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## The Effluent Engine

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by [N.K. JEMISIN](#)[Purchase Issue](#)PUBLISHED IN [MAR. 2018 \(ISSUE 94\)](#) | 10950 WORDS© 2011 by N. K. Jemisin. Originally published in *Steam-Powered*, edited by JoSelle Vanderhooft. Reprinted by permission of the author.

New Orleans stank to the heavens. This was either the water, which did not have the decency to confine itself to the river but instead puddled along every street; or the streets themselves, which seemed to have been cobbled with bricks of fired excrement. Or it may have come from the people who jostled and trotted along the narrow avenues, working and lounging and cursing and shouting and sweating, emitting a massed reek of unwashed resentment and perhaps a bit of hangover. As Jessaline strolled beneath the colonnaded balconies of Royal Street, she fought the urge to give up, put the whole fumid pile to her back, and catch the next dirigible out of town.

Then someone jostled her. "Pardon me, miss," said a voice at her elbow, and Jessaline was forced to stop, because the earnest-looking young man who stood there was white. He smiled, which did not surprise her, and doffed his hat, which did.

"Monsieur," Jessaline replied, in what she hoped was the correct mix of reserve and deference.

"A fine day, is it not?" The man's grin widened, so sincere that Jessaline could not help a small smile in response. "I must admit, though; I have yet to adjust to this abysmal heat. How are you

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handling it?"

"Quite well, monsieur," she replied, thinking, what is it that you want from me? "I am acclimated to it."

"Ah, yes, certainly. A fine negress like yourself would naturally deal better with such things. I am afraid my own ancestors derive from chillier climes, and we adapt poorly." He paused abruptly, a stricken look crossing his face. He was the florid kind, red-haired and freckled, with skin so pale that it revealed his every thought—in point of which he paled further. "Oh, dear! My sister warned me about this. You aren't Creole, are you? I understand they take it an insult to be called, er . . . by certain terms."

With some effort Jessaline managed not to snap, do I look like one of them? But people on the street were beginning to stare, so instead she said, "No, monsieur. And it's clear to me you aren't from these parts, or you would never ask such a thing."

"Ah—yes." The man looked sheepish. "You have caught me out, miss; I'm from New York. Is it so obvious?"

Jessaline smiled carefully. "Only in your politeness, monsieur." She reached up to adjust her hat, lifting it for a moment as a badly needed cooling breeze wafted past.

"Are you perhaps—" The man paused, staring at her head. "My word! You've naught but a scrim of hair!"

"I have sufficient to keep myself from drafts on cold days," she replied, and as she'd hoped, he laughed.

"You're a most charming ne—woman, my dear, and I feel honored to make your acquaintance." He stepped back and bowed, full and proper. "My name is Raymond Forstall."

"Jessaline Dumonde," she said, offering her lace-gloved hand, though she had no expectation that he would take it. To her surprise he did, bowing again over it.

"My apologies for gawking. I simply don't meet many of the colored on a typical day, and I must say—" he hesitated, darted a look about, and at least had the grace to drop his voice. "You're remarkably lovely, even with no hair."

In spite of herself, Jessaline laughed. "Thank you, monsieur." After an appropriate and slightly awkward pause, she inclined her head. "Well, then; good day to you."

"Good day indeed," he said, in a tone of such pleasure that Jessaline hoped no one had heard it, for his sake. The folk of this town were particular about matters of propriety, as any society which relied so firmly upon class differences. While there were many ways in which a white gentleman could appropriately express his admiration for a woman of color—the existence of the gens de couleur libre was testimony to that—all of those ways were simply Not Done in public.

But Forstall donned his hat, and Jessaline inclined her head in return before heading away. Another convenient breeze gusted by, and she took advantage of it to adjust her hat once more, in the process sliding her stiletto back into its hiding place amid the silk flowers.

....

This was the dance of things, the cric-crac as the storytellers said in Jessaline's land. Everyone needed something from someone. Glorious France needed money, to recover from the unlamented Napoleon's endless wars. Upstart Haiti had money from the sweet gold of its sugarcane fields, but needed guns—for all the world, it seemed, wanted the newborn country strangled in its crib. The United States had guns but craved sugar, as its fortunes were dependent upon the acquisition thereof. It alone was willing to treat with Haiti, though Haiti was the stuff of American nightmare: a nation of black slaves who had killed off their white masters. Yet Haitian sugar was no less sweet for its coating of blood, and so everyone got what they wanted, trading 'round and 'round, a graceful waltz—only occasionally devolving into a knife-fight.

It had been simplicity itself for Jessaline to slip into New Orleans. Dirigible travel in the Caribbean was inexpensive, and so many travelers regularly moved between the island nations and the great American port city that hardly any deception had been necessary. She was indentured, she told the captain, and he had waved her aboard without so much as a glance at her papers (which were false anyhow). She was a wealthy white man's mistress, she told the other passengers, and between her fine clothes, regal carriage, and beauty—despite her skin being purest sable in color—they believed her and were alternately awed and offended. She was a slave, she told the dockmaster on the levee; a trusted one, lettered and loyal, promised freedom should she continue to serve to her fullest. He had smirked at this, as if the notion of anyone freeing such an obviously valuable slave was ludicrous. Yet he, too, had let her pass unchallenged, without even charging her the disembarkation fee.

It had then taken two full months for Jessaline to make inquiries and sufficient contacts to arrange a meeting with the esteemed Monsieur

Norbert Rillieux. The Creoles of New Orleans were a closed and prickly bunch, most likely because they had to be; only by the rigid maintenance of caste and privilege could they hope to retain freedom in a land which loved to throw anyone darker than tan into chains. Thus more than a few of them had refused to speak to Jessaline on sight. Yet there were many who had not forgotten that there but for the grace of God went their own fortune, so from these she had been able to glean crucial information and finally an introduction by letter. As she had mentioned the right names and observed the right etiquette, Norbert Rillieux had at last invited her to afternoon tea.

That day had come, and . . .

And, Rillieux, Jessaline was finally forced to concede, was an idiot.

"Monsieur," she said again, after drawing a breath to calm herself, "as I explained in my letter, I have no interest in sugarcane processing. It is true that your contributions to this field have been much appreciated by the interests I represent; your improved refining methods have saved both money and lives, which could both be reinvested in other places. What we require assistance with is a wholly different matter, albeit related."

"Oh," said Rillieux, blinking. He was a savagely thin-lipped man, with a hard stare that might have been compelling on a man who knew how to use it. Rillieux did not. "Your pardon, mademoiselle. But, er, who did you say you represented, again?"

"I did not say, monsieur. And if you will forgive me, I would prefer not to say for the time being." She fixed him with her own hard stare. "You will understand, I hope, that not all parties can be trusted when matters scientific turn to matters commercial."

