

Secret Heart
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Sulking again, eh?

Sir Simeon Meriwether Kerrigan, owner of the fantastic skyship *Midnight Aurora*, wealthy beyond the ken of mere mortals, displayed a most troubling trait of sulking like a little child when the world failed to bend down and serve him as he desired. Like now. Simeon stood at the furthest forward point of the skyship's gleaming wooden deck, hands locked on the brass railing, head down. Edwin Julius could see tension in his body, a certain stiffness of posture beneath the elegant daytime suit. Tendrils of wet gray streamed over the man as the skyship plowed through low-hanging clouds. Edwin wondered what it would be like to rest his hands on those tense shoulders, feel the taut muscles warm and relax beneath affectionate ministrations.

Awkward thought. Edwin sighed, shook off the wayward desires, and stepped up to the railing beside his friend.

"What's bothering you, Kerrigan?"

"What makes you think there's something bothering me?"

"Well, let's see..." Edwin replied with a faint smile. "You won't talk to anyone, you're barely civil even to Rebecca, and you're hanging over the rail of the *Aurora* as it flies through a cloud. Need I say more?"

"Oh, very well, then. There's something bothering me." Simeon straightened from his bent posture, but still his dark eyes avoided Edwin. They remained focused on some distant vision known only to him.

After a moment of silence broken only by the steady thumping of the steam-powered engines, Edwin prompted him to continue. "And what would the problem be, old lad?"

"It's of a rather... personal nature, so if you don't mind I'd—"

"Rather not talk about it, I know," Edwin interrupted. "It's my guess that your problem is Rebecca."

At that, Simeon did turn to glare at him. "Rebecca is not a problem, she is my cousin."

"And as such, you care about her deeply... perhaps too deeply?"

"You know nothing of my issues, Julius! Go now, and trouble me no more!" His eyes betrayed deep inner turmoil, despite the unchanging facial expression.

"You don't mean that, do you." Edwin continued to gaze steadily into his friend's eyes, bright with distress behind brass-rimmed lenses.

Tension hummed through the damp air for a long moment, then Simeon glanced away. "No, I do not."

"I thought not. Now, if you're done being difficult, perhaps you could tell me what is going on in that head of yours?"

"Perhaps I could. But then, perhaps I could not." Simeon allowed himself a faint twitch of a smile.

"Kerrigan..." Torn between exasperation and amusement, Edwin settled on shaking his head with a smile of his own.

"Julius, my friend, there are some things which you simply do not want to know. Such as the true cause of my troubles." A flicker of emotion crossed his face, gone before Edwin could identify it. Longing? Not likely.

Simeon turned away, with a curious reluctance which sent a shiver of hope racing through Edwin. Could it be that—no, impossible. He must be imagining things, seeing something he only wished for.

"Always a possibility, granted." Edwin started to sigh, then caught himself. He sounded like a bellows with all the gusty sighing. Much more of that and the firemen would set him to tending the boilers. "Lord knows I haven't the spotless clean soul and mind. Doubtless there's things in there nobody wants to know. I know for a fact there's plenty I'd rather not tell you, so I suppose you're entitled to your own privacy. Unfortunately, your turmoil has begun to affect this entire crew of thrown-together adventurers. And so I shall continue to nag at you until you divulge the reason for your atypical upset."

Simeon snorted. "Atypical upset, indeed."

"Yes, *indeed*. You have always been the level-headed one of us, least likely go off half-cocked. And yet look at you now, my friend, mooning about like a lovesick schoolboy."

"And so what if I am?" Simeon's gaze bored into Edwin's very soul. "So what if I am indeed lovesick? The object of my affections does not return them, nor does Rebecca. Now leave me to suffer in peace."

The *Midnight Aurora* hit a trough in the air with a dip and a lurch. Edwin's insides echoed the maneuver. Had he misheard Simeon's words? He took a deep, steadying breath. It struggled past the tightness in his throat to reach his lungs.

"Someone... other than Rebecca?" His voice sounded strained, strangled by the unseen hand clamped around his neck.

"Yes, someone other than Rebecca. Now do leave me alone." Simeon turned back to the clouds.

Edwin retreated quietly into the interior of the skyship. He passed Rebecca and Claude in the parlor, playing at a hand of cards. Neither of them looked up. He passed through without a word, to the living quarters and the privacy of his cabin. Simeon felt interest in someone other than Rebecca.

