

KAT  
DUNN

MONSTROUS  
DESIGN

ZEPHYR

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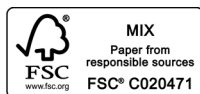
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## A Slum Near Rue St Denis

7 Thermidor, Year II  
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‘So, are you ready to die?’  
Ada’s face was cast in shadow as she spoke. The cramped medieval streets were unlit, and the buildings gathered too close for any moonlight to reach them. A meaty scent of offal and human waste wafted out of the gutters; in the distance the faint sound of bells tolled midnight. Summer had turned, bringing a sticky heat with it even at night.

Paris was rotting.

Beside her crouched Guil, eyes wide and wary as he watched the narrow opening of the alley they hid in. It was clear: they were unobserved.

Ada raised her eyebrows in question. ‘I can do it now or we can keep waiting, but you’ve got to die in the next half hour or I won’t make it home in time.’

‘Perhaps we should locate ourselves somewhere a little more noticeable first.’ Guil wrinkled his nose. ‘If

I die here I'm not sure anyone will be able to tell me apart from the refuse.'

Ada rolled her eyes. 'Fine, I'll take your artistic sensibilities into account choosing the next spot.'

She gathered up the battered canvas bag that held her supplies and followed him to the street. Here at least were a few signs of life: lights in mullioned windows, voices coming from the leaning upper levels of the timber-framed houses.

'There.' Guil pointed to an alcove closer to the main road where dray carts and drunks were trundling past. 'That's our stage.'

'You're sure the resurrection men will come?'

He shrugged. 'Léon may not like me as much as he likes Al, but I trust he still gives me good intelligence. The dead go missing from the slums in the hour after midnight, though no guarantee they will pass through tonight. If they do, we will only have a few moments' warning.'

'You'd better hope they turn up. All these late nights had me falling asleep in my soup yesterday.'

Guil folded himself into the alcove, looking hurt. 'You seem very eager to kill me. I wonder if I should be taking this personally.'

'What, and lose the suitor my father is so delighted I've finally found? Heavens, what a scandal that would cause.'

'I think he would be delighted if you were being courted by a pot plant.'

Ada snorted and tucked herself in beside him. 'As long as the plant had never belonged to Camille.'

She had met Camille when she still used her family name, du Bugue, but when she had formed the battalion she had taken the name Laroche after her mother. Camille du Bugue was the girl she'd fallen in love with, but Camille Laroche was the one with whom she had built a life.

As far as her father was concerned, Ada had abandoned Camille and finally decided to go 'home'. He was only too happy to believe that the business with Olympe and the Revolutionaries had scared her enough to leave the Bataillon des Morts; Guil turning up as her so-called suitor had made him all the happier. His daughter home and a handsome young army officer interested in her hand was the realisation of near all his dreams. Ada was disgusted by how simple his hopes for her future were.

Camille and Al had long since left for England. Ada and Guil had spent the whole time investigating, but they'd learned nothing of the duc's plans. Each plot they formed, each thread they followed, came up blank. The grisly abbey laboratory had been abandoned, the duc's former hôtel had been seized by the Revolutionary army to billet soldiers, and the servants who had worked for him were impossible to track down. He seemed to have no allies, no home, nothing.

He was a ghost.

For a while, Ada had let the thought grow in her mind: maybe he really *had* gone. The blow of being defeated by a gang of outsiders had been too crushing and he'd bowed out. It was a nice thought, but from

what little she'd experienced of the duc, she knew it couldn't be true. He was out there, somewhere, doing god knows what to god knows who. Only she and Guil could stop him.

Now they were down to their last hope. Their last foolhardy plan. A very, very stupid, dangerous plan – but that was the Bataillon des Morts. The Battalion of the Dead. They wouldn't give up until they'd tried everything.

Even death.

They had been settled into the alcove for only a few minutes when a scrawny girl appeared. Her lank hair hung loose around her gaunt face and her clothes were held together by dirt and wishful thinking. She looked them over, then gave Guil a curt nod.

'There's two of them tonight,' she said. 'Took Marcel Leclerc already.'

'Are you sure?' asked Guil.

'Yes. I saw them do it. I'm not a liar.'

'I know you're not.' He dug in his pocket and tossed her a coin. 'Get out of here, mousling. Stay safe.'

The girl snatched it out of the air and bolted. Ada thrummed with adrenaline. It was now or never.

Guil pushed her bag of supplies over. His eyes were dark, unreadable. 'I'm ready to die.'

