

LADY BEATRICE BODDINGTON looked askance at her hopeful suitor, Lord Rupert Whitbread. “Really, Lord Whitbread, you try my patience. I have already declined your proposal.”

Lord Whitbread gave a little smirk, but adjusted the cuffs of his jacket as he was wont to do when flustered. “My dear Beatrice, your debutante season was a bust, and spinsterhood threatens. You know as well as I that you will never find a more suitable husband than myself. And so I thought I might give you a second chance, to see if you may have reconsidered the matter.”

His feet shifted on the black and gold Persian carpet of the parlour but gave no indication of retreat. The man was passably handsome, Lady Boddington supposed, and certainly the Whitbreads were a family of means and some distinction, but to be bound to such a man, to surrender her independence and dash her dreams against the cruel shoals of marriage? Never!

“I appreciate the offer,” she said, planting her heels firmly on the carpet. “But I am afraid the answer is still no. I have a great deal to accomplish before I can consider such notions.”

Her adoptive parents had finally come to support her ambitions; why couldn’t others? If she should later succumb to passion for a man, she would only marry if favorable terms were granted.

Lord Whitbread’s eyes narrowed, as if constricting the parlour into a menagerie cage. “Are you referring to this airship of yours, and your wish to fly it around the world? Really, such things are best left to the professional adventurer.”

How dare he? No longer was the man merely irritating. To strike such a blow against her honour – she must respond in kind!

“The truth is, Lord Whitbread, the *Centurial Falcon* is the finest airship outside the Royal Air Navy. She is certainly faster than this *Glorious Summit* you are so boastful of, and with greater range.”

She had helped design the *Centurial Falcon* herself, with the hopes of being the first person to circumnavigate the globe by air. The *Glorious Summit*, on the other hand, was more a pleasure craft, designed for afternoon aerial parties, serving tea and crumpets in the clouds.

Lord Whitbread gave a smile of triumph, flashing teeth like a shark. “I will have you know, my dear Beatrice, I have had the *Glorious Summit* refitted, with the intention of being the first man to circumnavigate the world!”

So that was his game! It wasn’t merely a question of family alliances or the bedchamber affections of, so she’d been told, a reasonably attractive young

woman. If they married, his only aerial competitor would be removed. Moreover, the *Centurial Falcon* would, by law, be his.

“You may indeed be the first man to circle the world,” she said, “but your feat shall be preceded by a woman!”

He sputtered. “Preposterous!”

“We shall see! May I remind you that Queen Victoria is a woman and there has been no more capable ruler since... Queen Elizabeth?”

He cleared his throat. “God save the Queen and so forth. But that has no bearing on the matter at hand.” His lips formed a smile. “May I offer a wager?”

“You may indeed!” An opportunity not only to toast the man’s eyebrows, but to redirect some capital.

Lord Whitbread rubbed his long-fingered hands together. “We shall race around the world, following a path selected by the National Geographic Society. If I arrive back in London first, you agree to marry me.”

“Really, Lord Whitbread. You must be quite desperate for my affections.”

Her prospective rival barely flinched at the needle. “And you must be quite afraid you will lose.”

Afraid? Of him? “Very well,” she said.

What stakes could match such a fate? “If I win,” she added, “you must give all your fortune to the street urchins of London.”

His eyes bulged like a goldfish’s. “Preposterous! And why should you care about such rabble in the first place?”

“I have my reasons.” And indeed she did, although she could never share them. Her true blood, known only to her sterile foster parents, was not quite blue. “Are you the one afraid, then?”

“Of course not. But ground yourself in reason. Not everything is subject to wager.”

“Half, then.” Far better than nothing. “Half your fortune.”

He hesitated, then offered a hand. “Very well. It is a safe bet for me, as we both know the challenge of such an expedition is beyond the capacities of the fairer sex.”

II

Clad in her leather aviator jacket and form-fitting pants, multi-lensed goggles perched atop her skullcap, Lady Boddington stood behind the big steering wheel of the *Centurial Falcon*. For the moment, the Falcon was

tethered to the grassy expanse of the London Aerodrome, as was Lord Whitbread's ship, the *Glorious Summit*. Beyond, all manner of airships unloaded cargo from mainland Europe and reaches beyond: tea, silk, flax, porcelain, precious gems, and spices.

