

Novel
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Rights Negotiable
DRAFT 8

Distant Thunder

by

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< Prologue >

(Boulogne-sur-Mer)

Fabrice duLaurier awaiting the ferry at Boulogne again felt the stiffness sewn into his coat. He couldn't help it: his favorite frock had been slit open, two packets of papers slipped in, and the seam sewn shut. He had at the time noted the Imperial crest on the pale blue envelope and said nothing. A frock was a small thing to sacrifice in the service of the Emperor.

The Minister of State's man had shown him the two packets, one standard white, the other small and powder blue, and seen to the tailoring in his office with a very brief verbal instruction.

"You are to place these in the hands of Captain James Dunwoody Bulloch, agent of the Confederate States, at Fraser Trenholm and Company in Nautilus House, Liverpool."

One was then very possibly a contract to build ships in France for the American rebellion, which would benefit duLaurier's foundry.

"If Captain Bulloch is not available, he is at sea trials as he does, Monsieur Charles Prioleau of Fraser Trenholm has worked with us, and is a trustworthy man...?" he had asked, knowing better than to ask about the specific content he carried.

"No. Captain Bulloch only, by express order of the Emperor."

DuLaurier thus had confirmed the author of the blue paper. He asked if any negotiation would be required, from whom the steel would be procured, for example, and at what price.

The Minister's liaison had only smiled.

And so Fabrice DuLaurier went forth, not as an agent of Acier du Bourdeaux exactly, but as a messenger of a more exalted entity, one that would undoubtedly profit his company and himself upon completion of this little errand that had drawn him summarily from Claire's preparations for holiday. She had loved summer months in the Dordogne in their early years together, before Antoine, and more particularly before the fragility of their son's lungs became their central fact. Now they packed for the Pyrenees, for Hendaye always, for weeks of tedium upon return from this mission in clear air that Antoine could breathe.

He shook out the pages of *Le Figaro* purchased at the start of his rail trip to Boulogne. He had finished the paper long since, but a voyage of such sensitivity required vigilance, so his eyes skimmed over the words on the pages and took note of the others awaiting the ferry to England:

Tradesmen in soft worn costume.

A party of Englishwomen returning from an art outing with inexpert canvases strapped to travel easels.

A handful of businessmen like himself.

Few holiday families at this late morning hour.

Still, he played his little game, *chercher l'espion*. But he made sure that he himself, a neatly-dressed middle-aged businessman, was the spy that no one would notice.

DuLaurier consulted his watch. The ferry would bring him to Folkstone in time for an afternoon train to London, which he would traverse to get the train to Liverpool, where he should arrive by early evening. He yawned and permitted himself to lean back and tip his bowler down, and thus did not see a tinker in a slouch cap slip out to the telegraph office.

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M. Fabrice duLaurier opened his eyes to find industrial England had given way to more pastoral views sliding by the first-class London And North-Western Rail carriage window. He appreciated the rolling verdure of hedged fields as much as the next man, but Fabrice DuLaurier was not the next man, and the Emperor had no use for laggards. He must remain vigilant until back on French soil.

The United States had agents watching the ports, no question, and the British as well. As assistant director of Acier du Bordeaux he of course had business in English markets for iron and steel, in Liverpool and Glasgow and Belfast and the financial houses of London. But since the fracas over the *Alexandra* any business that might result in construction of a raider for the Confederate States was subject to scrutiny.

DuLaurier patted the in-sewn pocket of his coat. The documents were still there, sealed. He focused upon the task before him.

He had met Captain Bulloch on two occasions, once at Nautilus House in Liverpool and once at the Arman Shipyard in Bordeaux. Bulloch was tall, lean and fulsomely-whiskered with soft, passable French and piercing blue eyes that missed nothing. As agent of an unrecognized government with few resources, he was courteous, careful, and nobody's fool. Fabrice had to agree, a most trustworthy man, whom he earnestly hoped to find in residence at Nautilus House given the urgency of the matter.