## A Country House in England



James stood in the anteroom of his father's study, trying his best not to pace. A footman had assured him Lord Harford was inside seeing to some other business and would see him shortly. So James waited, sweat drying under his linens, his boots still dusty from the hard ride from London.

The urge to pace was strong. He felt, as always when meeting his father, as if a jar of live bees had been emptied inside him, every moment angry and at risk of being stung. But pacing only made him look weak; it was his anxiety painted on the outside. He would not let his father see it. He stilled himself, clasping his hands behind his back as he'd seen his father do in his Westminster office, listening to complaining constituents or lobbyists in smart waistcoats. A statesman's pose.

The anteroom bridged the gap between the airy, light rooms his mother kept decorated to contemporary

tastes and the sombre, tomb-like gloom of his father's study. Tobacco-stained wood panelling covered every wall, Ottoman rugs muffled footsteps, and shelf after shelf was filled with editions of Hansard, biographies of politicians, Greek and Latin texts, and copious snuff boxes, horse bronzes, ivory bookends, and even a Roundhead helmet from the Civil War.

His father had always seen to political business from behind his vast desk, or administered disinterested beatings when, as a boy, James had smashed crockery or hidden mice in his sister's bed. James remembered waiting in the anteroom on countless nervous occasions. In the thick rug a track of bare threads marked where he'd paced each time, a lifetime of worry etched in one spot.

James would not pace. He was a man now. What he had to say was worth hearing, and this time, he would make his father listen.

The corner held a shelf, bare except for a single treasured display piece: a duelling pistol resting on a stand, inlaid pearl handle iridescent beside the dark wood. Its barrel was freshly polished and a small leather pouch of shot and powder sat to one side to complete the display. James stopped before it. He knew this pistol well – the weight of it, the smoothness of its handle against his palm.

A muscle in his jaw flickered.

Its twin had belonged to his father's best friend – Camille's father. Since he'd taken it from her that frantic day in the foundations of the Madeleine church, he'd not been able to bring himself to touch it.



Instead, he'd stuffed it beneath a floorboard in his digs in London, along with any thought of Camille. But he couldn't help thinking of her now. How her pale face had turned up to him, looking so young in her shock and confusion. Then anger had taken over, and the Camille he had known was consumed by someone who had every reason to hate him.

No – he wouldn't feel guilty. He'd done what he had to do, and that was as complicated as this needed to be.

He crossed to the window, looking at the formal gardens and the ha-ha beyond, then crossed back to the door, his legs springy with tension. He turned to loop back to the window – oh, hell, he was pacing – and the study door was flung open in his path.

It took him a moment to realise it was not his father standing in the open doorway. A broad-shouldered man just reaching middle age strode through, all but slamming the door behind him. He had a shock of brown hair that tumbled into his eyes in a windswept fashion, his handsome features made even more appealing by the addition of a dashing scar running from temple to jaw. James was used to seeing him in a rubber apron with his shirtsleeves rolled up and blood splattered to his elbows. Seeing his surgery tutor in a suit and cravat was disconcerting.

Seeing him right *now* was the last thing James wanted.

He recovered himself. *Bright eyes, light smile, give nothing away.*

'Mr Wickham. I did not realise you had business with my father.'

The man's face was twisted, lips drawn back in a snarl. Then he noticed James and, not missing a beat, his expression smoothed into a winning smile, eyes twinkling.

'James, good Lord! How very nice to see you.' He took James's hand and shook it, palms rough with calluses in stark contrast to his crisply pressed shirt and frock coat. 'How nice to see you safe, I should say.'

'Quite safe – though only now returned. I would have come to you first, but I have been away from my family for too long – and my mother's health...'

He was overdoing it. Wickham would surely see through him at once. He'd never been any good at lying to his tutor, not about late assignments or missed lectures, nothing. When Wickham had taken James and his friend, Edward, under his wing as protégés, James had thought he'd finally found the recognition he'd always yearned for from his father. He would never have believed then that one day he'd *want* to lie to Wickham.

To betray him.

With a hand on his arm, the surgeon steered him to a quiet corner. 'Your letters were frustratingly vague. We must talk fully – in London. Aubespine's notes are fascinating; it seems he *did* create an electrical being after all, but in quite the novel manner. A baby! Such a shame you were not able to find the girl. It would have put our research forward by decades.'