But who? Rebecca, Simeon's second cousin, had been all but betrothed to him since birth. They'd grown up together, with the clear expectation that they would marry once Simeon completed his education. Even now, embarked upon a bachelor's last wild journey before settling into the bonds of matrimony, she accompanied him with the clear blessing of her family. Of course Simeon should care about her, should be upset when she danced with other men as she'd done at nearly every stop on their drifting travels around the world.

Edwin never once suspected the true cause of Simeon's upset centered on someone other than Rebecca.

Edwin sat in the barrel chair. Bolted securely to the floor, it occupied a space beside a round table, set at an angle somewhere between comfortable and awkward. He fingered its dark red leather upholstery, its brass studs. Someone other than Rebecca.

Who?

* * * * *

Simeon Kerrigan leaned out over the railing, the cold dampness of the cloud slipping through his fingers like silk. He fancied he caught occasional glimpses of the ground as it sped by far below, bits of exotic South America in all its unexplored glory. Rubbish, of course. The inclement weather rendered everything outside the little bubble of light surrounding the *Aurora* invisible. What would it be like, to fly without a machine? To soar through the air, without a care in the world? Or to leap from the ship without the power of flight... to feel the air go by with increasing speed, to hear the wild keening of the wind, to see the ground spiral ever closer... and then the impact, the final end to it all. He leaned farther yet, considering. But death made for the coward's way out, and his father never raised him to be a coward. Reluctantly, Kerrigan straightened. The blood pounded in his head, providing a welcome diversion from regret. Never strong enough, never resolute enough, couldn't carry through with any plan...

He waved off remembered criticisms and made his way back into the deserted interior of the *Aurora*. All on the upper decks had gone to bed. Surprise flickered through him. Surely he had not been out there so long? The mariner's timepiece on the mantel confirmed he had. He shrugged and made his way to the liquor cabinet. Some port would go down a treat. He poured himself a glass and settled into his favorite wingback chair, frowning at the contrast of the silvery-gray day jacket against the rich red and gold embroidery. He'd never changed out of day dress for evening, never heard the call to supper. He sipped at the port, wishing his mind would quiet and allow him to rest. He'd been up for three days. Insomnia itself was nothing new to him, but the disturbing direction his thoughts took if left unguarded... He gulped down half the port.

How was he to deal with this... this strange obsession growing inside him, focused wholly upon a certain young man? Worse yet, the *unnatural* dreams. Dreams of soft touches, of warm lips, of caring brown eyes... Distress curdled his innards. How could he think such things? Unclean. Unnatural. Punishable by death in some circles. Not that he'd ever cared much for social conventions, or facing death for that matter, but it simply wasn't *done*. The rest of the world could

say what they liked about the primness of Victorian society, but proper behavior held the world together. He should give over these improper urges and feelings and make an effort to re-cultivate his relationship with Rebecca. They'd slipped apart on this journey, as she experimented with other men and he wrestled with his wayward heart. Yes, a good choice indeed, the proper path to follow. Socially acceptable, safe, expected by his peers... and utterly the opposite of what his most secret heart yearned for.

The elegant crystal glass glinted at him in the soft gaslight, empty. Simeon blinked at it. He couldn't remember drinking the port down to the last drop. He shrugged and refilled the glass. This time he'd take a moment to savor the port, then take himself off to bed, where all of his friends and most of his crew apparently already were.

Idly, he wondered what Claude would think of his trouble. The feisty little Frenchman would doubtless laugh and tell him to follow his heart, something only likely to happen in France, where everyone knew the wildest of sins were commonplace.

He set the empty glass aside and rose. Forget going to bed. Despite the late hour, he knew he wouldn't sleep, and laying in soft, warm darkness hardly offered the ideal environment in which to clear his mind.

* * * * *

BOOM!

Edwin Julius sat bolt upright in his bed, heart pounding. What in the Devil's name had made that *noise*?

Nothing. The quiet darkness of his room surrounded him in ordinary nighttime peace, with no explanation for the loud noise. His heart quieted, the adrenaline eased from his system, and Edwin laid back down. Must've been a nightmare.

Hard on the heels of that thought, the *Aurora* shuddered violently, and his door burst open. One of the workmen charged in, carrying a lantern.

"There's a problem, Master Julius!"

Edwin sat up in bed, blankets falling to his lap. "What is it—" he squinted in the painful light, trying to make out features. "—Stoneman?"

