



TICKER
LISA MANTCHEV

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For Lori and Ciarán, who understand that we make our own dreams come true

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In Which a Young Lady of Good Standing and Impeccable Moral Character Enters the Scene

A girl with a clockwork heart shouldn't be running late, but I was. Narrowly avoiding a fruit cart, I hurtled into the thick of rush-hour traffic astride my new Vitesse. The motorized, high-wheeled cycle had been special-ordered from Grimthorpe's Custom Velocipedes, and I was still getting the hang of the throttle. Traveling at a speed one could only define as "breakneck," I defied physics and the traffic laws to swerve between a hansom cab and several irate pedestrians.

"Out of the way!" I accompanied my shout with the insistent clatter of the cycle's bell. "Coming through!"

Immediately behind me came the protesting neigh of a mechanical horse and the metallic shriek of brakes.

"Just see what you've done!" a driver yelled over the hiss of released steam.

I didn't dare turn around, so I craned my neck and raised my voice to bellow, "I can't see where I'm going if I only look where I've been, my good man!"

I had to look to the future; the past held nothing but pain and fear. And death.

The Ripley's Personal Aethergraph strapped to my ribboned leg garter fired to life, a welcome distraction. With a series of clicks, the RiPA tapped out a message.

ON THE WAY TO THE FACTORY YET - QUERY MARK - JUST
TOOK A TRAY OF STICKY BUNS OUT OF THE OVEN - STOP

"Wicked temptress!" I muttered, mouth suddenly watering. The communication was from Violet Nesselrode: best friend, confidante, and the youngest of a baker's dozen of children with whom she shared ownership of the SugarWerks Fully Automated Bakery.

But I wouldn't succumb. Copernicus Emery Farthing—Nic, for short, and my older-by-minute twin—was going to have my tardy head on a platter the moment I reached the factory. I couldn't pick him up also bedecked in confectioner's sugar. Not this morning.

Today wasn't a working day for the Farthings, but Nic had gone to his office to retrieve some paperwork. Within the hour, we needed to meet our parents at the Bazalgate Municipal Courthouse for the sentencing of Doctor Calvin Warwick. The papers called him many things, a "brilliant young surgeon" and a "genius gone mad" most often. He'd been my lead physician since I was twelve, and for the last four years my family counted him among our dearest friends. But over the past few months, the man who'd implanted my clockwork heart had become a monster none of us recognized.

Late or not, perhaps I did need some sweet pastry to clear out the horrible taste of bile at the back of my throat. The moment no other carriages or conveyances seemed intent on running me down

I clicked the RiPA over to “Outgoing” and tapped out a reply.

HAVE A DOZEN BOXED UP AND READY FOR ME - STOP - PUT THEM ON MY ACCOUNT - STOP - WHEN NIC STARTS TO LECTURE I CAN STUFF ONE IN HIS GAPING PIEHOLE - STOP

“You’re easily corrupted, Penelope Farthing,” I lectured myself. Altering course, I shot straight down to the River Aire, where a left turn put me on The Strand. The air here was heavy with river damp, yeast, and steam. The other factories on the block were thin gentlemen in severe black coats and top hats, smoke curling from chimneys like cigars stood on end. SugarWerks was the sole lady among them. Her striped awnings were like skirts snapping in a breeze perfumed with spices and bread; her welcoming illumination glinted off delicate ornamentation of copper and brass.

I’d arrived and so came the inglorious task of slowing down. The Vitesse herked and jerked and finally sputtered to a reluctant halt three inches from the pockmarked brick wall. With a sigh of relief I hopped off, propped the cycle against the building, and removed the key.

“Contrary beast!” Far from feeling peeved, I ran an appreciative finger over the gleaming copper handlebars. A year ago, I wouldn’t have even contemplated riding such a thing; now, I fairly flew upon it wherever I went. It might well kill me one of these days, but so might other less pleasant things. The moment I’d laid eyes upon it in Grimthorpe’s showroom, I arrived at the conclusion that I’d prefer to ride from this world to the next on its gorgeous wooden seat, with brass exhaust pipes in place of angel wings, high wheel instead of a halo.

After a short sprint up the stairs, I pushed through the door. An intoxicating sugar perfume nearly knocked me out the way I’d come in. Ding! Ding! Ding! I tapped the brass bell in rapid succession until Violet bustled in from the back room, wearing the blue-and-white pinafore that was the SugarWerks’s uniform and a frown that was not. The same age as Nic and I, Violet wore her amethyst hair spiked and a brass gearing stud on the left side of her nose. On one set of knuckles BAKE was tattooed in elaborate black calligraphy; CAKE was on the other. Today she had an aquamarine bow pinned to the top of her head, a silver cupcake and crossbones marking the space between the two loops of ribbon. Her lip rouge was the same fruit-stain red as the raspberry tarts; I’d seen that same color on Nic’s cheek quite a lot this summer, once they’d started walking out together.

“I’ve no idea why you’re wasting your time on my idiot brother,” I said by way of greeting.

“Don’t think you can distract me, Penelope Farthing.” She pulled a full sheet of gingerbread out of a brass rack and moved it to the glass case without even a grunt to mark her effort. Tougher specimen than I learned the hard way not to go up against her in an arm-wrestling match. “I saw how fast you shot in on that infernal contraption. You’re going to break your neck one of these days.”

“Sooner rather than later,” I agreed. “But you wouldn’t want me hanging about the omnibus stop at all hours, would you? I like keeping my own schedule.”

“Your purported schedule is a fearsome and terrifying thing.” Violet shifted gears as easily as might on the Vitesse. “Did you wind your Ticker this morning?” She fixed me with a stern look that was not the least bit undermined by her diminutive stature. Though Violet always wore black lace boots that added three inches to her height, I still towered over her.

“As if I’d ever forget. One hundred clicks before breakfast.” If we’d been fencing Mettlefield’s Gymnasium, that would have been an advance-lunge and a point scored.

Except Violet parried deftly: “How is the blasted thing holding up with all the stress from the

trial?”

—In response to her question, my clockwork ventriculator thudded twice in quick succession. Never meant to be implanted in the first place, it already needed an upgrade. The pretty little thing should have been decorating a shelf somewhere rather than struggling to keep the blood moving through my veins.

I steered myself away from such thoughts by ogling the caraway-seed cakes. “It’s working well enough. And even if it wasn’t, it’s not as though Warwick will ever be allowed to practice medicine again.”