At that, Rillieux's expression turned shrewd at last; he understood just fine. The year before, Jessaline's superiors had informed her, the plan Rillieux had proposed to the city—an ingenious means of draining its endless pestilent swamps, for the health and betterment of all—had been turned down. Six months later, a coalition of city engineers had submitted virtually the same plan and been heaped with praise and funds to bring it about. The men of the coalition were white, of course. Jessaline marveled that Rillieux even bothered being upset about it.

"I see," Rillieux said. "Then, please forgive me, but I do not know what it is you want."

Jessaline stood and went to her brocaded bag, which sat on a side-table across the Rillieux house's elegantly apportioned salon. In it was a small, rubber-stopped, peculiarly shaped jar of the sort utilized by chemists, complete with engraved markings on its surface to indicate measurements of the liquid within. At the bottom of this jar swirled a scrim of dark brown, foul-looking paste and liquid. Jessaline brought it over to Rillieux and offered the jar to his nose, waiting until he nodded before she unstopped it.

At the scent which wafted out, he stumbled back, gasping, his eyes all a-water. "By all that's holy! Woman, what is that putrescence?"

"That, Monsieur Rillieux, is effluent," Jessaline said, neatly stoppering the flask. "Waste, in other words, of a very particular kind. Do you drink rum?" She knew the answer already. On one side of the parlor was beautifully made side table holding an impressive array of bottles.

"Of course." Rillieux was still rubbing his eyes and looking affronted. "I'm fond of a glass or two on hot afternoons; it opens the pores, or so I'm told. But what does that—"

"Producing rum is a simple process with a messy result: this effluent, namely, and the gas it emits, which, until lately, had been regarded as simply the unavoidable price to be paid for your pleasant afternoons. Whole swaths of countryside are afflicted with this smell now as a result. Not only is the stench offensive to men and beasts, we have also found it to be as powerful as any tincture or laudanum; over time it causes anything exposed to suffocate and die. Yet there are scientific papers coming from Europe which laud this gas' potential as a fuel source. Captured properly, purified, and burned, it can power turbines, cook food, and more." Jessaline turned and set the flask on Rillieux's beverage stand, deliberately close to the square bottle of dark rum she had seen there. "We wish you to develop a process by which the usable gas— methane—may be extracted from the miasma you just smelled."

Rillieux stared at her for a moment, then at the flask. She could tell that he was intrigued, which meant that half her mission had been achieved already. Her superiors had spent a profligate amount of money requisitioning a set of those flasks from the German chemist who'd recently invented them, precisely with an eye towards impressing men like Rillieux, who looked down upon any science that did not show European roots.

Yet as Rillieux gazed at the flask, Jessaline was dismayed to see a look of consternation, then irritation, cross his face.

"I am an engineer, mademoiselle," he said at last, "not a chemist."

"We have already worked out the chemical means by which it might be done," Jessaline said quickly, her belly clenching in tension. "We would be happy to share that with you—"

"And then what?" He scowled at her. "Who will put the patent on this process, hmm? And who will profit?" He turned away, beginning to pace, and Jessaline could see that he was working up a good head of steam, to her horror. "You have a comely face, Mademoiselle Dumonde, and it does not escape me that dusky women such as yourself once seduced my forefathers into the most base acts, for which those men atoned by at least raising their half-breed children honorably. If I were a white man hoping to once more profit from the labor of an honest Creole like myself—one already proven gullible—I would send a woman like you to do the tempting. To them, all of us are alike, even though I have the purest of French blood in my veins, and you might as well have come straight from the jungles of Africa!"

He rounded on her at this, very nearly shouting, and if Jessaline had been one of the pampered, cowed women of this land, she might have stepped back in fear of unpleasantness. As it was, she did take a step—but to the side, closer to her brocade bag, within which was tucked a neat little derringer whose handle she could see from where she stood. Her mission had been to use Rillieux, not kill him, but she had no qualms about giving a man a flesh wound to remind him of the value of chivalry.

Before matters could come to a head, however, the parlor door opened, making both Jessaline and Norbert Rillieux jump. The young woman who came in was clearly some kin of Rillieux's; she had the same ocherine skin and loose-curved hair, the latter tucked into a graceful split chignon atop her head. Her eyes were softer, however, though that might have been an effect of the wire-rimmed spectacles perched atop her nose. She wore a simple gray dress, which had the unfortunate effect of emphasizing her natural pallor and making her look rather plain.

"Your pardon, Brother," she said, confirming Jessaline's guess. "I thought perhaps you and your guest might like refreshment?" In her hands was a silver tray of crisp square beignets dusted in sugar, sliced merlton with what looked like some sort of remoulade sauce, and tiny wedges of pecan penuche.

At the sight of this girl, Norbert blanched and looked properly abashed. "Ah—er, yes, you're right, thank you. Ah—" He glanced at Jessaline, his earlier irritation clearly warring with the ingrained desire

to be a good host; manners won, and he quickly composed himself. "Forgive me. Will you take refreshment, before you leave?" The last part of that sentence came out harder than the rest. Jessaline got the message.

"Thank you, yes," she said, immediately moving to assist the young woman. As she moved her brocade bag, she noticed the young woman's eyes, which were locked on the bag with a hint of alarm. Jessaline was struck at once with unease—had she noticed the derringer handle? Impossible to tell, since the young woman made no outcry of alarm, but that could have been just caution on her part. That one meeting of eyes had triggered an instant, instinctual assessment on Jessaline's part; this Rillieux, at least, was nowhere near as myopic or bombastic as her brother.

Indeed, as the young woman lifted her gaze after setting down the tray, Jessaline thought she saw a hint of challenge lurking behind those little round glasses, and above that perfectly pleasant smile.

"Brother," said the young woman, "won't you introduce me? It's so rare for you to have lady guests."

Norbert Rillieux went from blanching to blushing, and for an instant Jessaline feared he would progress all the way to bluster. Fortunately he mastered the urge and said, a bit stiffly, "Mademoiselle Jessaline Dumonde, may I present to you my younger sister, Eugenie?"

Jessaline bobbed a curtsy, which Mademoiselle Rillieux returned. "I'm pleased to meet you," Jessaline said, meaning it, because I might have enjoyed shooting your brother to an unseemly degree, otherwise.

It seemed Mademoiselle Rillieux's thoughts ran in the same direction, because she smiled at Jessaline and said, "I hope my brother hasn't been treating you to a display of his famous temper, Mademoiselle Dumonde. He deals better with his gadgets and vacuum tubes than people, I'm afraid."

