THE RUBY AIRSHIP

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SUMMARY:
RÉMY HAS LEFT THE CIRCUS AND HER LIFE AS A THIEF, BUT SHE DOUBTS THAT
DETECTIVE THADDEUS REC WILL EVER TRULY TRUST HER.

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For my mum and dad, with love –
a ruby airship for your ruby wedding year.
It was late, or — depending on your point of view — perhaps very early. Outside the theater, the streets of Shoreditch were cast in deep shadow. Rémy slipped out of the Albert Saloon’s stage door and stopped for a moment, looking up. The moon was curved and yellow, like a hard heel of cheese discarded against the tablecloth of the London sky. From somewhere close by came a rattling clatter, followed by the unholy racket of two alley cats doing battle.

Rémy loved this time of night. She liked it in any town or village, but when she walked the streets of London after midnight it felt as if she were seeing a different world. It was a fairy-tale world: magical, but
as cruel as it was enchanting. London by night was a reflection of itself. The people living in it were different, as dark as their surroundings. Rémy enjoyed the danger of walking among them, seen but untouched. She had been one of them, once; plotting dark deeds by the light of only a candle and the meager moon. But that had been before. Now, she was free, as long as she was careful... as long as certain parts of the law didn’t find her.

She set off for Limehouse Basin, still energized by her recent performance. Less than twenty minutes ago, Rémy had still been on the stage. It was Saturday: payday. The coins jangled in Rémy’s pocket as she pulled up the black hood of her heavy cloak against the early bite of frost. She was heading home, back to the Professor’s old workshop.

They’d been there three months now, she and J — after all, it seemed a pity to let the old place go to ruin when they were both homeless. Rémy had taken over the Professor’s private study as her bedroom, and J — on the rare occasion that the boy slept — had the use of a small anteroom off the main floor. So she hadn’t been alone since the circus had left London, even if a certain young policeman’s visits had become less frequent than she might have once hoped.

She quickened her step, replacing thoughts of Thaddeus Rec with thoughts of food and hoping that J had left her something on the stove. Ahead of her, a carriage rattled along the narrow road before turning a corner, disappearing through the tame halo of light thrown down by a gas lamp. In her head, Rémy tried to rehearse the new routine she’d been formulating for the past week or so. The problem with being a permanent fixture at a theater instead of in a touring circus was thinking up enough new tricks to keep the audiences coming back.

A piercing shriek shattered the gloom. There came another and then another. It wasn’t cats this time, it was something even more chilling. There were shouts, men’s voices overlaid by the whinnying of terrified horses and a series of sharp bangs that sounded like someone hammering against wood with fist or foot. Then more screams, echoing through the gaslight, shivering along the road toward her like ghosts.

Rémy ran to the corner of the street. The unlit road beyond was very dark, cast in such blackness that it was almost impossible to see what was happening. Quickly, Rémy reached into a pocket and pulled out the night glasses she’d borrowed from J, slipping them on. The world immediately took on a faint green
tinge, but at least she was no longer blind. The carriage
that had passed Rémy a few moments before stood in
the middle of the road at a skewed angle. The petrified
horses reared between the shafts, screaming as
only a scared animal can. Rémy looked for the driver
and spotted a figure lying slumped and still against the
curb. Two men were hammering at the door of the
carriage, their voices menacingly loud in the dark.

"Open up, lady!"

"No need to fear us, lovely — all we want are those
sparklers."

"Tha's right. Hand 'em over, and you'll be right as
rain. Make it difficult, and we'll . . ."

Rémy looked around, but the streets were deserted.
More screams came from inside the carriage as the two
ruffians began to rock it, tilting it on its thin wheels.
The horses were going crazy, and Rémy couldn't
understand why they hadn't bolted. Then she saw the
scrawny boy standing bravely between them, holding
on to their reins as if his life depended on it, which
it probably did. She strained to hear any other male
voices, but there were none. The woman — and there
was only one, she thought — must have been traveling
alone. That was unusual, not to mention dangerous,
especially at this time and in this part of the city.