"There's been an explosion. Number two boiler's blown. And Lord Kerrigan, he's out of reach. He's gone... *there* again."

As soon as he heard the word *explosion*, Edwin leapt out of bed, shedding his night clothes in favor of more appropriate garb. Boiler explosions were nothing to be trifled with.

"Tell me more," Edwin said, fingers working rapidly at the buttons on his shirt. "What's the situation?"

"Bad, sir. Very bad. There's not much left of the boiler room, or, in fact, the gondola. I don't know why we're even still in the air."

As he dressed and the workman spoke, Edwin felt the *Aurora* give a great shudder, heard the timbers groan in agony.

"We're going down for certain sure," Stoneman continued, "and I can't reach Lord Kerrigan. I just *can't!*"

"It's okay, Stoneman," Edwin said, slipping on his jacket. "I'll go get him. Do... do whatever needs doing."

"You'll take Wings with you, sir?"

Edwin jerked to a halt after only two steps. "Good thinking, Stoneman. Yes, I'll take a pair of Wings. I've got one here, where's the nearest—"

Stoneman extended a compact package without a word. Edwin took it, tucked it under his arm, retrieved his own emergency rescue device from its locker. The Wings offered something of a last resort, a type of overgrown kite on a harness that strapped to a body and allowed a brief period of unpowered human flight. If the situation were dire enough to need a Wing, well, the risk of catastrophic failure of the device seemed more acceptable. After all, they worked correctly slightly more than half the time...

Julius exited his cabin, Wings held securely close to his body. The deck groaned and shuddered

under his feet. How bad was the damage? He'd seen boiler explosions take out half a city block. Was anything left of the underside of the gondola?

And what about the other passengers?

He diverted his path to the safety railing ringing the top deck. No sense seeking out Kerrigan with nothing to report. He grasped the thin brass rail, felt it quivering in his hands, and leaned out over the edge, well beyond the strictly safe.

Oh, dear God.

The gaping hole in the *Midnight Aurora* made him want to throw up.

Numb with shock, Julius dragged himself back onto the deck, an afterimage of devastation seared into his soul. How in hell Stoneman escaped that, he'd never know, nor how the workman had known it was the number two boiler that went out. It looked more like *all* the boilers had blown.

Mechanically, Julius set himself into motion. Kerrigan must learn about this. Not like there was a blessed bit of good the man could do, but he must know, before the remains of the skyship crashed to the ground.

By the time Julius reached the rope ladder he sought, his frozen mind thawed enough to think. He'd have to be careful up there. What words did one use when telling someone his beautiful skyship was about two thirds destroyed, and that his cousin's rooms were nothing but a memory? More than just Rebecca's rooms. All the workmen's quarters were gone, as were most of the guest quarters, presumably with the guests inside. Julius himself only survived due to a freak of chance: he'd won a coin flip over Rebecca, and gotten the forward cabin next to Kerrigan's. Otherwise, he'd be just as dead as everyone else must surely be.

The Wings interfered with his climbing efforts. Julius wrapped an arm around a wooden rung and shifted the lumpy Wing packages into a more secure position under his left arm. Awkward, climbing a rope ladder with only one hand, but better than not having the Wings at all.

Had the others been blown to bits? Had they fallen through the air in their nightclothes? Had any survived? Surely someone, somewhere on the large skyship, had been out of their quarters and working the night shift. Stoneman had. Maybe others survived, somewhere.

The ladder led him up the curving side of the vast, gas-filled envelope. Edwin could certainly understand Stoneman's reluctance to come up here. Sensible people simply never did things like this. Especially not with the envelope starting to jerk and shudder in response to some aspect of the catastrophe below.

He reached the point where the ascent turned into more of a creep, using the rope ladder for traction now against the top of the gas envelope. Awkward, with Wings under his arm. Blast Simeon anyway, for demanding a way up to the very top of his aircraft. What did he think this was, a crow's nest on a tall ship?

There, up ahead. The dark shape of Simeon Kerrigan, apparently sulking again. Julius put out an ounce more effort and scrambled up beside his friend.

"There's a problem," he yelled over the roar of the wind.

"Julius, what are you doing here? Have you come to enjoy the view?"