Rillieux did bluster at this. "Eugenie, that's hardly—"

"Not at all," Jessaline interjected smoothly. "We were discussing the finer points of chemistry, and your brother, being such a learned man, just made his point rather emphatically."

"Chemistry? Why, I adore chemistry!" At this, Mademoiselle Rillieux immediately brightened, speaking faster and breathlessly. "What matter, if I may ask? Please, may I sit in?"

In that instant, Jessaline was struck by how lovely her eyes were,

despite their uncertain coloring of brownish-green. She had never preferred the looks of half-white folk, having grown up in a land where, thanks to the Revolution, darkness of skin was a point of pride. But as Mademoiselle Rillieux spoke of chemistry, something in her manner made her peculiar eyes sparkle, and Jessaline was forced to reassess her initial estimate of the girl's looks. She was handsome, perhaps, rather than plain.

"Eugenie is the only other member of my family to share my interest in the sciences," Rillieux said, pride warming his voice. "She could not study in Paris as I did; the schools there do not admit women. Still, I made certain to send her all of my books as I finished with them, and she critiques all of my prototypes. It's probably for the best that they wouldn't admit her; I daresay she could give my old masters at the École Centrale a run for their money!"

Jessaline blinked in surprise at this. Then it came to her; she had lost Rillieux's trust already. But, perhaps . . .

Turning to the beverage stand, she picked up the flask of effluent. "I'm afraid I won't be able to stay, Mademoiselle Rillieux—but before I go, perhaps you could give me your opinion of this?" She offered the flask.

Norbert Rillieux, guessing her intent, scowled. But Eugenie took the flask before he could muster a protest, unstoppering it deftly and wafting the fumes toward her face rather than sniffing outright. "Faugh," she said, grimacing. "Definitely hydrogen sulfide, and probably a number of other gases, too, if this is the product of some form of decay." She stoppered the flask and examined the sludge in its bottom with a critical eye. "Interesting—I thought it was dirt, but this seems to be some more uniform substance. Something made this? What process could generate something so noxious?"

"Rum distillation," Jessaline said, stifling the urge to smile when Eugenie looked scandalized.

"No wonder," Eugenie said darkly, "given what the end product does to men's souls." She handed the flask back to Jessaline. "What of it?"

So Jessaline was obliged to explain again. As she did, a curious thing happened; Eugenie's eyes grew a bit glazed. She nodded, "mmm-hmming" now and again. "And as I mentioned to your brother," Jessaline concluded, "we have already worked out the formula—"

"The formula is child's play," Eugenie said, flicking her fingers absently. "And the extraction would be simple enough, if methane weren't



dangerously flammable. Explosive even, under certain conditions . . . which most attempts at extraction would inevitably create. Obviously any mechanical method would need to concern itself primarily with stabilizing the end products, not merely separating them. Freezing, perhaps, or—" She brightened. "Brother, perhaps we could try a refinement of the vacuum-distillation process you developed for—"

"Yes, yes," said Norbert, who had spent the past ten minutes looking from Jessaline to Eugenie and back, in visibly increasing consternation. "I'll consider it. In the meantime, Mademoiselle Dumonde was actually leaving; I'm afraid we delay her." He glared at Jessaline as Eugenie made a moue of dismay.

"Quite right," said Jessaline, smiling graciously at him. She put away the flask and tucked the bag over her arm, retrieving her hat from the back of the chair. She could afford to be gracious now, even though Norbert Rillieux had proven intractable. Better indeed to leave, and pursue the matter from an entirely different angle.

And, as Norbert escorted her to the parlor door with a hand rather too firm upon her elbow, Jessaline glanced back and smiled at Eugenie, who returned the smile with charming ruefulness and a shy little wave.

Not just handsome, pretty, Jessaline decided at last. And that meant this new angle would be most enjoyable to pursue.

. . . .

There were, however, complications.

Jessaline, pleased that she had succeeded in making contact with a Rillieux, if not the one she'd come for, treated herself to an evening out about the Vieux Carre. It was not the done thing for a lady of gentle breeding—as she was emulating—to stop in at any of the rollicking music halls she could hear down side streets, though she was intrigued. She could, however, sit in on one of the new-fangled vaudevilles at the Playhouse, which she quite enjoyed, though it was difficult to see the stage well from rear balcony. Then, as nightfall finally brought a breath of cool relief from the day's sweltering humidity, she returned to her room at the inn.

From time spent on the harder streets of Port-au-Prince, it was Jessaline's longtime habit to stand to one side of a door while she unlocked it, so that her shadow under the door would not alert anyone inside. This proved wise, as pushing open the door she found

herself facing a startled male figure, which froze in silhouette before the room's picture window, near her traveling-chest. They stared at one another for a breath, and then Jessaline's wits returned; at once she dropped to one knee and in a single smooth sweep of her hand, brushed up her booted leg to palm a throwing-knife.

In the same instant the figure bolted, darting toward the open balcony window. Jessaline hissed out a curse in her own Kreyòl tongue, running into the room as he lunged through the window with an acrobat's nimbleness, rolling to his feet and fetching up against the elaborately ironworked railing. Fearing to lose him, Jessaline flung the knife from within the room as she ran, praying it would strike, and heard the thunk as it struck flesh. The figure on her balcony stumbled, crying out—but she could not have hit a vital area, for he grasped the railing and pulled himself over it, dropping the short distance to the ground and out of sight.

Jessaline scrambled through the window as best she could, hampered by her bustle and skirts. Just as she reached the railing, the figure finished picking himself up from the ground and turned to run. Jessaline got one good look at him in the moonlight, as he turned back to see if she pursued: a pinch-faced youth, clearly pale beneath the bootblack he'd smeared on his face and straw-colored hair to help himself hide in the dark. Then he was gone, running into the night, though he ran oddly and kept one of his hands clapped to his right buttock.

Furious, Jessaline pounded the railing, though she knew better than to make an outcry. No one in this town would care that some black woman had been robbed, and the constable would as likely arrest her for disturbing the peace.

Going back into her room, she lit the lanterns and surveyed the damage. At once a chill passed down her spine. The chest held a number of valuables that any sensible thief would've taken: fine dresses; a cameo pendant with a face of carved obsidian; the brass gyroscope that an old lover, a dirigible-navigator, had given her; a pearl-beaded purse containing twenty dollars. These, however, had all been shoved rudely aside, and to Jessaline's horror, the chest's false bottom had been lifted, revealing the compartment underneath. There was nothing here but a bundle of clothing and a larger pouch, containing a far more substantial sum—but that had not been taken, either.

But Jessaline knew what would have been in there, if she had not taken them with her to see Rillieux: the scrolls which held the chemical formula for the methane extraction process, and the

rudimentary designs for the mechanism to do so—the best her government’s scientists had been able to cobble together. These were even now at the bottom of her brocade bag.