Rémy bit her lip. How did she get herself into
these things? She slipped off her cloak. Beneath it, she
was dressed in her everyday clothes, which were not
the sort the folk of London were used to seeing on a
young woman. She wore a black corset with a loose
black shirt underneath, open at the neck. Around her
waist was a wide leather utility belt that had a place
for everything from her lock-picks to her night glasses.
Rémy’s slim, agile legs were clad in black breeches,
tucked into tall, black leather boots. Her dark hair was
still up from being on the wire, twisted into a coil and
pinned neatly against the back of her head. Rémy also
hadn’t removed her stage mask, the iridescent black
bird that she had taken to painting over her eyes, nose,
and lips to disguise her face. On the wire, it was spell-
binding — on the dark streets of night-London, it was
fearful.

She ran out of the shadows and into the street.
Surprise was the best tactic — if she could take one
of them out before the other realized what was
happening, they’d be one-to-one before the fight even
began. A few yards before she reached the melee,
Rémy pirouetted, launching herself into the air in
a quick spin and kicking out at the back of the first
man’s right leg. He crumpled like a sack of potatoes as
her toes connected, his knees hitting the slabs below so hard that he screeched in pain. Rémy was already deep into another turn, yanking herself around so fast that the street became a blur. This blow was aimed higher, and by the time her free foot landed back on solid ground, the man was out cold, sprawled headlong over the filth of the broken cobbles.

The second man realized what was happening just as his companion lost consciousness. He lunged at her. Rémy sprang sideways and then, in two nimble leaps, was on top of the carriage, eliciting another series of screams from the woman inside. The lumbering brute tried to reach her, but Rémy side-stepped and brought the heel of her boot down on his fat fingers. He yelled, jerking backward and almost stumbling over the inert figure of his colleague.

Rémy leaped again, head-height to the scoundrel as she sailed out of the dark, her knee cracking into his chin and then, once she’d landed, her third spin-and-kick leveled at his crotch. He folded in half like a cheap penknife, winded and cursing. She stood in front of him and lifted one foot to push against his shoulder. He slumped to the ground.

The horses bolted, let loose as the boy who’d been holding them scarpered. The animals lurched along the street, no longer in step with each other and completely without regard for the carriage harnessed behind them. The screams from the woman inside grew even more frantic as the two animals tried to escape. The carriage careened erratically down the road and away.

Rémy ran after it, splashing through the stinking, murky puddles to draw level with the foam-flecked gelding in the leftmost shaft. His neck was stretched; his head down and pushed forward, his ears back. She tried to grab at the reigns, but the horse, its eyes rolling in fear, jerked its head up and away from her hand. Rémy ran on, the muscles of her legs burning as they came to a corner. For one terrifying moment she thought the two horses were going to choose different directions, but then the second followed the first and crashed right, almost upturning the carriage as they slewed it against one of the ragged houses lining the street.

There was nothing for it. If she wanted to stop them, Rémy was going to have to take the driver’s place. She dropped back slightly and then leaped at the front of the carriage, her feet hitting the running board as she flung herself across the driver’s footrest. The screams from inside the carriage rose again like an
orchestra reaching a crescendo, as Rémy scrambled up, first to her knees, then to her feet, grabbing the reigns.

Rémy stood on the driver’s seat of the carriage. Feeling it tilt and move beneath her, she kept her knees unlocked to help her balance. The horses strained against her as she pulled back on the reigns. Then they began to slow, responding first to the bit and then to the familiarity of having a driver. Eventually, they found pace with each other, and then, finally, with her.

Rémy brought them to a stop, pulling the carriage in against the curb and taking a breath.

“Hey there,” she called to the occupant of the carriage. “If you will tell me where to go, I will take you home. I can’t let go of the horses or they may bolt again.”

There was a moment’s silence. Rémy pushed her night glasses up into her hair and spoke to the trembling, exhausted horses in the way she’d learned from the horsemen of the circus — *Breathe through your nose, Rémy, with horses you must always breathe through your nose* — trying to keep them calm. Then there came the sound of wood rubbing against wood as the carriage’s window opened. Rémy twisted around to see an elegant woman peering up at her, her hair coiled elaborately atop her head.