“Not if they hang him, he won’t—” Violet leaned over the counter and squeezed my shoulder gently. “Apologies. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s the truth though, isn’t it?” I said, trying to remember how to swallow. “There’s a very good chance they’ll sentence him to death.”

“They haven’t found him guilty yet . . .” Her voice trailed off, because everyone in Bazalga knew he’d committed the crimes of which he was accused.

Straight out of medical school and flush with the success of a new open-heart surgical procedure, Warwick had been brought in as a consultant on my case. Everything he’d done, everything that happened afterward, had been because of me.

I twitched my shoulders, wishing I could rid myself of the invisible weight sitting upon them. “I’d better step on it and get to the factory to pick up Nic. Are my sticky buns ready?”

“Of course!” Turning to the order board, Violet lined up a series of brass alphabetical dial keys. She spelled out “F-A-R-T-H-I-N-G” before moving to the end of the counter and standing on tiptoe to reach for the delivery lever.

I didn’t dare put my hands on the glass because Violet abhorred fingerprints. Instead, I lolled upon my elbows and mustered a half-smile. “Do you need a step stool?”

“Certainly not.” She finally grasped the burnished wood handle and pulled it down. Unseen gears locked tooth-to-tooth, and hidden wheels whirled and spun until, with a hiss of steam and trumpeted fanfare, a door opened in the wall. A SugarWerks Signature Ribbon-Striped Carry-Away Box slid down the gleaming gravity-roller conveyor belt and came to rest in front of us. Developed by Violet’s father, Gustaf, to prevent small children from spoiling their suppers, the SugarWerks Carry-Away Boxes could be set to open at a given hour, unless the contents included ice custard, in which case they should be opened immediately. Violet looped a strap around the box and buckled it down tight. “You need to get moving.”

“I also need to keep up my blood sugar.” Though I didn’t say so, needing to eat every few hours was no chore, not with my appetite and love of all things sweet. I tapped a gloved fingertip against one of the bell domes. “You wouldn’t send me off with a box of sticky buns and an empty stomach, would you? My mechanisms are winding down.”

“If you ate all of them in one go, you’d have dyspepsia.” Reaching into her pocket, Violet pulled out a SugarWerks token and handed it to me. “Pick your pleasure and take your choice.”

I flipped the token over my knuckles; as heavy as a real piece of money, it was good for use only in the Automatic Dessert Dispenser. My parents helped develop the vending machine for the Nesselrodes, and it remained the only one of its kind in the Industrian Empire. At any hour of the day, one could insert a token, open a door, and get a hot cherry turnover with the perfect scoop of frozen ice custard on top.

Mmm. Ice custard.

Pity I needed to pick something I could eat with one hand! Sending one last lingering, loving look at the cream puffs, I inserted my token, tugged at the knob, and withdrew an oft-picked favorite.

“The Figure Eight again?” Violet pulled out a piece of blue-and-white striped paper and set

on the counter.

—“Don’t squeeze it in the middle,” I warned, passing her my selection. “I don’t want the chocolate filling to mix with the raspberry jam.”

“Take these and leave before I toss you outside without so much as a day-old pastry for your troubles!” After handing over the paper-wrapped treat and the Carry-Away Box, Violet used the considerable ruffles on her apron to shoo me out the front door.

Grinning at her over my shoulder, I affixed the Carry-Away Box to the platform behind the Vitesse’s slick wooden seat. Then, unable to resist a second longer, I took an enormous bite of the Figure Eight. An incoming message from Nic startled me, and I nearly choked on chocolate filling.

WE ARE GOING TO BE LATE - STOP - WHERE THE COGS ARE
YOU - QUERY MARK

A short time ago, he would have been full of teases and dares, offering to race me across town betting a month’s worth of shoeblacking or a box of chocolate bars. With a sigh, I transferred my snack to my left hand so I could tap out a response with my right.

WILL BE THERE IN THREE MINUTES OR LESS - STOP - KEEP YOUR
HAIR ON - STOP

Firing up the engine, I pulled down my goggles and kicked the Vitesse into gear. Reentering traffic, I almost ran over an elderly gentleman who perambulated somewhat haphazardly on one leg of flesh and the other a brass prosthesis that must have been made at our factory.

“Attention, please, you demitasse of feminine frippery!” he barked. “This isn’t the Eight Belles Steeplechase!”

“A thousand pardons!” I returned, struggling to rein in my mechanical steed.

I made quick work of the Figure Eight as I drove, but the streets clogged up as I approached the traffic circle known as the Heart of the Star. The roundabout connected the eight Etoile Roads, which radiated outward like the spokes on the Vitesse, and it was more congested than I’d ever before seen it.

“Take care there, sir!” I slapped my hand against the side of a cart before it could run me up the curb; negotiating the hub wasn’t for the weak of knees or the faint of heart! “Ahoy, Freddy!”

Frederick Carmichael wore the charcoal uniform and namesake iron bracelets that marked his employment in the Ferrum Viriae. The largest and longest standing of Industria’s privatized military recently won the coveted contracts for Police, Fire, and Emergency Rescue Squadrons. Frederick was the soldier who’d aided me after my last accident. That particular occurrence left me with a twisted ankle, an official citation, and an off-the-record, blistering lecture about yielding to larger vehicles. Never let it be said that the Ferrum Viriae are not thorough.

Frederick bestowed one of his infrequent smiles upon me along with a white-gloved wave and proceed with caution. “You promised you’d slow down!” The silver glint of his whistle flashed as he lifted it to his mouth.

“Progress waits for no woman!” was my retort.

“All the same,” he said, jerking his chin at the sidewalk behind me. “Mind the crowd.”

— Looking about, I finally realized the cause for the congestion: a sizable assembly of protestors.

The Edoceon Movement sprang up almost immediately after my surgery, protesting the “unnatural” idea of Augmentation. Very few paid them any attention until formal accusations were brought against Calvin Warwick, but since the start of the trial, their numbers had quadrupled. The newspapers printed their well-researched and scathing letters to the editor with alarming regularity.

Today, the jostling figures held signs that read “Instruct, Inform, Apprise,” “Man Before Machine,” and “You Cannot Augment the Human Soul!” Restless, they shifted against the rough wooden barricades set in place to keep them off the road. They might have remained corralled, if they hadn’t seen me. Pity that I’m not the sort of girl who fades into the wallpaper.

“The Farthing girl! She’s over there!”

Heads pivoted in my direction. Then it was as though someone had uncorked a bottle of effervescent hatred and directed the resulting spray at me.

“That’s her!”

“The first abomination!”

“Freak!”

“How do you sleep at night?”