The bootblack-boy had been no thief. Someone in this foul city knew who and what she was, and sought to thwart her mission.

Carefully, Jessaline replaced everything in the trunk, including the false bottom and money. She went downstairs and paid her bill, then hired a porter to carry her trunk to an inn two blocks over, where she rented a room without windows. She slept lightly that night, waking with every creak and thump of the place, and took comfort only from the solid security of the stiletto in her hand.

....

The lovely thing about a town full of slaves, vagabonds, beggars, and blackguards was that it was blessedly easy to send a message in secret.

Having waited a few days so as to let Norbert Rillieux’s anger cool—just in case—Jessaline then hired a child who was one of the innkeepers’ slaves. She purchased fresh fruit at the market and offered the child an apple to memorize her message. When he repeated it back to her word for word, she showed him a bunch of big blue-black grapes, and his eyes went wide. “Get word to Mademoiselle Eugenie without her brother knowing, and these are yours,” she said. “You’ll have to make sure to spit the seeds in the fire, though, or Master will know you’ve had a treat.”

The boy grinned, and Jessaline saw that the warning had not been necessary. “Just you hold onto those, Miss Jessaline,” he said back, pointing with his chin at the grapes. “I’ll have ‘em in a minute or three.” And indeed, within an hour’s time he returned, carrying a small folded square of cloth. “Miss Eugenie agrees to meet,” he said, “and sends this as a surety of her good faith.” He pronounced this last carefully, perfectly emulating the Creole woman’s tone.

Pleased, Jessaline took the cloth and unfolded it to find a handkerchief of fine imported French linen, embroidered in one corner with a tiny perfect “R.” She held it to her nose and smelled a perfume like magnolia blossoms; the same scent had been about Eugenie the other day. She could not help smiling at the memory. The boy grinned too, and ate a handful of the grapes at once, pocketing the seeds with a wink.

“Gonna plant these near the city dump,” he said. “Maybe I’ll bring you

wine one day!" And he ran off.

. . . .

So Jessaline found herself on another bright, sweltering day at the convent of the Ursulines, where two gentlewomen might walk and exchange thoughts in peace without being seen or interrupted by curious others.

"I have to admit," said Eugenie, smiling sidelong at Jessaline as they strolled amid the nuns' garden, "I was of two minds about whether to meet you."

"I suppose your brother must've given you an earful after I left."

"You might say so," Eugenie said, in a dry tone that made Jessaline laugh. (One of the old nuns glowered at them over a bed of herbs. Jessaline covered her mouth and waved apology.) "But that wasn't what gave me pause. My brother has his ways, Mademoiselle Jessaline, and I do not always agree with him. He's fond of forming opinions without full information, then proceeding as if they are proven fact." She shrugged. "I, on the other hand, prefer to seek as much information as I can. I have made inquiries about you, you see."

"Oh? And what did you find?"

"That you do not exist, as far as anyone in this town knows." She spoke lightly, Jessaline noticed, but there was an edge to her words, too. Unease, perhaps. "You aren't one of us, that much anyone can see; but you aren't a freedwoman either, though the people at your old inn and the market seemed to think so."

At this, Jessaline blinked in surprise and unease of her own. She had not thought the girl would dig that deeply. "What makes you say that?"

"For one, that pistol in your bag."

Jessaline froze for a pace before remembering to keep walking. "A lady alone in a strange, rough city would be wise to look to her own protection, don't you think?"

"True," said Eugenie, "but I checked at the courthouse, too, and there are no records of a woman meeting your description having bought her way free anytime in the past thirty years, and I doubt you're far past that age. For another, you hide it well, but your French has an odd sort of lilt; not at all like that of folk hereabouts. And for thirdly—this is a small town at heart, Mademoiselle Dumonde, despite its

size. Every time some fortunate soul buys free, as they say, it's the talk of the town. To put it bluntly, there's no gossip about you, and there should have been."

They had reached a massive old willow tree which partially overhung the garden path. There was no way around it; the tree's draping branches had made a proper curtain of things, nearly obscuring from sight the area about the trunk.

The sensible thing to do would have been to turn around and walk back the way they'd come. But as Jessaline turned to meet Eugenie's eyes, she suffered another of those curious epiphanies. Eugenie was smiling, sweet, but despite this there was a hard look in her eyes, which reminded Jessaline fleetingly of Norbert. It was clear that she meant to have the truth from Jessaline, or Jessaline's efforts to employ her would get short shrift.

So on impulse Jessaline grabbed Eugenie's hand and pulled her into the willow-fall. Eugenie yelped in surprise, then giggled as they came through into the space beyond, green-shrouded and encircling, like a hurricane of leaves.

"What on earth—? Mademoiselle Dumonde—"

"It isn't Dumonde," Jessaline said, dropping her voice to a near-whisper. "My name is Jessaline Cleré. That is the name of the family that raised me, at least, but I should have had a different name, after the man who was my true father. His name was L'Overture. Do you know it?"

At that, Eugenie drew a sharp breath. "Toussaint the Rebel?" she asked. "The man who led the revolution in Haiti? That was your father?"

"So my mother says, though she was only his mistress; I am natural-born. But I do not begrudge her, because her status spared me. When the French betrayed Toussaint, they took him and his wife and legitimate children and carried them across the sea to torture to death."

Eugenie put her hands to her mouth at this, which Jessaline had to admit was a bit much for a gently raised woman to bear. Yet it was the truth, for Jessaline felt uncomfortable dissembling with Eugenie, for reasons she could not quite name.

"I see," Eugenie said at last, recovering. "Then—these interests you represent. You are with the Haitians."

"I am. If you build a methane extraction mechanism for us, Mademoiselle, you will have helped a nation of free folk stay free, for I swear that France is hell-bent upon re-enslaving us all. They would have done it already, if one of our number had not thought to use our torment to our advantage."

Eugenie nodded slowly. "The sugarcane," she said. "The papers say your people use the steam and gases from the distilleries to make hot-air balloons and blimps."

"Which helped us bomb the French ships most effectively during the Revolution, and also secured our position as the foremost manufacturers of dirigibles in the Americas," Jessaline said, with a bit of pride. "We were saved by a mad idea and a contraption that should have killed its first user. So we value cleverness now, Mademoiselle, which is why I came here in search of your brother."

"Then—" Eugenie frowned. "The methane. It is to power your dirigibles?"

"Partly. The French have begun using dirigibles too, you see. Our only hope is to enhance the maneuverability and speed of our craft, which can be done with gas-powered engines. We have also crafted powerful artillery which use this engine design, whose range and accuracy is unsurpassed. The prototypes work magnificently—but the price of the oil and coal we must currently use to power them is too dear. We would bankrupt ourselves buying it from the very nations that hope to destroy us. The rum effluent is our only abundant, inexpensive resource . . . our only hope."