DuLaurier had made a fair crossing from Boulogne-sur-Mer to Folkstone. He noted those boarding compartments near his on the train to London, not displeased to share his own with a family from Amiens on holiday with whose adults he shared initial courtesies before the train set into motion and the children dominated their attentions. The southeast of England passed into the sooty tedium of London and the short walk along Euston Road from grand St. Pancras to Euston

Station. Truly, as one got older, the fascination of travel and cities wore away to a series of customs and inconveniences to be endured.

Euston Station was its usual cindery bustle, but once settled into the first-class car of the LNWR train to Liverpool there was only a well-turned-out older gent who smoked Turkish cigarettes in the opposite corner of the compartment. He departed at Birmingham. There Fabrice had opened his first-class window to the rushing summer below the engine soot and drifted to wherever he was now.

The train slowed into a town with a large rail yard. This would be Crewe, a major maintenance center. He recalled last visit thinking about prospects for steel here. When the conductor walked the car to announce the station Fabrice opened his door to inquire about the length of the stop.

“Ten minutes, sir.”

DuLaurier thanked him and stepped out to the platform. It was all shades of grey and buff, laden carters bustling through sparse foot traffic to and from the cars. There was a fountain built into a brick pillar and he was thirsty but did not trust English water. Or coffee. He started for the café to get a cup of tea and inquire about steel procurement at the Crewe yards.

“Mise à jour du Meilleur,” a rough voice muttered behind him.

DuLaurier turned to a large man in a slouch hat and rough clothes bent over a barrow of sacks, the green-neckerchiefed bearer of an update in oddly-accented French.

“Qu’est-ce que c’est?”

“Viens. Comme fait en secret.”

It was not impossible that the Emperor had experienced a change in humor but it was suspicious. How would one find him here?

“Dis moi ici.”

The man looked around, gestured to a stack of freight behind the fountain column and rolled his barrow back. DuLaurier surveyed the station before taking two steps after him, enough to be discreet but not out of sight of the platform and train.

“Assez loin. Quel est votre message?”

DuLaurier suddenly smelled then felt presence, presences behind him, but as he spun a sack fell over his head. There was only time enough to register *barley* before a blow struck him senseless.

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The sack was placed atop the cart and taken to a shed near the head of the platform. Two of the carters carried it inside and disbursed its contents onto a crate.

“Kev -- He ain't movin'.”

“What now, Seamus?” The green-neckerchiefed man checked for a pulse, stood back stiffly. “Shite. That'll complicate things. Check him for papers.”

The tall, bearded man probed and drew a short knife from his belt.

“Aye, he's got a packet here sewn in his coat.”

“Check his pockets then and get it all to Joseph, we'll cover for ye.”

“Where'll we put 'im?”

Kevin eyed the ungainly corpse as though reviewing all the sorrow of his decades.

“No time now – set him back there when you're done, we'll move him tonight.”

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Wednesday, 3 June 1863

< 1 >

(London)

Viola Ross paused at the door of the Minister's study to listen to the voices inside.

Charles Francis Adams, scion of two Presidents and Minister to the Court of St. James's, was talking with his son and secretary Henry. Viola had always found it worth listening at a closed door before making herself known, a habit from childhood worth keeping in a household thick with matters of state and the presence of Henry Adams.

"We have Mr. Swift who is just returned from Pernambuco with report of the latest depredations of Confederate raiders off the Brazilian coast," Henry was saying. "He waits in the sitting room."

Viola looked to the open door of the sitting room and saw a solid figure with the nut-brown complexion and wide blue eyes of a plantation expatriot, clad in a fawn and khaki city dress of a temperament gone native beneath a loose fall of ruddy brown hair. He nodded pleasantly, having apparently watched her descend the stairs from his station after being admitted by Light the butler, who as usual was not in immediate evidence. She nodded back.

"Damned pirates! That's a lesson from independence the rebels have learned too well." An audible squeak issued from a shifting of the big chair. "We are not delegated here to report only pleasant tidings."

"No, Father, we are not."

There was pause and a shuffle of papers in which Viola prepared to knock when Henry continued.