The verbal abuse they hurled had less effect on me than the actual bottle someone threw. Glass shattered under the front wheel of the Vitesse, forcing me to swerve. Perhaps in response to all the excitement, my Ticker paused in its good work. My head began to spin, carousel dizzy. I couldn’t focus my eyes. Everything slowed down, like I’d abruptly driven through sticky toffee pudding.

“Miss Farthing?” I heard Frederick Carmichael call out behind me, followed by a more frantic “Penny!”

But I had no words with which to answer him, and everything seemed to happen at once: the crowd broke through the barricade, stampeding toward me with murder in their eyes; Frederick dove into the melee, whistle blaring; I fell off the Vitesse and landed with a thump on the cobblestones.

“I’ve called for backup,” Frederick shouted as though from the end of a tunnel. “Arrests are going to be made if you don’t remain peaceable!”

Despite my vision going fuzzy about the edges, I could see the demonstrators hesitating, weighing the cost of righteous anger against spending a night or two in prison. Taking their signs and their barely disguised hatred, they retreated to the curb.

“Laugh up your sleeve at us all you like, Miss Farthing,” a narrow woman snarled in passing. “Your precious Warwick is going to hang. The tables are about to be turned.”

Frederick shooed her away as he knelt next to me. “By all the Bells, are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” I lied the moment I could speak. Flashes of gold light swam around me when I tried to sit up. A full minute passed before I could manage, “But this is really becoming a habit, you’re scraping me off the road.”

“Shall I message for your brother? Or perhaps the hospital?”

I let him set me on my feet, and the satisfying swish of silken skirts around my ankles soothed me in a way that words never could. Secure in the knowledge of six flounces and velvet ribbon trim, I let go of his gloved hand. “It was just a little dizzy spell. I have them all the time.”

With a frown, Frederick righted the Vitesse. “At least let me summon you a hansom cab.”

“I’ll be fine,” I insisted to him and the world, except I wasn’t at all certain either was listening. Clambering aboard the cycle, I struggled to look poised and confident.

“If you won’t be convinced otherwise . . .” He reluctantly cleared me a space in the road.

I roared past him and down the street. He yelled a final remonstrance, but the wind and the engine conspired against him.

“I’ll be fine,” I repeated, this time trying to convince myself. The morning seemed devoid of color now, and even the prospect of sticky buns had lost its sweet appeal. There was no doubt in my mind that Warwick would be found guilty. If he went to jail, the entire country would breathe a sigh of relief; if he hanged, I’d carry that guilt with me for the rest of my days. Somewhere deep inside him still dwelled the caring surgeon and gentle man I’d known, but the blood of more than twenty people stained his hands, people he’d kidnapped off the streets of Bazalgate and experimented upon, testing different clockwork ventriculators . . .

All to save me.

Just ahead, the wrought iron gates of the Gears & Rivets Factory stood open, with half a dozen delivery wagons queued up to enter the courtyard. One of the streetcars paused just before me and disgorged a dozen workers, each wearing our distinctive emerald-and-black uniform. Beyond them the smokestacks emitted lazy plumes now that the boilers were stoked for the morning. Gaslight shone out of a single window. Ambrose Farnsworth, the supervisor, must already be noting the day’s goals in his ledger with a series of numbers and hieroglyphs worthy of an Aígyptian burial chamber.

The Gears & Rivets Factory was a family enterprise. Mama and Papa were both mechanic engineers. Nic had a talent for small machinery, so he headed Research and Development. That left the bookkeeping to me. Since my operation a year ago, we’d shifted all the machinery over to produce the tiny fittings, gears, mainsprings, and brass plates our Augmentation team needed to build prosthetics and implants. We skated on thin financial ice because of public disapproval, more so now than ever with the trial coming to its messy and sensational climax, but we were steadfast in our resolve that the technology could be used for the good of all. Development also proceeded slowly because none of the surgeons in our employ had Warwick’s spark of genius.

Perhaps that’s a good thing.

Interrupting my train of thought, the RiPA fired off yet another message from my twin.

THREE MINUTES HAVE PASSED - STOP - ONE MINUTE MORE
AND I AM GOING TO CATCH THE STREETCAR - STOP

I didn’t bother to answer. If he exited the building, I could head him off.

Or run him over.

I could well imagine the lecture he was composing. Nic would be furious when I told him about the protestors. And there was still the verdict on Warwick’s trial yet to be announced.

This day will surely get worse before it gets better—

In the second between one tick of my Ticker and the next, the front wall of the factory exploded outward. Brick and glass and bits of iron flew through the air and rained down on the courtyard. The shock wave threw me from the Vitesse, and I hit the cobblestones with a bone-jarring thud. Once the enormous and terrible noise of the blast passed and the ringing in my ears faded a little, I could make out the screams from the workers fleeing the building. Everything was chaos. Madness.

And Nic was waiting for me in his office.

In Which a Stream of Trouble Flows into a River of Mayhem

Scrambling to my feet, I ran for the door. Ambrose Farnsworth intercepted me as he stumbled out of the building.

“Miss Farthing!” he said between coughs, eyes streaming.

“Is Nic still inside?”

The supervisor shook his head and coughed before answering, “I’ve messaged for the Emergency Rescue Squadrons. I think the factory floor might be on fire.”

“Is my brother still inside?!”

Farnsworth sagged under the weight of my question. “Yes.” When I moved to pass him, he tried to hold me back. “You can’t go in. There might be structural damage!”

I shook him off as though he were no more than one of my mechanical Butterflies and ran into the factory. Smoke filled the hall. Dust billowed out every broken window. Coughing, I pulled my handkerchief from my pocket and held it over my nose.

Two bodies lay prone in the rubble. I scrambled over, uncertain if I felt relief or despair when I saw that neither one was my brother. Floor supervisors, both limp and pale, but each had a strong pulse and neither appeared to be bleeding. Just beyond them, the door to Nic’s office dangled from one hinge, its glass scattered across the floor. I kicked the remaining wood until it gave way, then peered inside. Everything familiar was obliterated, but the room appeared otherwise empty.

Ambrose must have been mistaken. Nic couldn’t have been inside when the blast happened.

Except a faint moan from under the collapsed bookcase proved the supervisor had been right. I climbed over splintered wood that ripped my stockings and cut my legs.

“No. No, no, no.” Popped Hydrostatical Bubbles scraped my palms as I flung aside shards of laboratory glass. I tried to move the bookcase off Nic, but the weight of it was simply too much. When he groaned again, desperation poured through my veins, hot and bright. With my Ticker thudding like a reciprocating engine, I heaved again and sent the wreckage flying. My vision blurred, then cleared like a slide in a stereoscope coming into focus.