But Eugenie had begun to shake her head, looking taken aback. "Artillery? Guns, you mean?" she said. "I am a Christian woman, Mademoiselle—"

"Jessaline."

"Very well; Jessaline." That look was in her face again, Jessaline noted, that air of determination and fierceness that made her beautiful at the oddest times. "I do not care for the idea of my skills being put to use in taking lives. That's simply unacceptable."

Jessaline stared at her, and for an instant fury blotted out thought. How dare this girl, with her privilege and wealth and coddled life . . . Jessaline set her jaw.

"In the Revolution," she said, in a low tight voice, "the last French commander, Rochambeau, decided to teach my people a lesson for daring to revolt against our betters. Do you know what he did? He

took slaves—including those who had not even fought—and broke them on the wheel, raising them on a post afterwards so the birds could eat them alive. He buried prisoners of war, also alive, in pits of insects. He boiled some of them, in vats of molasses. Such acts, he deemed, were necessary to put fear and subservience back into our hearts, since we had been tainted by a year of freedom."

Eugenie, who had gone quite pale, stared at Jessaline in purest horror, her mouth open. Jessaline smiled a hard, angry smile. "Such atrocities will happen again, Mademoiselle Rillieux, if you do not help us. Except this time we have been free for two generations. Imagine how much fear and subservience these Christian men will instill in us now?"

Eugenie shook her head slowly. "I . . . I had not heard . . . I did not consider . . ." She fell mute.

Jessaline stepped closer and laid one lace-gloved finger on the divot between Eugenie's collarbones. "You had best consider such things, my dear. Do you forget? There are those in this land who would like to do the same to you and all your kin."

Eugenie stared at her. Then, startling Jessaline, she dropped to the ground, sitting down so hard that her bustle made an aggrieved creaking sound.

"I did not know," she said at last. "I did not know these things."

Jessaline beheld the honest shock on her face and felt some guilt for having troubled her so. It was clear the girl's brother had worked hard to protect her from the world's harshness. Sitting beside Eugenie on the soft dry grass, she let out a weary sigh.

"In my land," she said, "men and women of all shades are free. I will not pretend that this makes us perfect; I have gone hungry many times in my life. Yet there, a woman such as yourself may be more than the coddled sister of a prominent scientist, or the mistress of a white man."

Eugenie threw her a guilty look, but Jessaline smiled to reassure her. The women of Eugenie's class had few options in life; Jessaline saw no point in condemning them for this.

"So many men died in the Revolution that women fill the ranks now as dirigible-pilots and gunners. We run factories and farms, too, and are highly placed in government. Even the hougans are mostly women now—you have vodoun here too, yes? So we are important." She leaned close, her shoulder brushing Eugenie's in a teasing way,

and grinned. "Some of us might even become spies. Who knows?"

Eugenie's cheeks flamed pink and she ducked her head to smile. Jessaline could see, however, that her words were having some effect; Eugenie had that oddly absent look again. Perhaps she was imagining all the things she could do in a land where the happenstances of sex and caste did not forbid her from using her mind to its fullest? A shame; Jessaline would have loved to take her there. But she had seen the luxury of the Rillieux household; why would any woman give that up?

This close, shoulder to shoulder and secluded within the willow tree's green canopy, Jessaline found herself staring at Eugenie, more aware than ever of the scent of her perfume, and the nearby softness of her skin, and the way the curls of her hair framed her long slender neck. At least she did not cover her hair like so many women of this land, convinced that its natural state was inherently ugly. She could not help her circumstances, but it seemed to Jessaline that she had taken what pride in her heritage that she could.

So taken was Jessaline by this notion, and by the silence and strangeness of the moment, that she found herself saying, "And in my land it is not uncommon for a woman to head a family with another woman, and even raise children if they so wish."

Eugenie started—and to Jessaline's delight, her blush deepened. She darted a half-scandalized, half-entranced look at Jessaline, then away, which Jessaline found deliciously fetching. "Live with—another woman? Do you mean—?" But of course she knew what Jessaline meant. "How can that be?"

"The necessities of security and shared labor. The priests look the other way."

Eugenie looked up then, and Jessaline was surprised to see a peculiar daring enter her expression, though her flush lingered. "And . . ." She licked her lips, swallowed. "Do such women . . . ah . . . behave as a family in . . . all matters?"

A slow grin spread across Jessaline's face. Not so sheltered in her thoughts at least, this one! "Oh, certainly. All matters—legal, financial, domestic . . ." Then, as a hint of uncertainty flickered in Eugenie's expression, Jessaline got tired of teasing. It was not proper, she knew; it was not within the bounds of her mission. But—just this once—perhaps—

She shifted just a little, from brushing shoulders to pressing rather



more suggestively close, and leaned near, her eyes fixed on Eugenie's lips. "And conjugal," she added.

Eugenie stared at her, eyes huge behind the spectacles. "C-conjugal?" she asked, rather breathlessly.

"Oh, indeed. Perhaps a demonstration . . ."

But just as Jessaline leaned in to offer just that, she was startled by the voice of one of the nuns, apparently calling to another in French. From far too near the willow tree, a third voice rose to shush the first two—the prying old biddy who'd given Jessaline the eye before.

Eugenie jumped, her face red as plums, and quickly shifted away from Jessaline. Privately cursing, Jessaline did the same, and an awkward silence fell.

"W-well," said Eugenie, "I had best be getting back. I told my brother I would be at the seamstress', and that doesn't take long."

"Yes," Jessaline said, realizing with some consternation that she'd completely forgotten why she'd asked for a meeting in the first place. "Well. Ah. I have something I'd like to offer you—but I would advise you to keep these out of sight, even at home where servants might see. For your own safety." She reached into the brocade bag and handed Eugenie the small cylindrical leather container that held the formula and plans for the methane extractor. "This is what we have come up with thus far, but the design is incomplete. If you can offer any assistance—"

"Yes, of course," Eugenie said, taking the case with an avid look that heartened Jessaline at once. She tucked the leather case into her purse. "Allow me a few days to consider the problem. How may I contact you, though, once I've devised a solution?"

"I will contact you in one week. Do not look for me." She got to her feet and offered her hand to help Eugenie up. Then, speaking loudly enough to be heard outside the willow at last, she giggled. "Before your brother learns we've been swapping tales about him!"

Eugenie looked blank for a moment, then opened her mouth in an "o" of understanding, grinning. "Oh, his ego could use a bit of flattening, I think. In any case, fare you well, Mademoiselle Dumonde. I must be on my way." And with that, she hurried off, holding her hat as she passed through the willow branches.

