withing the United Slave State Republics and I can see how they might be confusing. Nomenclature is political, it is the ownership of boundaries and superstructure. It is as necessary as knowing Euler’s Equation, or the workings of Bénard Cells or Fourier’s Theorem if you are to navigate the GCC, Greater Commonwealth Cooperative and prove your citizenship to the Crown and Pax Victoriana.”

Pyare snorted his contempt, “Pax Victoriana is a sham! There are still parts of the globe that have no intention of complying with the Jubilee Calendar Reset and resist the Crown’s Global Recalibration. As for peace, the wars may be smaller but there are more of them.”

“You have obviously been listening to ICER box propaganda and anti-globalists like my father. The JCR and the CGR are the basis for the Cooperative of Nations in which all geopolitical entities signed on as partners and that would include the APT, Artisan Protection Treaty of 55 PV, the CET, the Carbon Emission Treaty of 75 PV, the Hydrogen Helium Concorde, the H²C of the same year, the AFSP, the Antiseptic Food Safety Provisions of 80, The FAC, Famine Alleviating Commission formed in 90, and ACSA, the Admiralty Commonwealth Security Accords which were finally signed in 100 PV. The world is a much better place for the many. The few who have to suffer will always complain.”

Lydia was surprised by the irony that she had just parroted something spoken by the Lord High Admiral at her graduation from Admiralty’s Airship Officers Academy. She had accepted it without question. Why did it seem so hollow when she spoke it herself? “There are those who would willingly undermine the protection that the Pax provides for its global citizenry, whether it’s in the Empire of Brazil and its African Colonies or the unaffiliated Western Pacific polystates that run like a backbone from the Aleutians to the Isthmus, predators and thieves sheltered by rouge states who would fatten themselves on the spoils of a fractured Commonwealth if they could.”

“Ha!” Pyare replied accusingly, “You sound just like one of those police kiosk plasmovids. Spreading a biowashed version of history. If I can’t be a lithairian, I’ll settle for being a heavairian.”

Lydia shook her head. “You would be a heathen? You must be contemplating suicide. What if your noisy contraption runs out of petrol, and who can afford black gold but bandits and the super-rich, you will plummet like a large odiferous stone. Flight in a lighter-than-air is dignified transport whereas the noisome roar of internal combustion would vibrate you to a jellied mass. The internal combustion engine is an ICER invention that was never sanctioned by the Crown, especially after bioclean reproductive drives were developed. Even if eradication after the first global Black Mold Infestation led to the unexpected mutation of the biocide used to control it into a petrophage that essentially turned all the oil reserves

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in the Northern Hemisphere to ash, the wasteful application of the precious resources to an inefficient technology goes against everything the RCA, the Resource Conservation Act of 60 PV, stands for.”

“All that’s ancient history as far as I’m concerned. And who is to say that the BMI actually happened, that it was not a ploy by the Admiralty to extend its dominion over the dissident and defiant masses? No one is allowed into the Blank Forest Zones, the BFZ as you would have it. There are parts of the Northern Hemisphere that are still highly toxic, especially along the Baltic Estuary, and the North American Outback. Everything there has turned into a depolarized particulate cement landscape allowing no regeneration of any sort up from under its crust. It is uninhabitable and only fools and adventurers dare stray into the fringes with their wind driven sail trollies. The Lords of the Admiralty control all information and entry to the Access Restricted Zones. Yet where are the multitudes coming from? The north, the majority from above the 48th parallel. And no one is talking about this migration. Is it like the ICERs say, the world is cooling at its poles and if we don’t do something soon, the globe will be encased in ice?”

Lydia sighed, put her fists to her hips and gave her predicament another once over. What had started as an inquiry into her father’s whereabouts had turned into a kidnaping by a carnival snake doctor to have her pilot a humanitarian mission to non-aligned HOAR, the Horn Of Africa Republic, in exchange for a way to connect with the elusive and controversial anti-globalist, Commadore Jack, someone IOTA would very much like to get in their grasp, and the reason why she was wanted for questioning. And now she was trapped in a musty damp wine cellar with one of her father’s disciples, an ignorant country boy and ICER sympathizer. Men are such idiots. Was she going to have to set him straight?

“I’ll have some of that wine after all.”