James sorted through a series of suitable expressions in his head and settled on earnest interest. The notes he had sent Wickham were Ada's notes, along with the

Duc de l'Aubespine's papers she had stolen detailing Olympe's creation. He'd been working with Wickham and Edward on similar electrical research to the duc, and when Wickham had heard word of the duc's apparent success, they'd agreed James, with his French connections, would travel to Paris to search for her. But when he'd found Olympe and seen what she could do, he'd decided on a new plan, one that didn't involve his tutor or his friend at all.

Wickham was watching him closely. 'Are you *completely* sure there's nothing else?'

James swallowed around the lump in his throat. That was what he had learned about betrayal in France: it hurt. When someone mattered to you, when you had thought your future lay with them, it would always hurt. Wickham and Edward had offered him something once, just as Camille had.

But futures changed.

Everything was a choice, wasn't it?

He had different plans now, and if what he had to do hurt, so be it.

'Nothing,' he said. 'I would have searched further but the city wasn't safe...'

'I can only imagine. We hear of fresh horrors every day, and you must believe I am grateful that you would take such risks to further my – *our* – work.' Wickham's interest in the Revolution drifted rapidly. 'How much of the papers did you have a chance to study? Edward and I have been working through them – applying electrical stimulation in utero is a fascinating approach, but hardly scalable. A novelty. Nevertheless, I think

Aubespine's theories have given us solutions to some of our problems. I am most eager to test them as soon as is feasible.'

*As soon as is feasible.* What a polite way to say as soon as he had a fresh corpse. It was the grim reality of the surgical student's life: corpses brought from gallows to dissection slab the same day. Wickham had never seemed affected by that aspect of his profession, viewing the human body as simply another resource at his disposal. James, on the other hand, struggled not to be affected; he knew it made him a bad surgeon, but perhaps it made him a good man.

There was something else on his mind that James was unable to ignore. 'What business did you have with my father? Is he still interested in funding your research?'

Wickham's smile faltered. 'Unfortunately not.'

James paled. 'Truly? I was under the impression he thought it significant to the war effort.'

If his father had lost interest, then betraying his mentor had suddenly drained of meaning. His plan wasn't complicated: deliver Olympe to his father instead of Wickham. He'd thought he was content as Wickham's favourite, but when he had seen the possibilities Olympe's power presented, that treacherous thought had crept in. Perhaps he had finally found the thing that would make his father sit up and take notice of him. It might hurt to betray Wickham's and Edward's trust – God, and Camille's trust, for that matter – but it would be worth it. It had to be worth it.

Only, Wickham had just told him it wouldn't be.  
His father wasn't interested any more.

'It seems we were both mistaken.' Wickham tugged his frock coat straight, brushing off invisible specks of dust, then continued before James had a chance to speak. 'I saw too much death in my time as a naval surgeon. I offered him the commander's dream, troops who can rise from even the most grievous injuries. If we can harness electrical power, use it to restart that vital spark when it has been snuffed out – why, then England's enemies would tremble in their boots.'

For a panicked moment, James thought about staying loyal to Wickham after all. His mentor wasn't so bad an option, was he? Then he thought about the duc in Paris and the dark paths his work had led him down. The same ruthless streak of ambition he saw in Wickham too. He could choose his tutor but Wickham would never choose him. In the end, their work would always come first.

No. James had chosen his father. He was all in, and now the only thing left was to show his hand.

'What commander would not want such power?' he said. 'He will come around.'

Wickham clapped him on the shoulder, a little too hard, and settled his hat on his head. 'That's the spirit. With you and Edward working with me, I think we can still give the Frenchies a run for their money, eh? He's downstairs, by the way. Think your sister has cornered him so I dare say he'll be glad to see you. We were both worried about you.'

James's heart sank. Edward.

‘It’ll be good to see him too,’ he said, and he meant it. It had been too long since their last night together in the coffee house by the hospital, sharing lecture notes and planning their brilliant future. Betraying Wickham was difficult; betraying Edward was a gut-punch. He owed his friend far more than making him collateral damage.

Wickham left and the noise of papers being shuffled in the study drew his attention.

Futures changed.

It was time to make a new one with his father.

James shook himself out of his funk and knocked firmly on the open door.

‘Enter.’ The low baritone made the skin on the back of his neck prickle.

Lord Harford was bent over a spread of papers covered in cramped, sloping script. His dispatch box lay open on one side of the desk, the other stacked with unopened correspondence. With a flourish, he signed a document, then looked up, acknowledging James.

His lips thinned.

‘Oh. I see you’ve finally decided to grace us with your presence.’

‘I’m sorry to interrupt you, when I know you must be busy.’