“H-Hello?”

“Good evening, mademoiselle,” said Rémy. “Are you well?”

“Sh-shaken, but mostly unharmed — thanks to you. I owe you my life. Th-thank you.”

“You are welcome, mademoiselle —”

“I am Lady Sarah Valentine.”

“You are welcome, Lady Sarah,” Rémy adjusted. “I will take you home, if you will tell me your address?”

“Hanover Square, Miss — it is Miss, isn’t it? Who are you?”

Rémy smiled, suddenly remembering the grease-paint still covering her face. “Sit back and calm your nerves, my lady. I will have you home quick-smart.” She turned back to the horses and, a second later, heard the window grind shut again.

“Hey — you!” Rémy called as a shoeless little boy in tattered trousers slunk out of an alleyway beside them. “Want to earn your breakfast?”

He nodded eagerly and came closer. His expression changed as she came into better view — the black bird on her face cast a shadow of fear over him. Rémy dug a coin from her pocket and dropped it into his outstretched hand. “The driver of this carriage is injured. He’s lying against the curb in Worship Street. See that
he's taken care of. And see this?” She pointed to her face and the mask painted there. “Cheat me and this will come looking for you. D'accord?”

The boy nodded and then, in the space of a shattered second, was gone into the night.

The rest of the journey was uneventful as Rémy drove the carriage from the shadowy murk of the East End into the richer, though hardly cleaner, parts of London. As soon as she’d turned into Hanover Square, a group of men started toward the carriage. They’d obviously been waiting anxiously for the return of Lady Sarah.

“Who the devil are you?” asked one, as Rémy drew to a halt before the grand house.

“Lady Sarah met with some . . . misfortune on her journey this evening,” Rémy explained. “I was able to assist her.”

“Were you, by Jove,” said the man as a liveried footman darted past him to open the carriage door. “And what the blazes have you done with Evans, my driver?”

Lady Sarah appeared, helped down from the carriage by the servant, and for the first time Rémy saw her full finery. She wore a dress of sky blue, edged and embroidered in fine gold thread. At her throat was a sapphire of a matching hue, large enough to take Rémy’s breath away. It was Lady Sarah’s fingers, though, that truly made Rémy’s heart thump. Each was adorned with a ring bearing an enormous precious stone, and none spoke louder to the former jewel thief than the huge ruby on her index finger. She realized that Lady Sarah was looking at her intently as she spoke to the man, who appeared to be her husband.

“Charles, do show this young lady some manners. She single-handedly saw off a bunch of ruffians who accosted me and then tamed the horses before the carriage could fall to pieces. I owe her my life, or if not my life, then at the very least my jewels.”

Charles peered over her shoulder. “Where’s your feckless brother? Weren’t you under his protection?”

Lady Sarah glanced down at her hands. “He left me during the intermission. He’s probably at the gaming tables as we speak.”

Charles made a disgusted sound in his throat, and then glanced angrily up at Rémy. “Well, I am in your debt, whoever you are . . . if you were indeed Lady Sarah’s savior and not part of the plot.”

“Charles!”

Rémy jumped from the driver’s seat to the ground in one fluid movement to stand before them both.
“I am sorry, my dear,” began Lady Sarah, “for my husband’s rudeness. I know I am greatly indebted to you. How can I repay your efforts?”

Rémy shook her head. “I need nothing, Lady Sarah. I will leave you now. Good night.”

She began to walk away, but Lady Sarah stopped her with a hand on her arm. When Rémy turned back, she saw that the woman was pulling the ruby ring from her slender finger.

“Here,” said Lady Sarah, “please, take it. I saw how your gaze was drawn to it.”

Rémy stared at the glittering jewel in the palm of Lady Sarah’s hand. “No, my Lady, really —”

“Take it,” the woman ordered. “As you see, I have many jewels. And how many does one woman need? Besides, I heard you pay the boy to help poor Evans, and so you are out of pocket, too. Take it as a token of my thanks.”