Jessaline waited for ten breaths, then stepped out herself, sparing a hard look for the old nun—who, sure enough, had moved quite a bit

closer to the tree. "A good afternoon to you, Sister," she said.

"And to you," the woman said in a low voice, "though you had best be more careful from now on, estipid."

Startled to hear her own tongue on the old woman's lips, she stiffened. Then, carefully, she said in the same language, "And what would you know of it?"

"I know you have a dangerous enemy," the nun replied, getting to her feet and dusting dirt off her habit. Now that Jessaline could see her better, it was clear from her features that she had a dollop or two of African in her. "I am sent by your superiors to warn you. We have word the Order of the White Camellia is active in the city."

Jessaline caught her breath. The bootblack man! "I may have encountered them already," she said.

The old woman nodded grimly. "Word had it they broke apart after that scandal we arranged for them up in Baton Rouge," she said, "but in truth they've just gotten more subtle. We don't know what they're after, but obviously they don't just want to kill you, or you would be dead by now."

"I am not so easily removed, madame," Jessaline said, drawing herself up in affront.

The old woman rolled her eyes. "Just take care," she snapped. "And by all means, if you want that girl dead, continue playing silly lovers' games with her where any fool can suspect." And with that, the old woman picked up her spade and shears, and walked briskly away.

Jessaline did too, her cheeks burning. But back in her room, ostensibly safe, she leaned against the door and closed her eyes, wondering why her heart still fluttered so fast now that Eugenie was long gone, and why she was suddenly so afraid.

. . . .

The Order of the White Camellia changed everything. Jessaline had heard tales of them for years, of course—a secret society of wealthy professionals and intellectuals dedicated to the preservation of "American ideals" like the superiority of the white race. They had been responsible for the exposure—and deaths, in some cases—of many of Jessaline's fellow spies over the years. America was built on slavery; naturally, the White Camellias would oppose a nation built on slavery's overthrow.

So Jessaline decided on new tactics. She shifted her attire from that of a well-to-do freedwoman to the plainer garb of a woman of lesser means. This elicited no attention, as there were plenty such women in the city—though she was obliged to move to yet another inn that would suit her appearance. This drew her well into the less-respectable area of the city, where not a few of the patrons took rooms by the hour or the half-day.

Here she laid low for the next few days, trying to determine whether she was being watched, though she spotted no suspicious characters—or at least, no one suspicious for the area. Which, of course, was why she'd chosen it. White men frequented the inn, but a white face that lingered or appeared repeatedly would be remarked upon, and easy to spot.

When a week had passed and Jessaline felt safe, she radically transformed herself using the bundle that had been hidden beneath her chest's false bottom. First she hid her close-cropped hair beneath a lumpy calico headwrap, and donned an ill-fitting dress of worn, stained gingham patched here and there with burlap. A few small pillows rendered her effectively shapeless—a necessity, since in this disguise it was dangerous to be attractive in any way. As she slipped out in the small hours of the morning, carrying her belongings in a satchel and shuffling to make herself look much older, no one paid her any heed—not the drowsy old men sitting guard at the stables, nor the city constables chatting up a gaudily-dressed woman under a gaslamp, nor the young toughs still dicing on the corner. She was, for all intents and purposes, invisible.

So first she milled among the morning-market crowds at the waterfront awhile, keeping an eye out for observers. When she was certain she had not been followed, she made her way to the dirigible docks, where four of the great machines hovered above a cluster of cargo vessels like huge, sausage-shaped guardian angels. A massive brick fence screened the docks themselves from view, though this had a secondary purpose: The docks were the sovereign territory of the Haitian Republic, housing its embassy as well. No American-born slave was permitted to step upon even this proxy version of Haitian soil, since, by the laws of Haiti, they would then be free.

Yet practicality did not stop men and women from dreaming, and near the massive ironwork gate of the facility there was as usual a small crowd of slaves gathered, gazing enviously in at the shouting dirigible crews and their smartly dressed officers. Jessaline slipped in among these and edged her way to the front, then waited.

Presently, a young runner detached herself from the nearby rope

crew and ran over to the fence. Several of the slaves pushed envelopes through the fence, commissioning travel and shipping on behalf of their owners, and the girl collected these. The whole operation was conducted in utter silence; an American soldier hovered all too near the gate, ready to report any slave who talked. (It was not illegal to talk, but any slave who did so would likely suffer for it.)

Yet Jessaline noted that the runner met the eyes of every person she could, nodding to each solemnly, touching more hands than was strictly necessary for the sake of her work. A small taste of respect for those who needed it so badly, so that they might come to crave it and eventually seek it for themselves.

Jessaline met the runner's eyes too as she pushed through a plain, wrinkled envelope, but her gaze held none of the desperate hope of the others. The runner's eyes widened a bit, but she moved on at once after taking Jessaline's envelope. When she trotted away to deliver the commissions, Jessaline saw her shuffle the pile to put the wrinkled envelope on top.

That done, Jessaline headed then to the Rillieux house. At the back gate, she shifted her satchel from her shoulder to her hands, re-tying it so as to make it square-shaped. To the servant who then answered her knock—freeborn; the Rillieuxs did not go in for the practice of owning slaves themselves—she said in coarse French, "Package for Mademoiselle Rillieux. I was told to deliver it to her personal."

The servant, a cleanly dressed fellow who could barely conceal his distaste at Jessaline's appearance, frowned further. "English, woman, only high-class folk talk French here." But when Jessaline deliberately spoke in butchered English, rendered barely comprehensible by an exaggerated French accent, the man finally rolled his eyes and stood aside. "She's in the garden house. Back there. There!" And he pointed the way.

Thus did Jessaline come to the overlarge shed that sat amid the house's vast garden. It had clearly been meant to serve as a hothouse at some point, having a glass ceiling, but when Jessaline stepped inside she was assailed by sounds most unnatural: clanks and squealing and the rattling hiss of a steam boiler. These came from the equipment and incomprehensible machinery that lined every wall and hung from the ceiling, pipes and clockworks big enough to crush a man, all of it churning merrily away.

At the center of this chaos stood several high worktables, each bearing equipment in various states of construction or

dismantlement, save the last. At this table, which sat in a shaft of gathering sunlight, sat a sleeping Eugenie Rillieux.

At the sight of her, Jessaline stopped, momentarily overcome by a most uncharacteristic anxiety. Eugenie's head rested on her folded arms, atop a sheaf of large, irregular sheets of parchment that were practically covered with pen-scribbles and diagrams. Her hair was amuss, her glasses askew, and she had drooled a bit onto one of her pale, ink-stained hands.