‘And yet you still do.’ James felt his cheeks heat and began to apologise, but his father waved him silent. ‘Never mind that. Clearly you have decided what you want to say is important enough to bother me when I am tasked with the security of the nation.’

James collected himself. ‘Did you receive the letters I sent?’

Lord Harford snorted. ‘I received *something* resembling letters, but they seemed more like the novels your younger sister wastes her time on.’ He put down his pen. ‘What *did* catch my attention is that you took the astronomically foolish decision to travel to France – a country with which apparently I must remind you we are at *war* – in pursuit of some fantastical creature you believe to be imbued with the powers of electricity?’

Well, when he put it like that, it didn’t sound good.

‘Respectfully, sir, it’s not a fantasy but the result of rigorous scientific research – the same research that Mr Wickham has been pursuing in England—’

‘As you say in your letters. Don’t worry, I didn’t tell your mother. A shock like that with her health in the state it is... I would have thought you would have more consideration of your own family. Frankly, James, I am disappointed.’

There it was.

‘First, you insist on embarrassing us by pursuing this ghoulish profession and neglecting your role as heir to the estate, and now you have been taken in by Wickham’s lunatic nonsense. Do not mistake me, he is a clever, charismatic man, has been since I first met him, but he has a tendency to believe his own myth-making, to concoct grandiose ideas of saving the world. Resurrecting dead soldiers, I believe it is this time.’ Lord Harford sighed. ‘I had hoped you clever enough not to be taken in.’

‘You believed it too, didn’t you?’ said James. ‘You were going to fund his research.’

‘A good politician entertains all the options available to him. If Wickham had presented me a genuine, rational proposal I would have been more than ready to back it. But he didn’t. He came here today to berate me about my foolish decision, just as you do. Electricity may well provide opportunities one day, but Wickham’s “research” is the delusion of a man rapidly losing grip on reality.’

James bristled. Why did his father have to be so stubborn? So convinced anything he didn’t know wasn’t worth knowing? James had Olympe. He had *proof* the science was real. He only needed to force his father to see the truth.

‘The science is evolving every day,’ he said. ‘There are things we know now that would have seemed like fantasy merely a few years ago. I know it may be hard to understand as an unscientific man, but the foundations all point to this very possibility—’ James saw his misstep as he made it. His father’s face soured and he leaned back in his chair, hands steepled.

‘I am an unscientific man?’

‘I beg your pardon, I meant only that your specialism lies elsewhere—’

‘Do you know the going rate for gunpowder? How much food it takes to feed an army? How to supply them as they move?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Do not assume that because I do not interest myself in the same grisly work as you that I am simple; I readily grasp reality, which I fear you do not. Do you know how many rumours and lies come out of France



every day? If I believed them all I would be the biggest fool in Westminster.'

James clenched his teeth. He was too old for his father to cane, but it didn't stop the anxiety that flooded through him when his father got angry. Now, it was easier to turn that fear into anger, and they had become embroiled in more than one explosive fight over the years.

'I don't mean to make you a fool. Indeed, quite the opposite.'

Lord Harford held up a hand. 'Stop. I have heard this all from Wickham; I have no need to hear it again. You cannot help the war effort with fairy tales and delusions; I have told him no and I am telling you the same.' He picked up his pen and returned to his letter-writing. 'Say hello to your mother before you leave.'

It was as if James had ceased to exist the moment Lord Harford was no longer interested in him. He had always done this, since James was a child. Their relationship was dictated entirely by his father's terms, and James knew that to push now would only cause his father to dig in further.

Quietly, James let himself out of the study, steps sinking silently into the thick rugs. So much for things being different this time.

Shame was too simple a word for what he felt. He was ashamed of disappointing his father, and ashamed of his own stupidity for misjudging things *again*. Of course his father wouldn't believe Olympe's powers; they had sounded like fiction even to James at first. If

he hadn't seen everything that Olympe could do, he would have doubted it too.

Nearly nineteen years of learning how to navigate his father's expectations and he was no nearer to understanding him.

But James had pulled off something his father would never have thought him capable of: he had got hold of the most valuable scientific discovery of the era, delivering it into England's hands while depriving *France* of its newest weapon. He was helping the war, helping England – helping his *father*. If only he wasn't too stubborn to believe it.

James cracked his knuckles, flexing his fingers.

Fine. He would drop the matter – for now. He wouldn't let himself wallow. The task ahead was clear: he must give his father a demonstration of the science no one could not deny.

Then they would see who was a disappointment.