Rémy did as she was told. The ruby was warm, as if the jewel contained a miniature fire, burning safely in its belly. Lady Sarah smiled once more, and then turned to join her husband, sweeping up the steps of her fine home and into the comfort beyond.

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By the time Rémy finally made it back to Limehouse Basin and the Professor’s workshop, it was so late that the sky over the river was beginning to take on the pink tinge of dawn. Weary and starving, she pushed open the door to find the cluttered space empty and still, save for the flickering of embers in the fireplace grate. Rémy sighed, trying not to feel the disappointment that weighed upon her heart. She had half-hoped that Thaddeus would be there, waiting for her to get home, as he used to in the weeks after she and J had first moved in. She wondered where he was and whether he was thinking of her at all.


“\textit{You realize, of course},” said Lord Falconer from over the candelabra at the other end of the table, “\textit{that the situation in India is not merely one of economics, but of ideology, too.}”

There was a general murmuring of assent. Or perhaps it was dissent — Thaddeus Rec couldn’t be sure. He stared down at the shallow dish of soup that had appeared before him. It was green and had the aroma of peas. The policeman — Detective Inspector now, no less — had been dreading the soup course ever since he had learned that he would have to attend this dinner. Soup generally ended up down his front instead of in his mouth. And this one was green, for goodness’ sake! Thaddeus blinked, imagining the horror of tipping food down his only good white shirt in front of the assorted gentry around Sir Henry Strong’s elegant dinner table. The thought made him feel faintly sick.

The conversation about the state of the Empire rumbled on around him. Thaddeus wondered again, for the millionth time, just how he had ended up in such eminent company. He’d be happier down by the docks, clearing out the opium dens of the city’s lost souls or chasing pickpockets through Whitechapel. But ever since the affair of the Shah of Persia’s diamond, Thaddeus had been no ordinary London policeman. He had been held up as a shining example of good policing by Queen Victoria herself, which is how the boy from the East End had ended up as the youngest detective inspector in her Majesty’s constabulary. At the time, Thaddeus hadn’t realized that his promotion would mean less actual police work and more fiddling about at evenings such as this. Apparently, though, it came with the territory.

Everyone else was beginning to eat. Thaddeus glanced down at his enemy, the spoon, and noticed that the cuff of his shirt was poking out from beneath his black jacket. It was frayed, betraying its age. He’d borrowed the dinner suit from the Professor’s stash.
of disguises, but he hadn’t been able to find a decent white shirt to go beneath it. Buying a new one was out of the question. An inspector’s salary, it turned out, wasn’t that much more than a constable’s.

“Perhaps the young monsieur has an — how you say? — insight on the situation? He must surely come across similar during his duties as one of ’er Majesty’s police?”

It took Thaddeus a moment to register that the speaker was addressing him. He looked up to find the eyes of the entire table trained in his direction. Opposite, the man who had spoken — the Comte de Cantal — was watching him with calculating eyes and an unfriendly smile. The ladies present obviously found the Comte handsome, as they had been twittering behind their hands about him ever since he had stepped into the room earlier that evening. To Thaddeus, the man seemed strangely snake-like. An unusually thin, curling scar stood out on his left cheek, and all his movements were sly and darting. If he’d been dressed in street garb, Thaddeus would have pegged him for a pickpocket.

“Forgive me,” the man said, flicking his cool gaze away with a lazy shrug. “I have neglected — I should address you as Lord, no doubt?”

Thaddeus’s fingers twitched away from the spoon. “Er — no.”

“Ah,” said the stranger, his soft French accent caressing the English words with undue care, as if to make them hang around longer than necessary. “Sir, then. Sir — I’m sorry, what is your name?”

Thaddeus clenched his jaw. Sir Henry had introduced everyone upon their arrival, and there were not so many present that it was difficult to remember who was who. Particularly since Thaddeus was the only guest with no honorific title. The Comte de Cantal knew full well the policeman’s name and that nothing went in front of it. Which was, the policeman surmised, the reason the nobleman had drawn attention to him with such cunning mockery. It wasn’t the first time that someone had chosen to point out his true station in life among polite company. For Thaddeus, it had become just another tedious aspect of his promotion.

