

Encounter: Lady Raven
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Lady Raven

There is no shame in running last in a race. It is disagreeable, no doubt, but there is no dishonor in it, provided one has stayed the course.

My aerostat, misnamed The Shark, limped past the finish line to the jeers of the impatient crowd. Their derisive whistles and laughter climbed one hundred feet to assault my ears even through my thickly padded helmet. I was, after all, thirty minutes behind the winner, The Raven.

I cut the throttle and adjusted the flamer to steer The Shark down to the parking area beside the official podium. She landed awkwardly and I was almost thrown overboard. The crowd laughed and I wished I was someplace else, racing my roadster, or even better a team of four at full gallop rather than hanging suspended beneath a bag of hot air.

Adding to my discomfort was the fact that the race committee had delayed the prize giving ceremony until my arrival. The three place getters stood bored and impatient on the podium, awaiting my addition to the line of defeated aeronauts behind them.

As I mounted the podium my sheepish gaze took in The Lady Raven herself, standing hand on hip, encased in a tight black leather flying suit, her helmet and goggles tapping on a shapely thigh. She watched me too, and unless I was mistaken her expression held a touch of admiration

In front of the podium sat her winning aerostat. The Raven was very sleek. Just like its owner. It was a beautifully streamlined affair; the fuselage black as pitch and made of an unfamiliar sturdy material, which was neither metallic nor canvass. It was unbelievably small, a quarter of the size of The Shark, and unlike most, if not all, vehicles I'd seen, the aeronaut did not sit in a basket beneath the gas envelope but inside, in a cockpit hollowed out of the

fuselage which itself was the envelope. The inner workings, the means of propulsion, were invisible except of course for the aft propeller and ailerons.

The presentation went over long, as they usually do. The Raven collected the thousand pound prize and the gold cup, Lord Darnley, his face livid with rage, collected second prize, and some tiny fellow from across the sea took third.

As they posed for a calotype Darnley stepped towards her. He gesticulated aggressively at the Raven. "You cheat with this magic!"

"What magic?" she retorted haughtily. "This is science!"

"Phar! Then what is this science? Show us!"

"So dolts like you can steal my work? Never!"

He took a step towards her, but my hand on his chest stopped him in his tracks. He glared at me, his eyes flaring, his pudgy face reddening. Spittle flecked his lips and chin. "Unhand me, you imbecile!"

"You will cease and desist, Darnley, or show yourself to be the coward that you are. Violence against a lady. For shame, sir, for shame!"

"She's no Lady. She's a witch!"

I slapped him across the face with my flying glove. "My seconds will call on you this evening at seven."

I took Lady Raven by the arm and led her away. She shook me off. "You had no right," she said sharply, keeping her voice low so as not to entertain curious bystanders. "I was handling him well enough on my own."

"I saw."

"Well then? Why did you intervene?"

"I planned to call him out in any case. The man cheats at cards. He cheated my friend out of his fortune. He took his own life a month ago."

She appeared shocked, composed herself and then pointed to The Shark. "That airship is your friend's, I take it?"

"How did you guess?"

"You sir are hardly a pilot. You almost destroyed my chances when I lapped you at the ten mile mark. You were not in control of your altitude and almost collided with me."

"I apologize for my ineptitude. I'm more at home before a team of four. Do you like horses by any chance?"

She laughed. "Tell me you didn't know I was once a jockey and I'll call you a lying scoundrel and demand satisfaction at dawn."

I studied her face for a moment before replying, to check if the double entendre was deliberate or not. I held up my arms in apology. "I'm sorry. I truly didn't. Where did you ride?"

"Not somewhere you would know, my Lord."

I suddenly placed her. "I'll be damned. You are Rose Courtney!"

She bowed. "The very same."

"I won ten guineas betting on Regal Pride last year. You rode her?"

"Glad to be of service to you."

"Then consider my intervention to be a belated thank you for the pleasure of watching you ride."

She laughed in a most captivating manner. "Then I must invite you to the Club for dinner, to apologize for my previous anger."

"The Club?"

"The Aeronauts Club."

"I'm afraid I'm not a member."

"I'll sign you in." She hooked her arm through mine. "As my guest. I insist."

I can't say I enjoyed a better night of late. What with Peter Grisholm's travails and other developments internationally, I've been distracted from the enjoyments of life. Rose Courtney, in addition to being a beautiful and engaging woman, was an extremely intelligent and articulate person. I quickly came to respect her as an intellect and not the saucy hoyden of popular rumor. I soon

realized those same feelings were reciprocated, and we quickly found ourselves locked in tight embrace in the cab heading for her house in salubrious Baxter Heights.

Once her door closed behind us, in quick fashion we relieved each other of our flight suits. She made love like she raced -- aggressively. Not satisfied to be passive, she played to conquer. She rolled me onto my back and squatted over my cock, raising and lowering her tight muscle toned body in a hypnotic rhythm, throwing her head back in pleasure each time shudder rippled through her flesh. Her breasts, small and firm, fitted snugly in my palms.

Firelight sent flickering shadows across her taut body, accentuating the lines of muscle, the surprising number of scars, not obtained in duels I wagered, indicating a violent past. For some these blemishes would be ugly, but for me, they confirmed I had last found a kindred spirit.

She rode me relentlessly, her hips rocking back and forth, grinding her womanhood against my pelvis. I felt the tension in her body increase as she charged towards the finish line, manifesting an insatiable desire to climax first. I stayed the course. It was a race I was delighted to lose.

Spent at last she rolled away from me and we lay breathless for a time, until the warmth of the fire and her body roused me again. I kissed her.

"You should have an early night," she said. "If you are to fight at dawn."

"I do not expect to fight. Darnley is a prat, a coward, who has no skills at arms whatsoever, whereas I do. He knows that. He'll be on an airship half way to Atlantis by midnight."

She laughed. "You sound over confident, sir."

"If he is foolish enough to stay I expect no contest."

"You will kill him?"

"I am duty bound to honor my friend, who Darnley killed assuredly as if he held the gun himself. I'll not lose sleep over him."

"You have a cold heart," she said.

“Perhaps for those who, by their own actions, deserve no pity. For others, they find I am warm hearted enough.”

She cocked an eyebrow at me. “Those deemed worthy of your affection, you mean.”

“You would have me love someone unworthy?”

“Worthiness, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, is it not?”

I detected her disapproving tone and wondered from where this compassion came from one so abused by life. She was a surprising woman. Would she think less of me if I put a lead ball through Darnley’s chest? I traced a scar on her shoulder. “Indeed, my standards may be higher than most.”

“Should I take that as a compliment, sir?”

“It was so intended, my Lady Raven.”

For a moment, my desire for her and the desire for vengeance on Darnley battled within my mind. With no clear victor, uncertainty ruled. I hoped Darnley had indeed fled.

Was it dishonorable to wish that honor would not force me to fight? As it had no ready answer, this new question threatened to steal the pleasure of the evening. I decided to think about it again ten minutes after dawn.

“Morning is far, far away.” I pulled Lady Raven, Rose Courtney, to me. She came willingly like one of her champions lusting at the gate; her muscles shivering, her breath hot, and with an inner light flaring in those jade eyes.

I would let her win this race again. There was no dishonor in coming second.

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