Beautiful, Jessaline thought, and marveled at herself. Her tastes had never leaned towards women like Eugenie, pampered and sheltered and shy. She generally preferred women like herself, who could be counted upon to know what they wanted and take decisive steps to get it. Yet in that moment, gazing upon this awkward, brilliant creature, Jessaline wanted nothing more than to be holding flowers instead of a fake package, and to have come for courting rather than her own selfish motives.

Perhaps Eugenie felt the weight of her longing, for after a moment she wrinkled her nose and sat up. "Oh," she said blearily, seeing Jessaline. "What is it, a delivery? Put it on the table there, please; I'll fetch you a tip." She got up, and Jessaline was amused to see that her bustle was askew.

"Eugenie," she said, and Eugenie whirled back as she recognized Jessaline's voice. Her eyes flew wide.

"What in heaven's name—"

"I haven't much time," she said, hastening forward. She took Eugenie's hands in quick greeting, and resisted the urge to kiss her as well. "Have you been able to refine the plans?"

"Oh—yes, yes, I think." Eugenie pushed her glasses straight and gestured toward the papers that had served as her pillow. "This design should work, at least in theory. I was right; the vacuum-distillation mechanism was the key! Of course, I haven't finished the prototype, because the damned glassmaker is trying to charge pirates' rates—"

Jessaline squeezed her hands, exhilarated. "Marvelous! Don't worry; we shall test the design thoroughly before we put it into use. But now I must have the plans. Men are searching for me; I don't dare stay in town much longer."

Eugenie nodded absently, then blinked again as her head cleared. She narrowed her eyes at Jessaline in sudden suspicion. "Wait," she said.

"You're leaving town?"

"Yes, of course," Jessaline said, surprised. "This is what I came for, after all. I can't just put something so important on the next dirigible packet—"

The look of hurt that came over Eugenie's face sent a needle straight into Jessaline's heart. She realized, belatedly and with guilty dismay, what Eugenie must have been imagining all this time.

"But . . . I thought . . ." Eugenie looked away suddenly, and bit her lower lip. "You might stay."

"Eugenie," Jessaline began, uncomfortably. "I . . . could never have remained here. This place . . . the way you live here . . ."

"Yes, I know." At once Eugenie's voice hardened; she glared at Jessaline. "In your perfect, wonderful land, everyone is free to live as they please. It is the rest of us, then, the poor wretched folk you scorn and pity, who have no choice but to endure it. Perhaps we should never bother to love at all, then! That way, at least, when we are used and cast aside, it will at least be for material gain!"

And with that, she slapped Jessaline smartly, and walked out. Stunned, Jessaline put a hand to her cheek and stared after her.

"Trouble in paradise?" said a voice behind her, in a syrupy drawl.

Jessaline whirled to find herself facing a six-shooter. And holding it, his face free of bootblack this time, was the young man who had invaded her quarters nearly two weeks before.

"I heard you Haitians were unnatural," he said, coming into the light, "but this? Not at all what I was expecting."

Not me, Jessaline realized, too late. They were watching Rillieux, not me! "Natural is in the eye of the beholder, as is beauty," she snapped.

"True. Speaking of beauty, though, you looked a damn sight finer before. What's all this?" He sidled forward, poking with the gun at the padding 'round Jessaline's middle. "So that's it! But—" He raised the gun, to Jessaline's fury, and poked at her breasts none-too-gently. "Ah, no padding here. Yes, I do remember you rightly." He scowled. "I still can't sit down thanks to you, woman. Maybe I ought to repay you that."

Jessaline raised her hands slowly, pulling off her lumpy headwrap so he could see her more clearly. "That's ungentlemanly of you, I would

say."

"Gentlemen need gentlewomen," he said. "Your kind are hardly that, being good for only one thing. Well—that and lynching, I suppose. But we'll save both for later, won't we? After you've met my superior and told us everything that's in your nappy little head. He's partial to your variety. I, however, feel that if I must lower myself to baseness, better to do it with one bearing the fair blood of the French."

It took Jessaline a moment to understand through all his airs. But then she did, and shivered in purest rage. "You will not lay a finger upon Eugenie. I'll snap them all off fir—"

But before she could finish her threat, there was a scream and commotion from the house. The scream, amid all the chaos of shouting and running servants, she recognized at once: Eugenie.

The noise startled the bootblack man as well. Fortunately he did not pull the trigger; he did start badly, however, half-turning to point the gun in the direction of Eugenie's scream. Which was all the opening that Jessaline needed, as she drew her derringer from the wadded cloth of the headwrap and shot the man point-blank. The bootblack man cried out, clutching his chest and falling to the ground.

The derringer was spent; it carried only a single bullet. Snatching up the bootblack man's sixgun instead, Jessaline turned to sprint toward the Rillieux house—then froze for an instant in terrible indecision. Behind her, on Eugenie's table, sat the plans for which she had spent the past three months of her life striving and stealing and sneaking. The methane extractor could be the salvation of her nation, the start of its brightest future.

And in the house—

Eugenie, she thought.

And started running.

....

In the parlor, Norbert Rillieux was frozen, paler than usual and trembling. Before him, holding Eugenie about the throat and with a gun to her head, was a white man whose face was so floridly familiar that Jessaline gasped.

"Raymond Forstall?"

He started badly as Jessaline rounded the door, and she froze as well,

fearing to cause Eugenie's death. Very slowly she set the sixgun on a nearby sideboard, pushed it so that it slid out of easy reach, and raised her hands to show that she was no threat. At this, Forstall relaxed.

"So we meet again, my beauteous negress," he said, though there was anger in his smile. "I had hoped to make your acquaintance under more favorable circumstances. Alas."

"You are with the White Camellia?" He had seemed so gormless that day on Royal Street; not at all the sort Jessaline would associate with a murderous secret society.

"I am indeed," he said. "And you would have met the rest of us if my assistant had not clearly failed in his goal of taking you captive. Nevertheless, I, too, have a goal, and I ask again, sir, where are the plans?"

Jessaline realized belatedly that this was directed at Norbert Rillieux. And he, too frightened to bluster, just shook his head. "I told you, I have built no such device! Ask this woman—she wanted it, and I refused her!"

The methane extractor, Jessaline realized. Of course—they had known, probably via their own spies, that she was after it. Forstall had been tailing her the day he'd bumped into her, probably all the way to Rillieux's house; she cursed herself for a fool for not realizing. But the White Camellias were mostly philosophers and bankers and lawyers, not the trained, proficient spies she'd been expecting to deal with. It had never occurred to her that an enemy would be so clumsy as to jostle and converse with his target in the course of surveillance.