“Neither am I a Sir, Comte,” Thaddeus said, with a faint smile of his own. “I am merely Thaddeus Rec, born and bred of London town.”

“Come now, Rec,” spluttered their host, Sir Henry, from his seat at the table’s head. “There’s no ‘merely’ about it, my boy. Rec is the very future of the force,
Comte, the very future! We are lucky that he has found time to grace our little soiree, what?”

The Comte’s handsome, angular face momentarily twisted into a grimace but was just as quickly forced back into a grin as he looked directly at Thaddeus. “The future, yes,” he said, “and how bright the future must be, no? If even one such as yourself may prosper in the glow.”

Thaddeus understood. Just a year ago, he would have been nothing to most of these people. Born on the streets of the East End, parentless, homeless, Thaddeus Rec had clawed his way up out of the gutter. There were plenty of those, such as the Comte, who wished he had not. For how many other commoners might decide they had the right to follow in his footsteps?

Thaddeus forced a pleasant smile on to his face and was about to reply when Sir Henry stepped in again. “Perhaps you did not hear, Comte,” Sir Henry began, “about the shocking events surrounding the theft of the Shah of Persia’s diamond. It is called the Ocean of Light, you know — quite the biggest in the world, excepting her Majesty’s own stone, the Mountain of Light, of course. Well, if not for Rec here, it would have disappeared into the clutches of a circus brat — one of your countrywomen, in fact, now I come to think of it. She was rather famous in your parts, I believe. Now, what was her name? Something flighty, something — well, you know — typically French.”

Thaddeus made no reply, but his stomach churned at the thought of Rémy’s stage name being mentioned in connection with the crime. She was still a wanted criminal, still in London — and he knew exactly where she was.

“Le Petit Moineau,” murmured the Comte. “In English, I believe you call her Little Bird.” Thaddeus found the Frenchman looking at him with renewed interest, though his gaze was no friendlier. “She has been wanted in France for some years, as you say, Sir Henry, but she always seems to slip the net. Well, well, well. So this is the man who thwarted the best jewel thief in Europe. Or almost, at least, no? I congratulate you, Monsieur Rec. An achievement indeed.”

Thankfully, at that point the conversation moved on, although Thaddeus had not missed the Comte’s final jibe. Neither was he ignorant of the Frenchman’s inquisitive gaze as the evening continued. Thaddeus survived the soup course and the fish course, too. They were embarking on the meat course — a huge
hunk of beef that had been broiled with onions — when the Comte spoke again. This time his words were only for Thaddeus’s ears.

“Tell me, Rec,” he said softly, “the time of the theft of the Darye-ye Noor and your subsequent investigation. That was also when Lord Abernathy disappeared so mysteriously from London, yes?”

The Comte’s casual mention of Abernathy in connection with the diamond’s theft almost made Thaddeus choke on his food. He forced himself to stay calm, looking at the Frenchman with a deliberately puzzled frown.

“I’m sorry, Comte? Lord who?”

Something unpleasant flickered in the Comte’s dark eyes. He leaned back, pausing before he spoke again. “You do not remember the case? Strange, for I believe the Lord in question was present when the jewel first disappeared. I thought I heard tell that he had even been the one to help the girl thief into the Tower of London on the night the diamond was stolen.”

“Ah,” said Thaddeus, pretending to remember. “Indeed, you are right, of course. I did not know, however, that Lord Abernathy was said to have disappeared. You mean no one has seen him recently? I am afraid I was so busy during that investigation —”

“But of course,” the Comte whispered, with a rather mocking nod. “You were . . . busy.”

Thaddeus picked up his champagne glass and took a sip. “Lord Abernathy was an elderly gentleman, wasn’t he? I am not certain that he disappeared so much as . . .”

“Died?” The Comte de Cantal supplied the word with a sharp tongue and shot Thaddeus a piercing look. “It is possible, I suppose. Although for that to happen with no one to hear about it . . . Strange, do you not think?”