Incredulous, Julius glanced around out of reflex, but still couldn't see anything beyond the *Aurora's* running gaslights. "View? What view? Kerrigan, it's past midnight! I can't hardly see you, let alone anything else. You've got to come down. There's been an accident."

"Nothing to worry about, I'm sure. The world is a better place up here."

Julius peered more closely at his friend, visible in the... light. *Oh, dear God in Heaven!* The envelope glowed faintly orange from within.

"*Fire!* Kerrigan, listen to me. Are you drunk? You are. Damn. The ship is going down, understand?"

A muffled boom punctuated his words. Julius grabbed the man by the shoulder, jolting him out of his fog. Kerrigan's gaze sharpened and focused on him.

"What is it, then?"

"There's been an explosion in the boiler room. The ship is destroyed, Kerrigan. We're going

down. And look."

He pointed to the glowing envelope beneath them. The last bit of muzziness left Kerrigan's eyes and his face showed a brief flash of panic. He cursed.

"Right, then, we're doomed. Thanks for letting me know, old man. I'll see you on the other side."

What?

Kerrigan rose to his feet, and Julius followed, still trying to puzzle out the meaning of those words. Simeon Kerrigan looked at him, suddenly glittering and all but dancing with excitement. He grinned.

"What an adventure this will be!"

Then Julius felt Simeon's arms around him, felt urgent lips press into his own. Suddenly he understood the stereotype of ladies swooning when kissed. His knees felt weak, watery. He clutched at Simeon, held on when the man tried to break away.

Simeon ended the kiss all too soon, and ran, struggling against the wind of their passage.

One heartbeat of confusion, two, then a sudden horrible vision of what Simeon Kerrigan meant to do.

"Simeon, no, wait! Not without your Wing!"

Julius started running, too, while fumbling at one of the Wing packages. His fingers felt awkward as sausages, legs trembling, heart galloping like a Derby champion. He opened it, lost ground trying to sort out the folded framework, put on a burst of speed. The Wing unfolded on its own in the strong wind. Lightweight ribs snapped into place in an act of mechanical magery. He fought his way into the harness, then lunged forward and caught at Kerrigan before he could run right off the front of the envelope. Kerrigan's wild eyes looked at him, unseeing, filled with a mad light.

"No! Not without—"

The envelope shuddered, interrupting his frantic words. Brilliant orange light accompanied a series of booms as the gas within the heavily oiled silk chambers lit off. Six chambers, meant to keep the ship aloft even if one or two chambers sprung a leak. But no one had designed the envelope to survive *fire*.

A shock wave knocked the two men off the foundering skyship and launched them into the air. Julius barely managed to keep hold of Kerrigan.

"Simeon! Hang on!"

For a terrifying moment, Julius *knew* he would lose his friend. Free of the supporting envelope, without his Wing which now plummeted toward the Earth so far below, still packaged, Kerrigan started to fall. Then instinct kicked in and he clutched at Julius, whose Wing groaned at the strain of supporting two men.

Wind roared past them. Straps cut deep into Julius's armpits. He hadn't a chance to settle the Wing harness properly, not while running on an unstable surface. His arms and hands burned from his tight grip on Simeon.

Despite everything, though, despite the pain, the terror, the flaming wreckage tumbling Earthward, Edwin Julius smiled.

Simeon shifted in his arms, reaching carefully for the Wing harness with one hand, using it to pull himself up closer to Julius's head.

"Why did you stop me?"

His words blew away, barely audible. Edwin considered ignoring them, letting the wind keep them. But instead he bent his head to yell his own response.

"I will never let you go, Simeon! Never!"

The Wing gave a sharp crack. Edwin looked up and saw nothing in the inky darkness. The Wing lurched, cracked again, collapsed.

Falling... falling...

The two men spun out of control through the night, broken Wing flapping uselessly above them.

This is it, then, Edwin Julius thought, panic giving way to a wave of peaceful calm. *Nothing more to do but hold on to Simeon.*

They smashed into the Earth.

* * * * *

Simeon Kerrigan regained his senses all in a rush. From blank unconsciousness to extreme discomfort, all in a heartbeat. His eyes opened to a topsy-turvy world where nothing much made sense. His face pressed into something soft and yielding, wrapped in soft wool. An arm? Whose?

He moved his own arms, but the one under his cheekbone didn't so much as twitch. Edwin's, then. Where was the rest of him? And in what condition?