“Before you interview Mr. Swift, there is a report that a Frenchman known to be a courier for the French Emperor was seen disembarking the ferry from Boulogne.”

“When?”

“Yesterday, early afternoon, so he is in England now. This was telegraphed in cypher from Folkstone.”

The Minister took a moment in replying.

“No doubt on his way to Liverpool, if not already there.”

“No doubt. This person, Fabrice DuLaurier, would not be entailed for a normal diplomatic dispatch. You will see that he nominally represents the interests of a French foundry, but he has been seen at Nautilus House as well as the Laird shipyards.”

Viola considered a bit guiltily the notebook and papers in her hand, bearing considerably less critical business. Her father, Isaiah Ross, had been a longtime friend, political supporter and frequent bridge partner of Mr. Adams and the family of Mrs. Abigail Brooks Adams. When sending her off to serve their legation in England he had pondered the number of times Adams fathers and sons had discussed matters of state in offices far from home. But Viola attended Abigail and her daughter Mary, friends since her childhood, as social secretary.

“Best send your man to see what they’re up to, Henry. I’ll write to Mr. Dudley in Liverpool to put his consulate on alert. I won’t be caught on the back foot again.”

Viola tapped at the door.

“Yes?” the Minister responded.

Viola opened the door enough to crane in.

“Good morning, Your Excellency, Mr. Adams. Mrs. Adams sends greetings and a message. May I take a moment?”

Viola as Abigail's social secretary practiced a presentation of frankness balanced by a lightness in her voice. Early on she had rehearsed in her garret room into the night until she wore a seriousness about the trivial but required matters under her purview like a second skin. She could readily see that her presence entertained Minister Adams, whose face framed in tufted white hair and whiskers relaxed in regarding her.

"What is Mrs. Adams's pleasure?" he asked.

"She has asked me to remind you of preparations for her reception for Americans here Monday fortnight," she said quickly. There was no mistaking Henry's impatience, his fingers tapping on the papers in his hands. Viola kept her eyes locked on the Minister as she moved forward in vast skirts of pale blue satin and a scent of lilac to place two papers on his blotter. "I have prepared a guest list and budget for the occasion. For your approval, sir, in your good time."

"Thank you, Miss Ross," the Minister replied as Viola retreated. "I'd have quite forgotten. Please tell Mrs. Adams I shall address the matter."

"Thank you, Your Excellency, I shall," she curtsied, nodded to Henry, "Mr. Adams." She paused in her turn for the door. "Oh, Excellency, regarding the Independence Day dinner next month, shall we include the French legation in our planning?"

"Certainly," Adams said. "It is only right to acknowledge their part in our liberty."

"Speak with Mr. Lannan," Henry added.

Henry's forehead was already ascending to thin receding wisps of brown hair, another Adams legacy.

She smiled and curtsied again.

"On to Pernambuco, then," the Minister said just as Viola had reached the door.

“Miss Ross,” Henry called after her. “Please, on your way out, show Mr. Josiah Swift in. He awaits in the sitting room.”

“Certainly, sir.”

Josiah Swift, Merchant, according to his calling card, native of Edinburgh and late of Brazil, spent the next several minutes nattering on excitedly as Viola lingered in the vestibule without.

“So then, sir, you see, the second ship comes upwind athwart the *Mermaid* and takes her wind while closing with steam and sail. She fired a shot across the bow and, I say, sir, that was pretty much that, the *Mermaid* struck colors and sail and the raider grappled. They hove to about an hour before setting out in line for Recife.”

“Did you hear the name of the pirate vessel?” the Minister asked.

“T’was said to be the *Florida*, sir,” Mr. Swift testified. “They scuttled the next few.”

Then Viola heard Charles Light harrumphing his way up the cellar steps. She never liked to be around the butler without other members of the household present, even in their separate rooms up in the servants’ quarters, so she crossed the sitting room to the drawing room beyond and closed the doors to work.