The policeman felt sweat begin to prick at his brow and cursed himself, hoping that this strange Frenchman could not see his discomfort. Thaddeus had a terrible feeling about this man. Did he know something about the truth of what had happened beneath the streets of London? What Abernathy had sought to bring about through his army of infernal machines? Surely not. Abernathy and his men had died, thanks to Rémy’s own willingness to sacrifice herself. Only she, Thaddeus, Desai, and J knew the truth of what had happened.

He was trying to come up with an appropriate reply to the Comte’s question when a butler entered the room and spoke to his master.
“Comte,” said Sir Henry a moment later, "there is a messenger outside for you. He insists on speaking to you in person. Rec, there is a message for you, too. Go on, Jackson, give it to him, don’t delay!"

The Comte stood, dabbing his mouth with his napkin in an elaborate show of delicacy. He bowed to the table. “My apologies, dear friends, for this interruption. Please excuse me for a moment.”

Thaddeus watched the Frenchman as he departed the table, but the Comte did not look at him. Jackson appeared at Thaddeus’s shoulder, proffering a silver tray that held one small sealed envelope with his name scrawled untidily upon it. The policeman recognized the hand at once — it was from his sergeant, Collins. Tearing open the envelope, Thaddeus read the enclosed note and grimaced.

“A problem, Rec?” Sir Henry asked.

“I am afraid so, Sir Henry,” Thaddeus told him, standing. “I am sorry, but I must take my leave. Police business.”

“Not another darned burglary, Rec?” Sir Henry demanded. “Lord Theakston’s hopping mad, you know. Lost his grandmother’s pearls in his, by Jove.”

“I’m not at liberty to say, Sir Henry,” said Thaddeus, smoothly, “but my attendance is needed. Can you please excuse me, with many thanks for this excellent meal?”

“Yes, yes, Rec, of course. Come, I will walk you out.” With effort, the considerable bulk of Sir Henry stood and ushered Rec from the room. Once outside, the kindly old gent placed a hand on the policeman’s shoulder. “Now look here, Rec,” he said. “You’re not to mind that fool Cantal. He may be aristocracy, but he’s not got two pennies to rub together, and he’s sure as heck not fit enough to lick your boots. So chin up, young chap. Understand?”

Thaddeus smiled. “Thank you, Sir Henry. And I am truly sorry to break up your party.”

“Pish,” said the gent, with a wave of his hand. “Enough of that. Bunch of useless windbags, the lot of them. Now be off with you. Save us from the rabble, Rec. Save us from the rabble.”

Outside, the night had congealed into a mess of gray clouds tinged a sickly yellow by the weak moon beyond. Thaddeus pulled the collar of his old leather overcoat up around his ears and ran down the steps from Sir Henry’s townhouse. There had indeed been another burglary, and Collins had called him to the scene. It wasn’t far. Thaddeus began to walk, crossing the square and heading into the streets.
He was passing a shaded alley when a noise caught his attention. He glanced in its direction to see two men standing in the buttery glow of a gas lamp, talking quietly. He recognized one as the Comte de Cantal. The other’s face was half-hidden in the murky shadows. He was a young man, with a high forehead and a thin nose. He was dressed in a dark tailcoat, a top hat clutched in one hand. The stranger glanced toward him as Thaddeus passed, sharp eyes looking out of a sharp face. Then he turned away into shadow, passing out of the policeman’s sight as if he had never been there at all.

Thaddeus walked quickly onward, shivering slightly in the evening chill. For him, at least, it was going to be a long night.

At noon the next day, Rémy woke to the familiar sound of tinny hammering coming from J’s room. The boy had been hard at work on something for weeks now, but he hadn’t said a word about it. In fact, Rémy had hardly seen him for days. She wondered what he was doing but knew better than to ask. The explanation would likely be as confusing as whatever contraption J was trying to cobble together. Since moving in to the Professor’s workshop, he’d become obsessed with the various mechanical marvels — or, more accurately, bits of mechanical marvels — that were scattered around the building. Still, at least it kept him out of trouble.