Nic’s face was scratched and bloody, his spectacles broken and hanging off one ear. “What happened?” he said, blinking hard.

“I was hoping you could tell me.” Circling behind him, I gathered his head onto my lap, trying to avoid touching the silver fléchettes that riddled his skin. Blood trickled into my skirts. “Hold still. Don’t be an idiot.”

“Get out, Penny.” With the jerky motions of a half-wound automaton, he pulled off his glasses and cast them aside. Practically blind without them, he peered around us with a squinting sort of frown. “Before the roof falls in.”

Even felled by an explosion, he was still trying to take care of me. He’d been doing it since we were little, holding my hand as we teetered about the house, crossed the streets, ran through the park.

I looked into his eyes, hazel mirrors of my own, and gently reminded him, “I don’t take orders from you.”

“That’s always been the problem,” he said with another groan. Trailing his fingers over the fléchettes protruding from his chest, he pulled them out, one by one. “You’ve no respect for anyone or anything.”

And just like that, any closeness I’d felt between us evaporated like water hitting a hot boiler. Broken and bleeding, he still couldn’t forgive me.

“I give respect only where it’s due.” I heard a door slam open somewhere in the corridor and raised my voice, the words ragged and smoke-stained. “We’re down the hall! We have three men injured, and we need stretchers!”

The rescue crew appeared seconds later. “Sir, don’t get up!” one shouted as they pushed past me. “You could have internal bleeding.”

“You hear that, Nic?” All the panic that had incited me to action receded, leaving me cold and trembling. “Hold still.”

“You need to get to safety,” the second crewman advised me.

“I’m staying until you get my brother out,” I said. “And I’m riding in the ambulance to the hospital.”

“I don’t need a hospital, Penny,” Nic said with a cough. “Just a new pair of glasses. I can’t see a bloody thing.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I told him. Just to spite me, Nic rose under his own power and stood albeit shakily. “Don’t be a hero, then,” I amended.

“Take me home, Penny,” he said, voice faint but sure.

Putting my arm about him, I did my best not to jostle anything as we picked our way outside. Half carrying my twin out into the autumn sunlight, I couldn’t help but wonder if the explosion was what the Edoceon protestor meant by “the tables are about to be turned.”

There’s no such thing as a coincidence. Not in science, anyway.

I tapped out a message to my parents, who were most likely en route to the courthouse by now.

WE ARE ALL RIGHT - STOP - INCIDENT AT FACTORY - STOP -
MEET US BACK AT GLASSHOUSE - STOP

Mama was always slow to answer her RiPA, but when no answer came back after two full minutes, I repeated the message.

“They might already be inside the courtroom,” Nic said, peering at the Vitesse with another one of his farsighted frowns. “You have to turn off all communications devices in there.”

“Then let’s hope she doesn’t hear about the explosion from someone else.” One swift yank and the leather straps removed the Carry-Away Box from the back of the cycle; I tossed it aside to make room for my brother. “Hang on tight.”

With Nic tucked in behind me, I roared out of the courtyard and past the Ferrum Viria. Emergency Rescue vehicles hurrying to the scene. In the rush to get home, I spared no appreciation for the city’s towering buildings, the turning leaves. The gears in my mind whirled at an extraordinary pace. In response, my Ticker thudded and then paused as though sorting through the possible list of suspects. Though I tried to keep my breathing even and my mind steady, my fingers gripped the handlebars until my bones begged for mercy.

Was it the Edoceon?

Because it wasn’t just letters to the editor and protests in the street. Some of the extremists se

threatening notes to the house via the PaperTape machine and the regular post. One member turned up on the doorstep a few weeks back and tried to shoulder her way into the house to speak with me. Everyday, the Edoceon were getting bolder and more vehement about their cause.

But does that mean they attacked the factory?

Craning my neck, I could just make out Nic's ashen features. Gray smudged the sky once again, and the haze was like the glass in my glacier goggles. "Are you all right?"

"I might not be able to see, but I can tell you're driving too fast!" His arms constricted about me when I took the next corner at an impossible speed and angle. "I don't fancy almost dying a second time today, if you don't mind!" The wind frayed the edges of his words, threatening to unravel them.

A lump the size of a croquet ball rose in my throat at the memory of Nic lying prone in the rubble. If he felt the same horrible sense of responsibility mingled with fear day in and day out, then he could almost forgive his shortness of temper, his lectures and snarls. "No one is dying today. Not if I can help it."

"Not dying is good. Not rattling the bones from my body would place a close second. You really have no business driving this thing with your condition." He shuddered, a small vibration I doubted had been caused by the Vitesse.

"I should take you to Currey! You need someone to look at you!"

"Just get me home!" The last word left him with a gasp, and my Ticker thudded again. The moment I felt his grip tighten, I opened up the Vitesse and gave her everything she had. Bypassing the Heart of the Star, I ran the cycle full tilt down a nearby alley, through ruts and puddles that splashed their questionable contents over my skirts. My RiPA sputtered with competing incoming messages. Though I was still expecting an answer from Mama, the first to make it through was from Violet.

HEARD WHAT HAPPENED AT THE FACTORY - STOP - WHERE
SHALL I MEET YOU - QUERY MARK

And the second was from Sebastian Stirling.

RECEIVED YOUR SOS - STOP - YOU NEED NOT HAVE SENT UP
SUCH A LARGE SMOKE SIGNAL - STOP

Sebastian and Nic had become best of friends the first day of primary school, a union that hadn't pleased any of their teachers or anyone else forced to endure their countless shenanigans.

Few people know the secret to answering multiple RiPA messages at once, let alone have the talent to do so when traveling at the Vitesse's uppermost speed, but I managed it.

GOING TO GLASSHOUSE - STOP - YOU CAN MEET US THERE -
STOP

Turning onto our street caused a flower of relief to bloom in my chest. Overnight, it seemed

the trees that lined Trinovantes Avenue had burst into flaming color, vivid against the white brick facades and black wrought iron gates. Ahead, Glasshouse beckoned, sunlight glinting off the famous Rose Windows that spanned the upper story. The Artisans' Omnibus Tour never failed to point out that series to the occupants of the streetcars, noting the repeating floral patterns in sets of six, three, six.

"The number of letters in the phrase *Tempus est clavis*," they trumpeted through bullhorns. "'Time is key,' the Farthing family motto."