Upon first arriving in London Viola had wondered why Henry Adams clearly did not like her. He had been a rare and distant presence at Adams family dinners she had experienced in Boston, speaking little but always incisively enough to halt or turn a conversation. In the two months since she had staggered off her father’s steamer *North Star*, she had come to appreciate that Henry did not like anyone. But Mr. Adams, the Minister, for all his heritage and public attainments, remained a shy old dear in the privacy of his family dwellings. Mrs. Adams, Abigail, who had offered her ear and shoulder to Viola after Mother had died, felt very much a kindred

spirit, a daughter of Boston commerce and society who had followed her heart to a life's adventure.

And yet Viola had not bargained her way out of Beacon Hill society to carry on the same social dance in a different setting. London was the prime diplomatic posting in the civilized world, a lens for power projected across oceans, a den of intrigue. That was what had inspired her to petition Father for this engagement, as an apprenticeship of sorts. Her job was to assist Mrs. Adams and young Mary keep their social calendar, organize and attend parties. But her sustenance was the talk at these socials and parties and within this household.

She settled behind the closed parlor door to take out this morning's letter from Father.

My most beloved Viola,

Spring arrives in Boston at last, and yet its freshness seems less without you. I console myself once more that you begin your life's adventure in the best possible setting and company. Grasp this opportunity to inform your spirit and intellect to best direct the passion you have always kindled.

Viola had felt him withdraw from the world after Mother's death, not to solitude but an armor of business society. Many found Isaiah Ross to be cold and distant. Part of his strength, she knew, was to make men wonder about Isaiah Ross's strategy and secrets at the expense of their own.

We remain thick in commerce here, even with some losses of ships to raiders and ill fortune. Reports from the front are muted, with rumors of Lee marching north and Meade now replacing Hooker to match him. There's a feel of storm brewing.

For Father there was always a storm at hand or in the offing. That was why he schooled her so sternly at his side after Mother's passing, a training acquaintances thought more befitting a son. That was behind his agreeing to let her go to London as a finishing school for his sole heir and posterity.

In these dangerous times, remain mindful of all our lessons. I cherish your safety in the company of the Adamases, but I am ever more thankful of our hard training against any vicissitude that may arise to carry you safely on your journeys and home to tell your stories. I ask only that you continue to write often and share your days in letters that always brighten mine.

Carry always my love and fondest wishes,

Father

It was said in Boston that tides rose and fell but Isaiah Ross always prospered.

Early on Viola had taken to hovering at the door of her father's library when the men retired after dinner for port and cigars. He was not happy when he caught her there, at first. Then she would tell him what she'd overheard, and he had come to realize the advantages of a clever girl, someone invisible who could see and hear everything.

Even through the heavy door of the Minister's study the large room had carried Henry's clipped voice, His Excellency's "Damned pirates!" about a Confederate raider off Brazil. Raiders were off the Northeast coast as well, had taken, plundered and scuttled the *North Star* on her next voyage. There was now a Frenchman at large on a mysterious errand, likely headed to Liverpool. Even she knew that Liverpool was the British capital of the Confederacy, just as she knew that Henry's man to investigate anything was Thomas Lannan, Henry's law school chum, who often slipped away for days at a time to investigate Rebel intrigues in England and Scotland.

There had to be something she could do to help track down this agent, find out what he was up to, stop the raiders and impair the Confederacy's means of pressing the war.

It was also known in Boston that Isaiah Ross moved through the rough and tumble of the waterfront without guards and without fear. As time passed the widower Ross raised his only child to walk with him anywhere, alert and ready.

Viola carefully folded the letter into the small notebook she carried and consulted today's calendar. Mrs. Adams was invited to visit Lady Russell, the Foreign Minister's wife, at Pembroke Lodge later in the morning. Viola stepped out to an already sultry morning to notify the household's coachman, already stifled in her dress and petticoat even without the scaffolding of crinoline.

Viola Ross, butterfly of the corps diplomatique, would soon with the Minister's blessing be talking with the French legation about an impending Independence Day party. She would ask about commercial interests attending, and listen for whatever else might be offered or withheld.