The morning sun drove away the remnants of nightly chill, and reflected brilliantly off the polished brass fittings and machinery dotting the gondola's upper deck. And guns as well, for while *Centurial Falcon* was no warship, she needed to protect herself when leaving the embrace of the Empire. Not all the world was as civilized as Great Britain.

Lady Boddington drew a deep breath, a joy of anticipation mixing with pride as she surveyed the tarred balsa deck, her azure-uniformed crew, the inflated expanse of the balloon overhead, the propeller engines on their angled struts. She stifled a cough, for the air was tinged with smoke from the world's biggest concentration of chimneys and smokestacks.

She drew the brass speaking tube to her mouth and pressed the intercom button to the engineer's room. "Engines ready, Miss Bass?"

"Aye, cap'n."

Lady Boddington turned to her navigator, Miss Newcastle. "Course laid in?"

"Aye, captain. First stop, Brussels."

From below, the starting gun sounded, and the tethers were released, freeing *Falcon* to the open skies. Beneath her leather accouterment, an electric thrill raced up Lady Boddington's spine and across her scalp. "We are off!"

She flipped switches on the control board to release ballast, dumping water onto the ground below. She pushed the engine order telegraph handle to 'Full Ahead,' spun the elevator wheel to rotate the pitch fins, and engaged the top fin motor to point the nose up.

As crewmen winched the tether lines aboard, the propellers spun faster and faster until reaching a high-pitched blur. The mighty ship moved forward and upward.

To starboard, *Glorious Summit* advanced as well, her prow yielding not an inch to the *Falcon*. Rather, as they climbed into the clouds, *Summit* began to gain the advantage.

"Miss Bass!" Lady Boddington spoke in the brass tube. "We need more speed!"

"I'm giving you all she's got, cap'n!"

"Well give me more!" They couldn't lose this race.

It was more than a matter of pride, more than a matter of horror at the prospect of marital subservience. Orphaned at four, Beatrice had been forced to beg for food. Only the nuns at Charity Convent, followed by the kindness of her foster mother, had saved her from life as a three-penny-uprighter. If she won this bet, she'd make sure every street urchin in London had a similar opportunity – a bed to sleep in and a chance for a decent future.

III

The *Falcon* left England behind and flew over the churning North Sea. They lost the *Summit* in the clouds.

How far ahead was Lord Whitbread? Could *Falcon* catch them? Perhaps jettison some weight? Brussels was but a small fraction of their voyage, so ample opportunity yet existed to make corrections.

Then, as they approached the Belgian coast, she spotted their competitor's ship. Two smaller airships, painted black, shadowed her on either side. White puffs appeared from all three ships, followed by the cracks of cannon and rifle fire.

Summit was under attack! Lady Boddington lifted her spyglass and peered through it.

The harrying black ships bore no insignia but one – a hawk pouncing on a dove. Pirates! So close to England? An affront to Queen and Country!

As she watched, one of the dark ships rose above *Summit* and fired a harpoon into the outer canvas of its balloon, linking the two ships by rope.

Next to Lady Boddington on the bridge, Miss Newcastle exclaimed, "We've won already! We need only to steer clear of the mayhem and continue onward, while our nemesis falls prey to his attackers."

Lady Boddington put down her spyglass. Miss Newcastle's advice was sorely tempting. The glory of winning the race, of being the first person to circumnavigate the world by air! The freedom from bondage to Lord Whitbread, the freedom to do as she wished! The money, all the good she could do with it!

But their country's honour was at stake. And so was hers. She could not let a fellow countryman be taken by pirates, even if the man in question was the insufferable Lord Whitbread. To do so would condemn her to a life forever in shame. And she would win the race regardless.

“We must go to our countryman’s rescue,” she told Miss Newcastle. She put the speaking tube to her lips and contacted the radio operator. “Miss Hughes.”

“Yes, captain?”

“Contact the Royal Air Navy immediately. We are being attacked by pirates. Two ships, at least.” She gave their coordinates.

Then she pressed the ‘all stations’ button on the intercom. “Attention all hands,” she shouted into the speaking tube. “Battle stations. This is no drill.”