Perhaps realizing I was distracted, the Vitesse's motor chose that moment to hiccup and die. The contrary conveyance glided to a halt in the gutter, right between the neighboring Twin Spires and Pinkerton Manor.

"Hold on," I told Nic. For an answer, my twin toppled off the back of the cycle. Trying to catch him before he hit the ground, I bungled the dismount. A vicious rip emanated from the vicinity of my backside, but just now I had concerns beyond my wardrobe.

"No need to fuss," he tried to reassure me from the ground.

"Sorry, but I'm not buying what you're selling." Looping an arm around him, I heaved my brother to his feet and helped him to our stoop. Only when I went to insert my key did I notice that the front door stood ajar.

At another house, this might be construed as happenstance, the downstairs maid forgetting to close it after sweeping the stairs, perhaps. But not at Glasshouse. Such things would not be tolerated on Miss Evangeline Dreadnaught's vigilant watch. Above all else, our chatelaine subscribed to the motto "thou shalt not leave any detail unattended," and that certainly included front doors left open.

Reaching into my messenger bag, I pulled out my Pixii. Nic invented the personal safety device for me as soon as I was old enough to take the streetcar alone. Thumb to the resistance switch, I charged it with repeated depressions until I could make out its telltale whine. "Get behind me."

Nic squinted at me in puzzlement. "Whatever is the matter?"

I put my finger to his lips and nudged at the heavy front door. It swung inward without so much as a whisper—*bless Dreadnaught for her conscientious oiling!*—revealing another scene of wreckage. Rugs had been tugged from their proper places and left in woolen wrinkles along the hall. Occasional tables were overturned. Broken crystal and bruised flowers decorated the floor.

A few steps more and we stood in our parents' study. The damage inflicted here was precisely Methodical. Someone upended the room, turned out the drawers of the desks, rifled through the filing cabinets, removed the art from the walls, slashed open pillows and chaise cushions and even the leather armchairs. Feathers and cotton were scattered among the various oddities our parents collected over years of travel: petrified wood from the blood forests of Portola, the wired skeleton of a wolpertinger, souvenir spoons from at least thirty cities. Worst of all, the intruders smashed the hurricane of volcanic glass carried back from the underwater dome city of Halcyon. Recruited to the development engineering team, my parents fell in love while funneling salt water near enough the volcanic activity to heat it for the medicinal spas. They shared a Submersible to the surface and were inseparable ever since.

"What's happened?" Nic gave the back of my jacket a shake.

"Someone broke in." I towed him farther into the room. Surprisingly, the perpetrators spared the stained glass Aquaria that spanned the length of the far wall, with its pale green depths and coral-colored goldfish. However, one of the panels had been shifted to the side, revealing the inner workings of the gas lamps that gave the glass waterweeds the illusion of movement. Beyond that were several large and well-greased gears, two pulley systems, and a small rectangular wall safe. The latter was open, its papers scattered over the floor and the desks. "They've turned the room upside down and broken into the wall safe."

Nic pulled me back half a step with a hissed, "They could still be in the house."

~~"I don't think so," I said with a slow glance about to take in every detail. "They smashed the~~
face of the carriage clock when they were here. Happened about an hour ago."

"About the same time as the explosion at the factory," he said, unwilling to let go of me. "I somehow doubt that was a coincidence."

Gently prying my clothing from his grasp, I knelt in the debris and retrieved a glass daguerreotype. It was from the day Cygna was born and the only picture of the four Farthing children together: Nic and I at age eight, holding the baby between us, and eleven-year-old Dimitria standing behind. The glass was cracked down the middle, so I was quite literally picking up the pieces of our family. "I need to message Mama and Papa again. All of this is going to come as a nasty shock."

Nic tried to pick a path between the marble chess figurines and promptly fell over the remnant of the mirror that should have been hanging over the fireplace. Behind the desk, he squinted and reached for something.

"You might want to call in the police now." He held up our father's pocket watch by its long gold chain. "I think Mama and Papa were here when it happened."

Most men and women in Bazalgate society carry a watch that requires regular winding, one composed of balance wheels and screws and gears, but our father's elaborately engraved case held instead a miniature sundial set over a compass. Given the fact that my parents would rather crawl through a jungle atop an elephant than bask in wooden deck chairs, the gift served its purpose more than once. It was a unique timepiece, commissioned by my mother for a wedding gift, and my father was never without it.

My Ticker responded before I could, accelerating until I could hear my pulse in my ears. "Do you think the burglars hurt them?"

Peering ineffectually around the room, Nic shook his head. "I think they *took* them."

The pit in my stomach widened until I was afraid I might fall into it, never to climb back out. I walked over to Nic and took the pocket watch, wanting to believe that it somehow wasn't my father's. When I opened the case, though, there was the metal dial folded down over the compass. "But why—"

The sound of a boot snapping a bit of broken glass came from the hallway. I whirled about and raised the charged Pixii.

"Penny, don't," Nic warned, trying to catch hold of me.

Skirting an overturned table, I evaded his reaching hands. "Shut up and get down."

It was only a few steps back to the study doors, and I eased through the gap between them. Clouds wrapped sulky arms about the sun; in the resultant gloom, everything in the hallway was the enemy, from the broken furniture to the grandfather clock. The low whine of the Pixii in my ear settled alongside the rapid staccato of my Ticker. With the next step, I cursed the silk whisper of my skirts, but it didn't muffle the sound of a footfall behind me, another tinkle of disturbed glass before an arm about my waist lifted me from the ground. The strong hand over my mouth prevented me from calling out for help.

Like a shawl of frost, a sort of terrible calm settled over me. Twisting my hand about until I thought it might snap, I jammed the Pixii into my attacker's bare wrist.

No use lying to yourself, Farthing; this is going to hurt.

The Pixii discharged with a burst of phosphorescent blue light, and electricity shot through both of us. Every muscle in our bodies contracted, and then my assailant went limp. I stumbled forward but kept my feet. Instead of shuddering to a stop, my Ticker hammered merrily in my chest.

Nic vaulted into the hallway, brandishing a fire shovel. Still without his glasses, he'd need more than luck to land a blow, though he hadn't let that stop him. "What's happened now?"

"An ambush." It took me only a second to recharge the Pixii, and then I sat atop the intruder.

chest and jammed the metal foreprongs under his chin. “Rise and shine.”

—When the stranger opened his eyes, another frisson of white heat traveled from the base of my skull to every extremity, somehow just as real as the discharge from the Pixii. I peered into eyes so dark gray they were one blink away from black, and imagined ridiculous things: spreading a blanket for a picnic, sharing a pair of gold binoculars at the opera, snowy sled rides with furs up to our chins . . .