Simeon pushed himself into a more-or-less upright position, a difficult proposal. He couldn't seem to find the ground. The dim light offered little assistance. The time must be right before dawn, judging by the filtered gloom, barely bright enough to see by. Simeon gripped rough bark and spiky branches, trying to make sense out of his surroundings. He and Edwin lay tangled together... in a tree?

Yes, in a tree. Simeon could see the ground now, at least twenty feet below. Damn. They'd probably been saved by hanging up on the prickly branches, but right now, he didn't feel much gratitude towards the tree. Rather, he felt distinctly annoyed. One wrong movement would likely pitch the two of them straight to the ground. And while the grand gesture of flinging himself off his failing ship had felt highly appropriate, well, now he had Edwin Julius to worry about, and damned if he'd just stand aside and let the man die.

The dim light brightened a tiny bit while he thought, enough to let him guess at what a frightful tangle Julius lay in. Limbs bent at horribly awkward angles, tied up in the Wing harness. Stupid device, anyway. What good came of a rescue device with a forty-seven percent failure rate? Better to honestly perish in the wreckage.

Except... During the exhilarating, terrifying fall, Simeon somehow lost his desire to die. He'd done the worst, he'd kissed Edwin Julius, and the man hadn't stopped him. Rather, he'd held on tight and kissed back, with every bit as much hidden passion as that which raged through Simeon Kerrigan. Death would put an end to any hope of discovering why the man hadn't rejected him violently.

Julius stirred, let out a faint groan. Simeon's grip tightened before he told his hands to do any such thing.

"Edwin? Are you awake?"

Another groan, this one louder. Julius moved his legs, tangled only in branches, not Wing harness.

"Edwin! Careful now, you'll drop us from this tree."

"Kerrigan?"

That rough whisper sounded like the finest thing Simeon had ever heard.

"I can't feel my arms!"

Julius thrashed, frightened. Simeon cursed.

"Steady on, old man! You must hold still. Your arms are fine. The circulation must be cut off, that's all. Now hold still!"

But Edwin, barely conscious, fearful, managed to flop like a landed fish and send both of them hurtling towards the ground below.

They landed, again, with a sickening crunch. Edwin went limp.

"No, oh no..."

Simeon scrabbled at the stiff, starched collar of the man's shirt. He broke it loose, pulled it away, felt for a pulse.

He found it.

Limp and unconscious, Edwin Julius still lived. His heart beat on. Good.

Reassured, Simeon sorted himself out. Tangled as they'd been in the tree, the two of them had fallen to the ground still entwined. Under other circumstances he might enjoy having Edwin's limbs so jumbled up with his own it took real effort to tell which part belonged to whom, but not now. By

virtue of moving carefully, Simeon identified all his own extremities and pulled himself free of Edwin and the wreckage of the Wing. Most of that apparently remained in the tree, but bits of the harness still clung stubbornly to Edwin. Simeon removed the straps, then gently tugged Edwin's limbs into a more conventional resting position.

No sooner had he arranged the man's body properly than Edwin's breathing became labored, with a heavy wheezing sound. Obviously something had gone wrong inside, and he must hold the man up, lest he drown in his own lungs.

Simeon looked around furtively in the faint, early light. Only the trees watched them, and only a few exotic bird chirps marred the forest's silence, other than Edwin's gasps. Nobody could possibly see what he did. No one would care, anyway. Because this clearly constituted a survival situation. Any proper gentleman would be expected to do whatever it took to save his closest friend, never mind the distastefulness to society of one man holding another.

Edwin hadn't pushed him away.

Simeon nodded minutely. He found a reasonably comfortable place to sit, with his back against a tree and thick forest loam to cushion his rear end. Then he tugged Edwin into position, trying to be as considerate as possible of the injuries he couldn't see. Simeon sagged into his chosen seat, with barely enough strength left to pull Edwin mostly upright and into his arms.

His action resulted in an immediate improvement in Edwin's breathing, which smoothed from labored gasps into a more peaceful sound. Simeon held him carefully, feeling guilty pleasure course through him. Edwin's body slumped against his own, warm and welcome. If only the man would wake, here in this isolated place where no eyes existed to judge them...

Simeon listened to Edwin breathe as the forest brightened around them and birds burst into raucous song, greeting the day. *In, out.* Somewhat gurgling breaths, but steady. *In, out.* He felt peaceful, comfortable, for the first time in many months. Really, he'd have to figure out something to do about his unnatural attraction to Edwin, but later. When they were safe.