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(Liverpool)

Captain James Dunwoody Bulloch set down the invoices he had just pored over next to the shipping manifests stacked on his desk, rubbed his eyes, and picked up the letter from his brother Irvine. As European procurement agent for the Navy of the Confederate States of America, Bulloch was charged with shipping and quietly selling the cotton that was the Confederacy's financial lifeline to British buyers and sending back credit reports and materiel while fitting out war ships and blockade runners wherever he could. Irvine's work was less complicated and closer to his older half-brother's heart: he was a mate on the CSS *Atlanta*, one of two raiders Bulloch had thus far been able to build, arm and launch against Union shipping.

Dearest Jem,

I hope I am not out of line in offering greetings for your impending birthday – 40 no less! – but of course one is never certain of a timely port for coaling or correspondence.

Bulloch often felt these days that he could only fully breathe when (rarely) on-deck for a shakeout cruise of a potential runner, or refitting a raider, or when reading a letter from Irvine. At all other times he needed to tread softly, meeting with Lancashire mill owners to bid up their purchases, with munitions factors to work out terms of payment that could be fairly anticipated by blockade-running shipments of cotton, tobacco and turpentine, and then fit out fast ships with able crews (in theory excluding British subjects) to spirit arms back to the desperate struggle on Southern soil. Even with support from the Southern Club here, this desk was his quarterdeck in

battles with bankers and merchants and government officials, warding off the efforts of Secretary Seward and Minister Adams to sway British and continental policy against his command.

Our voyage goes well so far, many beneficial encounters. Captain Semmes is well pleased with the ship and our crew's morale is high.

Bulloch sat back, stretched his long legs and smiled. *Smooth seas, fair winds and good hunting, brother*, he thought. He would post a letter of uncertain delivery to the care of the CSA consul in Kingston or Havana or Marseilles or another friendly port. It was the best that could be done in the circumstances.

There was a tapping at his door, two-three-two-one.

Bulloch rose, put Irvine's letter in his right-hand drawer and set paperweights on top of his stacks to guard against a breeze or prying eyes. In two long strides he was at the door, which he unlocked and opened to the smiling Irish cornstalk of Howard Norton, the chief clerk of his merchant banker Fraser Trenholm, standing in the upstairs hallway holding a telegram.

"Morning, Captain," Norton said cheerfully. "Mr. Prioleau thought you should see this straightaway."

"Thank you, Mr. Norton," Bulloch said. "Will you have a seat?"

He saw at a glance that the telegram was from John Slidell in Paris.

"No thank you, sir, I'll be needing to get back." Norton paused, apparently to take in a glimpse of the Mersey from the window behind Bulloch's desk. "I expect we'll be seeing you downstairs directly."

"That would be a fair wager. Till then."

Bulloch closed the door and opened the message.

EXPECT DULAURIER BY AFTERNOON. SLIDELL

It had been sent yesterday.

Bulloch released a breath he had not been aware of holding. Slidell had been negotiating with Emperor Napoleon and his ministers for over a year. He just wore people down. He'd done it to the captain of the *Trent* when the Yankee gunship took him and Mason off a British steamer and set off an international ruckus. He'd done it to Bulloch and Prioleau more than once. And now he'd done it to the French Emperor. DuLaurier was a foundry agent who often served as a messenger for the Crown: not much personality, but as direct and efficient as you could want. And Bulloch wanted, no, he needed, ships, ironclad rams and raiders, as soon as he could get them, on whatever terms could be worked out.

The Confederate Army in the field with its commanders on home ground could beat anybody, but not without arms and not without food. Secretary Benjamin's every letter was a jeremiad demanding better progress from Europe. If the French were convinced that their interests in Mexico would benefit from eliciting some Southern hospitality, well bless them and be welcome.

Bulloch slipped the telegram into his coat. He rubbed his full side whiskers and clean, square chin. This could be a good day. He set off downstairs to the heart of Fraser Trenholm as Norton had predicted to await what the Emperor might have in mind.

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