A sudden silence in my chest told me that the clockwork heart had ceased pumping the blood through my veins. I realized that I shouldn’t be touching this man, though he remained very still. Almost too still.

“I’m afraid you have me at something of a disadvantage, Miss Farthing,” he finally said.

“As you do me,” was all I said in response. I could feel the blood draining from my face. My hands went cold. My feet prickled as though snow-kissed. Looking down at him, I whispered, “So this is what dying feels like.”

The stranger caught me in his arms as I fell back, but Nic’s frantic shout seemed to come from a great distance. Remembering the jolt the Pixii gave me just a few minutes ago, I tried to tell Nic to use it again. My nearly incoherent mumbles must have conveyed the message. All at once I heard the whine of the charge, felt a rip and tear of fabric at my throat and cold metal against my skin, then the energy raced through me. My eyes flew open, and I gasped for air with a horrible sucking noise. I lay prone on the floor between the coatrack and the wall. The stranger knelt over me now, one hand gripping the Pixii.

Before I could say or do anything to reassure him, he charged it and zinged me a third time—what I deserved, perhaps, for attacking him earlier. I convulsed around the pain, then my words constricted to the wild gray gaze of the stranger as he took me by the shoulders.

“Miss Farthing!” He sounded like a Cylindrella record player, winding down. “Can you hear me?” He put his head to my chest and checked my respiratory functions. “Say something.”

“It . . . isn’t . . . nice . . . to electrocute people, sir,” I sputtered.

“She needs a stimulant,” Nic said, stumbling forward and tripping over the edge of the carpet. “And something sweet to bring up her blood sugar.”

“Plum cake would be nice.” Colors were brighter than they ought to be. I thought I could taste yellow.

“I’ll plum cake you!” Nic said. “I think that scared another ten years off my life!”

The first ten were scared off the day that Warwick implanted my clockwork heart.

“How long has she been having these kinds of episodes?” the newcomer asked, scooping me up in his arms and carrying me to the chaise in the study. After depositing me on one of the slashed-open cushions, he sat down next to me, arm at the ready to catch me if I toppled off. His sturdy presence was as reassuring as the light scents of his cologne and fresh linen, but his face was drawn.

“A month. Maybe two.” Nic stumbled in after us and felt his way to the desk. “Her ventriculator is already outmoded,” he added as he rummaged in the drawers. “It was only a prototype to begin with, and the doctors aren’t certain how much longer it will function. Warwick was developing a new Ticker for her when he was arrested.”

The sharp reek of ammonia carbonate cleared the rest of the fog from my head. Indeed, I could just make out the label under my very nose.

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My head recoiled, as though I'd been slapped, and several things came into rapid focus: the concern on my brother's face, the stranger's uniform of charcoal wool, the fact that I had just been attacked, and then saved, by a soldier.

"I'm afraid you still have me at a disadvantage, sir," I said.

"Marcus Kingsley," he said, offering me a small nod. "Proprietor and Legatus legionus of the Ferrum Viriae."

Thoroughly taken aback by the introduction, I blinked. We'd never met socially or professionally, but anyone with an eye to the broadsheets knew the Kingsley name. Marcus only recently inherited the military empire; still, it was common knowledge that disarming any member of Ferrum Viriae required stealth, cunning, and heavy artillery if one wished to avoid precipitous termination.

For the moment, though, I was alive and fairly tingling with it. As was he, it would seem, from the flakes of brilliant scarlet that painted his cheekbones. I struggled to sit up, not wanting him to have the advantage of looking down at me in any way.

"Thank you for coming to my aid," I said, "but could you explain exactly what you are doing skulking about our home when you ought to be supervising your soldiers at the courthouse?"

Though only nineteen or twenty, Marcus wore the air of a much older person the same way he wore his uniform: with excessive amounts of starch. He replied slowly, as though ironing out every word to perfect crispness. "Seconds after we received word about the factory explosion, one of your neighbors called in a burglary. The moment I heard it was Glasshouse, I put my second-in-command in charge and came to investigate. Tensions are running high in the city because of the trial, and against my advice, your family refused a protective detail. Where are your parents?"

A masculine shout of "Penny?" came from the front door followed by a louder, feminine "Nic, where are you?" from the hall. Violet and Sebastian charged into the study, skidding to a halt several feet away. There was a lot for them to take in, what with the house in disarray, a bloodied and battered Nic squinting at them, the collar of my bodice ripped away from my neck, and Marcus Kingsley sitting next to me on the chaise.

"Gracious, Nic," Violet said, striding toward him as she yanked off her gloves. Taking his face in her hands, she turned him toward the light. "You look as though you've had quite the time of it this morning."

"And it isn't even luncheon yet." Nic tried to smile but only achieved a grimace.

Standing, he allowed himself the small luxury of putting his arms about her and resting his head atop hers. With my breath still rattling in my lungs, I realized that if I was a cookie crumbling before his very eyes, Violet was a ship's biscuit: sturdy and in no need of coddling. Ever prepared, she pulled a spare pair of Nic's glasses from her reticule.

"Stirling," Marcus said, rising from the chaise to offer his hand in greeting.

"Kingsley." Struggling to recover his usual air of nonchalance, Sebastian accepted the handshake. As always, he was dressed like a model on the cover of *The Dapper Gentleman Quarterly*, but his shoulder-length hair and aristocratically thin mustache were currently tinted the ice-blue of saffyre gin. His eyes were the same dazzling color, but right now they were obscured by smoked-glass spectacles. He'd inherited his good looks, cheerful demeanor, and eye for the ladies from his father. His weakness for infernal, newfangled contraptions and rakish gentlemen came from

his mother. Like both his parents before him, Sebastian was involved in every profitable venture in Industria as well as countless abroad. “Did we arrive in time for the festivities, or is this the after party?”

“Penny’s Ticker is troubling her.” Nic hooked the wires of his spectacles behind his ears, his face puckering again with worry. “She needs to go up to bed and rest. I’ll send to Currey Hospital for one of the surgeons.”

“No, you won’t.” From the sturdy chain hanging about my neck, I retrieved a gold key, warm from nestling against my skin. Marcus popped several buttons off my collar when administering the jolt from the Pixii, so I merely had to nudge the fabric aside to access the brass faceplate set just under my left clavicle. Another demoiselle might have blushed, but the faceplate was located well above the ruffles atop my corset, and I’d been examined by so many doctors that I’d no patience for false modesty. I slid the key into place with a small click. “I must have forgotten to wind my Ticker this morning.”