In, out.

For now, he'd stay here in the privacy of the forest, listening to the in, out of Edwin's breathing, and enjoy the feeling of warmth and closeness.

In, out. In, out.

Who knew how long Simeon sat there listening to his friend's breathing. Not long enough. Nowhere near long enough. Because there came a time when that breathing stilled.

Silence.

Simeon listened close, jolted out of his quiet, peaceful reverie by that break in rhythm.

Silence.

Simeon felt panic clutch right at his heart, all but stopping its steady beat. He groped frantically at Edmund's wrist, his neck, searching for any sign of a pulse. Nothing. No heartbeat, no breath...

No life.

Simeon heard a harsh groan tear out of him, an animal sound of distress. But no amount of emotion on his part could make the man in his arms live again.

* * * * *

Edwin regained consciousness to the feeling of warm arms around him and the sound of a gentle snore. Uncertainty froze him into place for a moment, then he remembered the crash.

And the kiss.

Edwin smiled. The arms around him wore Simeon's elegant dove gray suit, smudged and torn, but still Simeon's. Good.

He tried to move, felt a sharp stabbing pain in his chest, coupled with a moist gurgling as he breathed. Had he injured a rib in the crash? Perhaps. He'd count himself lucky if he'd gotten away from the wreck with only a broken rib or two.

Sitting up against a tree being held by the man he was probably in love with didn't do much to get them out of this unpleasant situation. He needed to know more information. Where were they? Could they find water? What about something to eat? How would they survive? He pried himself loose from Simeon's arms with regret.

Simeon moaned in his sleep and his hands flexed.

"Poor fellow," Edwin murmured. "Anyone would have a nightmare after a night like we've had."

He stood, moving away from Simeon and his bad dream. But he couldn't focus on his surroundings with Simeon in such a way. The dream worsened, making the man groan and twitch, rendered feeble by the bonds of sleep. He knelt down, took hold of Simeon's shoulder.

"Wake up, Kerrigan. You're dreaming."

He'd never tell anyone, on pain of death, that Sir Simeon Kerrigan whimpered in his sleep at the touch on his shoulder. But it was... well, rather adorable, especially when the man moved to press his cheek against Edwin's hand and arm.

"Come on, wake up."

Kerrigan tensed all over. His eyes opened, wary at first, then filled with startled recognition and... relief? "You're alive!"

Edwin smiled. "Of course I'm alive."

A brief flare of emotion, then Kerrigan brushed off his hand and stood, straightening his battered garments. "Right, then. This is a sticky situation we've landed in. We'd best come up with a plan for getting out of it."

"Just like that?"

"Yes." Kerrigan brushed some twigs from his hair, took off his spectacles. His eyebrows rose when he found them undamaged, merely dirty. He shrugged and wiped them off.

Edwin watched him move stiffly, looking at anything other than Edwin, nearly vibrating with tension. He reached out and took hold of Kerrigan's forearm as he settled the lenses back on his nose.

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

Edwin caught and held his dark eyes. His ribs jabbed at him when Kerrigan tugged halfheartedly, not really trying to break Edwin's grip. "I mean *no*. Kerrigan—*Simeon*—I'm not letting you get away with ignoring what happened."

Simeon flinched and looked away. "The *Midnight Aurora* crashed, leaving us stranded. God only knows where. There's no ignoring of that."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it." Edwin grinned, feeling a sudden recklessness sweep over him. "You never asked why I transferred into Oxford mid-year."

Simeon frowned, perplexed. "What? Why should I have? You showed up in my Philosophy class, that was enough."

Edwin moved a step closer, tightening his hold on Simeon's arm when he tried to move back. "Simeon, I got caught kissing someone I shouldn't have."

Simeon's eyes widened, and his breath caught. "You mean—"

Edwin nodded. "Yes. But last night was better."

The struggle on Simeon's face would have been hilarious, if not for the serious potential for disaster the moment held. If the man retreated into proper Victorian manners and mores...

But he didn't. Instead, he let out a strangled gasping sound and lurched forward, awkwardly wrapping his arms around Edwin and clinging tight. Edwin smothered a gasp at the pain, shifted so Simeon's arm avoided the damaged rib.

"I thought you were dead. *Dead!* With never a chance for me to confess this indecent attraction."

Edwin shivered. "Please don't say that, Simeon."