Sam Smith, her gun-master, a veteran of the Royal Air Navy, rushed onto the deck from below, followed by the cook and gunnery assistant, Mr. Young. They ran to the light cannon mounted on the bow and readied it. Miss Newcastle ran to the other main weapon, a Gatling gun located amidships. Their armaments were limited. But artillery was heavy. Lady Boddington could only hope the attackers were similarly handicapped.

As *Falcon* neared the battle, one of the nefarious interlopers broke away from *Summit* and turned to face them. “Steady, Mr. Smith,” Lady Boddington urged in the speaking tube. “Wait until they’re in range. Every shot must count.”

“Aye, captain,” came the response.

Bright orange flashed from the bow of the approaching pirate ship. A flower of smoke burst in the air ahead and to port, accompanied by a loud bang.

“Steady, Mr. Smith.” He was a professional but even so, this was their first time in battle and only determined teamwork would carry the day.

Another explosion, this one close enough to flutter the ropes. Lady Boddington waited a few seconds longer, then spoke, “You may fire at will, Mr. Smith.”

The bow cannon boomed. Seconds later, smoke and fire erupted from the approaching ship.

A hit! *Falcon* had drawn first blood, shredding a hole in the outer canvas of the enemy’s balloon. “Well done, Mr. Smith!”

The pirates, closing fast, returned fire. *Falcon* shuddered and an alarm bell rang. They’d been hit!

The pressure gauge needle dropped. Lady Boddington activated one of the compressors to compensate.

Tracer fire arced toward them from enemy riflemen. A bullet whizzed past Lady Boddington’s head. They exchanged more cannon fire and *Falcon* jolted again.

If only the Gatling gun could be brought to bear! But they would have to turn broadsides, presenting an easy target. Of course, she remembered, they were fighting in three dimensions, not two.

Lady Boddington flipped switches, which dropped more ballast water, and turned the elevator wheel. *Falcon* climbed rapidly and the enemy airship passed underneath.

She spun the elevators the opposite way, and the rudder wheel to starboard, and soon *Falcon* was angled behind the enemy. Their balloon made a tempting target, but it was unlikely they could puncture enough air bags to take them down.

Falcon dropped a little further. As soon as the enemy's gondola was in view, Lady Boddington said, "You may fire, Miss Newcastle!"

The indomitable Miss Newcastle opened fire with the Gatling gun, raking the enemy gondola and casting splinters of wood in every direction. At least two riflemen dropped.

But the enemy was not done! A rocket launched from their deck and lurched toward *Falcon*, trailing smoke in its wake. Lady Boddington spun the wheels, but the ship seemed to move in slow motion.

A fireball exploded next to the gondola, throwing Lady Boddington off-balance. Her hands grasped the wheel as the deck careened to port. "Mr. Smith! Miss Newcastle! Destroy that ship!"

Her gunners fired round after round into the enemy gondola, focusing on the bridge. When they were done, nothing stirred on their decks and the ship began to drift in circles, its port engines out.

"On to the next target!" Lady Boddington commanded. She steered a course toward *Summit* and pushed the engine telegraph to 'Full Ahead.'

Worryingly, they appeared to be losing altitude. The gas pressure needle was dropping. At least one of the inner gas cells had been ruptured, probably more than one. She dropped more ballast, which compensated somewhat.

"The Royal Air Navy is on the way!" Miss Hughes exclaimed over the horn mounted by the wheel.

Excellent news! Lady Boddington lifted her spyglass.

The second pirate ship had cut their harpoon line to *Summit* and was in full retreat, apparently not wishing to suffer the fate of their sister ship.

Should they pursue? No, the task was best left to the approaching warships. *Falcon* was still losing altitude and had expended most of their ammunition.

Ahead, *Summit* continued its course toward Brussels. Not a thought toward *Falcon's* predicament. "Whitbread, you cad!" Lady Boddington shouted, not that anyone but her own crew could hear.

It appeared unlikely *Falcon* would make it to Brussels. But the Belgian coast was in sight. They'd have to land in the nearest field and make repairs.

She'd lost this leg of the race. But *Summit* would need repairs too, and the flight to Brussels was only a small fraction of the world's circumference.

The contest had just begun!