Violet gave me a narrow look. No doubt she wondered if I’d lied to her at SugarWerks or if I was lying now, but I would have died thrice over before admitting that Marcus had been the one to almost kill me, that his body pressed to mine and the heat between us had been enough to stop my heart. His gray eyes were on me as I tightened the mainspring. The muscles in my chest constricted under the combined pressure.

I am more than a pretty little windup doll.

But he knew that, somehow. There was respect in his eyes, alongside something decidedly personal. I paid back his attention with interest, wanting to see how long it would take him to avert his gaze. We were well on our way to a full-blown staring contest when Nic interrupted.

“I do wish you’d take more care with yourself,” he said, wiping a handkerchief over his glasses and resettling them on his face. “I swear you’ll forget your name one of these days, Penny.”

It was a variation on the theme he’d played since the implant, seeing ominous shadows in every passing rain cloud. Fresh frown lines pinched the bridge of his nose. His eyes, once as merry as mine, were dark and somber.

“Thankfully, you’ll always be there to remind me of it.” I reached out and gave his arm a squeeze, trying to convey through layers of cotton and wool that I was stronger than he thought.

Before I could offer further reassurances, six men entered the study, guns raised.

In Which Hazards Appear Around Every Hedge

“Stand down!” Marcus barked at them. Under the command was steel. Steel, and layers of reinforced Chytin body armor.

They immediately lowered their weapons.

“The rest of the house is clear,” the tallest of them said. “Save for rooms on the top floor we couldn’t access.”

I let go of a breath I hadn’t known I was holding and explained. “The bedrooms have combination locks on the doors. There’s no way to access them without chopping a hole in the wall.”

The soldier spared me a nod. “No other breaches or signs of forced entry at the back or side doors. And no sign of any of the staff.”

“We’ve only a chatelaine, and today’s market day,” Nic said. “She wouldn’t have been here to thank goodness.”

When Marcus reached into his pocket, the charcoal wool fell back far enough from his waist to reveal a holstered Magnetic Acceleration Gun. The MAG’s metallic inlays and soldered joints tempted my professional curiosity, but I knew better than to try to reach for it without his permission.

Rather than draw the weapon, he flipped open a leather-bound notebook and assessed the room with a keen glance. “You never answered me before. Where are your parents?”

I hesitated to voice my suspicions. Perhaps it had something to do with Marcus’s swift arrival here on one of the most important days in Bazalgate’s judicial history. Or it was the way he studied the mess of papers on Papa’s desk that warned me I ought to keep my suspicions to myself. Never in my mind that there was always the possibility that my father had simply forgotten his watch this morning.

I’ll look a right fool if Mama and Papa turn up in time for tea.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” I answered. “I sent my mother a RiPA message, but she hasn’t answered it yet.”

“I have a unit down at the factory questioning your supervisor, but is there anything you can tell me? Anything out of the ordinary you noticed before the blast?” Marcus looked at Nic, who shook his head.

“One minute I was gathering my things, the next I was on the floor.”

“What about here?” Marcus scanned the room again. “I know the damage makes it difficult to tell, but does anything appear to be missing?”

“We won’t know until we put the house back in order.” I gave him a well-practiced smile of dismissal. “We’ll be sure to file a full report once we’ve a list, but we don’t want to keep you any longer. You’re needed at the courthouse.”

He automatically glanced at the military-encoded RiPA he wore on his left wrist. “I’m expecting a quarter-hour report any minute now. They should be close to announcing the verdict.”

“You ought to be there when that happens,” I said. “Perhaps there’ll be a riot.” I didn’t want to think about such a possibility.

Neither did Marcus, it seemed. His gaze flickered about the room, monitoring the waning

threat level. "You need a safety detail. I can spare two or three soldiers to man the doors."

~~I flapped a hand at him, doing my best impression of Grandmother Pendleton, who did not~~ suffer the advice of others. "Nonsense. I'll have the locksmith around within the hour. Once Dreadnaught returns, she'll make short work of the mess."

Undeterred, Marcus peered hard into my face, as though trying to peel back the layers of lies and read the truth in my eyes. Whatever he lacked in battle instincts, that look of his burned me all the way down to my boots.

Sixteen years of swapping whoppers with my twin hadn't been for nothing. I met Marcus' gaze with my most guileless expression. "We'll be fine."

"Are you certain?" he asked.

"I am," I said. "We are grateful for your prompt response." He might have six inches and fifty pounds on me, but there was no need to shove him out the door. I lowered my voice to a stage whisper. "Don't fret, Mister Kingsley. I won't tell anyone that I laid you out flat in my entryway. I'm sure that would be bad for business."

Blotches of red reappeared on his cheeks, like I'd slapped him. He turned and ordered his men out with a clipped, "We're done here."

We watched the soldiers depart in shared silence. Violet still had her arms about Nic's waist, the brilliant spikes of her hair standing out in stark contrast to his bloody shirtfront. Her iridescent blue fingernails glittered when she trailed them over the holes in the cotton.

"You should go to the hospital," she said to him.

"We've bigger problems than a little blood."

"You're lucky to have escaped with only a couple of scratches to show for it." Sebastian's expression took a turn for the serious. "Are you in pain? If you need something to take the edge off, I have these lovely little purple pills I picked up on my last trip to Bhaskara." Taking a silver case out of his pocket, he offered it to Nic.

My twin smiled and shook his head. "I've told you that your habit of collecting foreign medications is a bad one, yes?"

"At least a dozen times. But you've no need of pills, foreign or otherwise, if you can survive a nuclear explosion and live to lecture me," Sebastian said easily, opening the case and shaking out a tablet for himself. "I felt the tremor in my office halfway across town. Looked out the window to see smoke plumes and emergency vehicles headed your way. The broadsheet sellers are already squawking, but I like to get my information straight from the source—"

He was interrupted by a startled shriek that emanated from the kitchen. Seconds later Dreadnaught entered the room. Her eyes were wide with horror, and she had her hand pressed to her mouth. If I was the "First of the Augmented!" (as dubbed by the press), then she was the less-heralded second. After reading about my surgery in the broadsheets, Dreadnaught arrived on our doorstep with her right arm half-twisted out of the socket, the appendage rendered limp and useless by a factory accident. As soon as my father could get clearance from the medical board at Currey Hospital, a team of research surgeons Augmented everything from the shoulder down. Only the brass glint between her sleeve and a black glove betrayed her.