Simeon broke away, so quickly the awkward embrace might never have happened. "I meant nothing by that, chalk it up to—"

"Simeon. Please. I need you to stop talking before you say something we'll both regret."

Simeon started to speak, chopped off the words, clamped his mouth shut. Edwin wondered if he was the only person who ever interrupted the overly-wealthy lord. Probably.

"Listen to me," he said, nerves trembling and twitching, not daring to think too closely about

what words he chose. Over-thinking could destroy him now. "There's nothing indecent about caring."

Simeon looked away. "If not, then why are such things condemned by the entire world?"

"Not the *entire* world." Despite the nerves, a quick grin flashed across Edwin's face. "Just ask the French."

"Bunch of immoral layabouts," Simeon muttered, but snuck a look at Edwin.

"Tell that to—" He stopped short before saying Claude's name, remembering the hole blown through the skyship. No more Claude. He cleared his throat. "Never mind. Why'd you kiss me, if you think it's so wrong?"

Simeon launched into motion. He strode from under the tree that had caught and sheltered them, then tripped over a root and cursed, nearly crashing into another tree.

"Blast this forest!"

"By damn, Simeon, even the trees want to keep you here with me. Face it, you can't get away from what happened. Nor should you want to. Can't you just admit it? Say that you feel the same as I do?"

Simeon closed in on him so suddenly Edwin nearly flinched away. His eyes burned with emotion unchained. "Damn you, don't you see? I kissed you because it was the end! It didn't matter anymore! We were doing to die, damn it, and nobody was around to condemn either one of us for— for—"

Edwin forgot to think. He took hold of Simeon, dragged him into a close embrace, completely ignored the fire burning in his side, and prevented any more words with a kiss. And this time, no flaming skyship or explosion distracted either of them from the sheer pleasure of the moment. Simeon's hands clutched at him, held him closer. Edwin could feel both of them trembling, like willows in a breeze, shaken by the emotional intensity. He'd never felt such... what? Oh, what did it matter, anyway? He let thought go and enjoyed the kiss.

"Simeon," Edwin whispered, what felt like a lifetime later. He cupped his hands around Simeon's face, taking full advantage of the opportunity to touch while it lasted. The conflict raging in those dark eyes promised trouble in the future. "I think I've fallen in love with you. Please say you can try to... to give me a chance."

"A chance to what?" Simeon asked, voice dull and flat. "Be condemned by society? Live in fear? Endure the taunts, the ostracism, the shunning? You deserve better than that, Edwin."

They kissed again, and Edwin drew hope from the fact that Simeon still held him. Simeon could say whatever he wanted, as long as he kept on kissing Edwin.

"It doesn't have to be that way," Edwin said, breathless, when he ended the kiss. "You know that. We're together often enough already, people expect us to show up together. You know *that*. And look where we are now. We've survived a horrible ordeal together. That gives us every reason to seek out each other's company. It's expected. Tragedy brings people closer together. It wouldn't even raise eyebrows if I moved in with you."

Simeon's eyes widened, and his hands, formerly soft and caressing, clutched at Edwin.

"Tragedy... Edwin, dear God, they're all dead!"

The devastated remains of the *Aurora* flashed through Edwin's mind. He nodded, not trusting his voice to speak.

"And here we are, canoodling like courting teenagers... No. I won't have it, I tell you. It's disrespectful."

But he didn't step away. Edwin held him closer. He'd heard the unshed tears in Simeon's voice.

"It'll get better, Simeon. You'll see. We'll find a way out of this, and we'll mourn our dead, and we'll move on. Together. Because we belong together."

Simeon laid his head against Edwin's shoulder, a rather awkward movement since they stood very close in height. "Maybe you're right, Ed. Maybe. Is it worth the risk?"

"Of course. You're worth any risk."

They held each other in silence, each lost in his own thoughts. Then Simeon did break free of Edwin's hold, with a brief smile of regret. "Enough of this emotional nonsense, Ed. Let's see about

getting home again."

"Together?"

The smile returned, and this time it lit his eyes with a glorious brilliance that Edwin could easily drown in. "Of course, together. I wouldn't want to live any other way."

Edwin's mouth fell open from the pure shock of hearing those words. "You—you—but—*damn!*"

Simeon laughed at him. Then, *together*, they began seeking a way out of the mountains they'd crashed in and all the way back home.

* * * *

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