"The kitchen is chaos. The goose I was roasting is blackened, vegetables are all over the floor, half the good china is smashed . . . Did a bomb go off while I was at the market?" While each of us struggled to formulate an answer that would placate her, she contemplated us over the sea of ruin. "Would one of you explain what transpired here?"

Nic found his voice first. "Someone broke into the house while we were gone. Fortunately you weren't here when it happened."

While the housekeeper surveyed the mess in her hall with pursed lips, I couldn't help but think

it was the burglars who were fortunate they'd already made their escape. Dreadnaught removed her neat straw going-out hat, turned up the gas lamps and then her sleeves. Moving with the grace and speed of a hummingbird, she cleared the worst of the broken glass as we straightened the rugs and righted the tables.

She retrieved her hat and moved to the door. "I'll fetch some refreshments."

"Yes, please." I was suddenly ravenous. When she returned, not only did I finish a cup of tea but drank two more, consumed a plateful of sandwiches, and topped that off with a slice of lemon cake. The others watched me, no doubt fearing I might collapse face-first into the cart at any second but I felt marvelous.

"Her appetite seems good," Sebastian said with great diplomacy as he bypassed the tea service and headed for the liquor cabinet.

"I've seen horses eat less in one sitting," was Violet's way of putting it. "Now tell me what happened at the factory."

In between bites, the morning's events came out in a rush. When I described the explosion Violet lost her appetite and passed me her untouched slice of cake. Hand hovering over the Gentian Amaros, Sebastian blinked twice and moved straight from herbal aperitifs to hard liquor. I finished with the Vitesse ride across town, finding the house upturned, and Marcus's arrival on the scene. Had the carriage clock not been smashed, I'm certain I would have heard it ticking in the utter silence that followed my narrative.

Violet commenced cracking her knuckles, just as she always did when perturbed. "Do you have any idea who'd want to break in?" she asked, working her way through the letters in BAKE.

I should have been stuffed with cake and tea, but lemon sponge couldn't fill the dreadful hole in my stomach. Shaking my head, I tapped out yet another message on my RiPA. "We should have heard from my parents by now."

"If you're feeling well enough, we ought to drive down to the courthouse to meet them," Sebastian finished his drink and set his glass down on the tray.

Before I could agree or Nic could offer an argument, the pipes in the wall set up such a rattling that we all cringed. Rising from the chaise, I made my way to the vintage Calliope in the corner. It hadn't been used with any regularity since Papa installed the PaperTape machine, but it still had the capacity to send and deliver message cylinders all over the city via pneumatic tubes. It was a gleaming thing, thanks to Dreadnaught's many hours of polishing. As a child, I'd been fascinated by the receiving tray that looked exactly like an enormous lion's head.

The message cylinder arrived with the clatter of metal against metal. When I reached into the feline's mouth, a sharp tooth grazed my skin. The scratch was a line of red crimestones in the gaslight. Blood dribbled between my fingers and onto the message cylinder. Cold and smooth against my hand, it bore none of the usual decorative etchings and lacked a maker's mark to identify it. Rolling it over, I noted the grooves in the brass, tested its weight, and examined the clasp. Not locked, thank goodness. Lacking a key, I'd require a combination of three explosives to get this open, two of which are illegal within Bazalgate city limits and the third rumored never to have existed at all.

"Open it, Penny." Nic's command was softly voiced.

"Do. I'm always in the mood for a good mystery," Sebastian said.

Flicking the clasp, I extracted the typed missive within.

Master and Miss Farthing:

We politely asked your parents for the notes and the diagrams pertaining to the more complicated Augmentation procedures, but they declined to relinquish them. Your parents

are now residing with us, having graciously accepted our invitation to reconsider the matter. ~~We suggest most firmly that if you care to see your mother and father again, you will locate the items they refused us. You have until noon tomorrow, when we will deliver your next set of instructions.~~

By the time I finished reading, I'd gripped the paper so hard that it was crumpled along both edges.

"How did they sign it?" Sebastian wanted to know.

"They didn't." I read the note over again, seeking out some clue that would tell us who'd sent it. Without warning, the paper spontaneously burst into flames and disappeared into a cloud of cough-inducing smoke. Yelping, I danced back.

Nic rushed to check my hands. "Are you badly burned?"

I shook my head and held them up. "Not even singed. What *was* that?"

Sebastian offered an answer. "It's high-security stationery. Only meant to be read once before combusting."

"Just how do you know that?" Violet asked.

"Remember my moving-picture project?" Realizing his tie was crooked, Sebastian straightened the bit of silk. "A sample of 'spypaper' came with my orders for the nitrocellulose film we're using to shoot the first movie. Fun to play with, but damned dangerous stuff to have hanging about the place."

Violet went to pour a generous lemon and Fizz. "Don't you think the Edoceon must be responsible for this? They've been pushing for an Augmentation ban since Warwick was arrested."

"They were protesting at the Heart of the Star this morning," I said, the memory cracking open like the bottle under the Vitesse's wheel. "They shouted threats at me. One of them said the tables were turning."

"There you have it." Violet dispensed a second drink, sloshing out sparkling wine and citrus syrup in a fashion that made Sebastian shudder. Elbowing him aside, she handed the glass to Nic. "It's not 'reeducating the public' when they destroy personal property and kidnap civilians. You need to file a report right now. The Ferrum Viriae can have the Edoceon under lock and key in less than a day."

"I don't think it's that simple." Much as I would like the mystery solved so swiftly, a different suspicion tickled the back of my mind again. "What if Marcus is the one who broke into the house?"

The rest of them stared at me, their faces painted in varying shades of confusion and dismay.

"You can't think he would actually do such a thing," Nic said. He was the spitting image of our father at his most worried; it was an expression the two of them perfected over countless doctor visits and overseas excursions to specialists. "He's duty bound to serve Industria."

"Precisely my reasoning," I countered. "The kidnapers want the Augmentation schematic. For all we know, Kingsley wants to use that information to build an army of Augmented soldiers. He could have been dragging our parents out the back door even as I took the Pixii to him."

"Don't tell me you felled the great Marcus Kingsley with that pocket zinger of yours," Sebastian asked. When I nodded, he looked amused and annoyed all at once. "Dash it all, I would have paid good money to see that! Other people would have done the same. We could have sold tickets." He finished his drink and set the glass down on the occasional table.

"It was about as satisfying as you might expect," I conceded, "but it doesn't change the fact that I can't call him back here. We can't bring in the Ferrum Viriae. If Marcus is involved, we might be the next to disappear."

"So if we aren't ringing the police, what are we doing?" Violet asked.

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