"It's true," Jessaline said, stalling desperately in hopes that some solution would present itself to her. "This man refused my request to build the device."

"Then why did you come back here?" Forstall asked, tightening his grip on Eugenie so that she gasped. "We had men watching the house servants, too. We intercepted orders for metal parts and rubber tubing, and I paid the glasssmith to delay an order for custom vacuum-pipes—"

"You did that?" To Jessaline's horror, Eugenie stiffened in Forstall's grasp, trying to turn and glare at him in her affront. "I argued with that old fool for an hour!"

"Eugenie, be still!" cried Norbert, which raised him high in Jessaline's estimation; she had wanted to shout the same thing.



"I will not—" Eugenie began to struggle, plainly furious. As Forstall cursed and tried to restrain her, Jessaline heard Eugenie's protests continue. "—interference with my work—very idea—"

Please, Holy Mother, Jessaline thought, taking a very careful step closer to the gun on the sideboard, don't let him shoot her to shut her up.

When Forstall finally thrust Eugenie aside—she fell against the bottle-strewn side table, nearly toppling it—and indeed raised the gun to shoot her, Jessaline blurted, "Wait!"

Both Forstall and Eugenie froze, now separated and facing each other, though Forstall's gun was still pointed dead at Eugenie's chest. "The plans are complete," Jessaline said to him. "They are in the workshop out back." With a hint of pride, she looked at Eugenie and added, "Eugenie has made it work."

"What?" said Rillieux, looking thunderstruck.

"What?" Forstall stared at her, then Eugenie, and then anger filled his expression. "Clever, indeed! And while I go out back to check if your story is true, you will make your escape with the plans already tucked into your clothes."

"I am not lying in this instance," she said, "but if you like, we can all proceed to the garden and see. Or, since I'm the one you seem to fear most—" She wagged her empty hands in mockery, hoping this would make him too angry to notice how much closer she was to the gun on the sideboard. His face reddened further with fury. "You could leave Eugenie and her brother here, and take me alone."

Eugenie caught her breath. "Jessaline, are you mad?"

"Yes," Jessaline said, and smiled, letting her heart live in her face for a moment. Eugenie's mouth fell open, then softened into a small smile. Her glasses were still askew, Jessaline saw with a rush of fondness.

Forstall rolled his eyes, but smiled. "A capital suggestion, I think. Then I can shoot you—"

He got no further, for in the next instant Eugenie suddenly struck him in the head with a rum-bottle.

The bottle shattered on impact. Forstall cried out, half-stunned by the blow and the sting of rum in his eyes, but he managed to keep his grip on the gun, and keep it trained more or less on Eugenie. Jessaline thought she saw the muscles in his forearm flex to pull the trigger—

—and then the sixgun was in her hand, its wooden grip warm and almost comforting as she blew a hole in Raymond Forstall's rum-drenched head. Forstall uttered a horrid gurgling sound and fell to the floor.

Before his body stopped twitching, Jessaline caught Eugenie's hand. "Hurry!" She dragged the other woman out of the parlor. Norbert, again to his credit, started out of shock and trotted after them, for once silent as they moved through the house's corridors toward the garden. The house was nearly deserted now, the servants having fled or found some place to hide that was safe from gunshots and madmen.

"You must tell me which of the papers on your desk I can take," Jessaline said as they trotted along, "and then you must make a decision."

"Wh-what decision?" Eugenie still sounded shaken.

"Whether you will stay here, or whether you will come with me to Haiti."

"Haiti?" Norbert cried.

"Haiti?" Eugenie asked, in wonder.

"Haiti," said Jessaline, and as they passed through the rear door and went into the garden, she stopped and turned to Eugenie. "With me."

Eugenie stared at her in such dawning amazement that Jessaline could no longer help herself. She caught Eugenie about the waist, pulled her near, and kissed her most soundly and improperly, right there in front of her brother. It was the sweetest, wildest kiss she had ever known in her life.

When she pulled back, Norbert was standing at the edge of her vision with his mouth open, and Eugenie looked a bit faint. "Well," Eugenie said, and fell silent, the whole affair having been a bit much for her.

Jessaline grinned and let her go, then hurried forward to enter the workshop—and froze, horror shattering her good mood.

The bootblack man was gone. Where his body had been lay Jessaline's derringer and copious blood, trailing away . . . to Eugenie's worktable, where the plans had been, and were no longer. The trail then led away, out the workshop's rear door.

"No," she whispered, her fists clenching at her sides. "No, by God!"

Everything she had worked for, gone. She had failed, both her mission and her people.

"Very well," Eugenie said after a moment. "Then I shall simply have to come with you."

The words penetrated Jessaline's despair slowly. "What?"

She touched Jessaline's hand. "I will come with you. To Haiti. And I will build an even more efficient methane extractor for you there."

Jessaline turned to stare at her and found that she could not, for her eyes had filled with tears.

"Wait—" Norbert caught his breath as understanding dawned. "Go to Haiti? Are you mad? I forbid—"

"You had better come too, brother," Eugenie said, turning to him, and Jessaline was struck breathless once more by the cool determination in her eyes. "The police will take their time about it, but they'll come eventually, and a white man lies dead in our house. It doesn't really matter whether you shot him or not; you know full well what they'll decide."

And Norbert stiffened, for he did indeed know—probably better than Eugenie, Jessaline suspected—what his fate would be.

Eugenie turned to Jessaline. "He can come, can't he?" By which Jessaline knew it was a condition, not an option.

"Of course he can," she said at once. "I wouldn't leave a dog to these people's justice. But it will not be the life you're used to, either of you. Are you certain?"

Eugenie smiled, and before Jessaline realized what was imminent, she had been pulled rather roughly into another kiss. Eugenie had been eating penuche again, she realized dimly, and then for a long perfect moment she thought of nothing but pecans and sweetness.

When it was done, Eugenie searched Jessaline's face and then smiled in satisfaction. "Perhaps we should go, Jessaline," she said gently.

"Ah. Yes. We should, yes." Jessaline fought to compose herself; she glanced at Norbert and took a deep breath. "Fetch us a hansom cab while you still can, Monsieur Rillieux, and we'll go down to the docks and take the next dirigible southbound."

The daze cleared from Norbert's eyes as well; he nodded mutely and trotted off.

In the silence that fell, Eugenie turned to Jessaline.

"Marriage," she said, "and a house together. I believe you mentioned that?"

"Er," said Jessaline, blinking. "Well, yes, I suppose, but I rather thought that first we would—"

"Good," Eugenie replied, "because I'm not fond of you keeping up this dangerous line of work. My inventions should certainly earn enough for the both of us, don't you think?"

"Um," said Jessaline.

"Yes. So there's no reason for you to work when I can keep you in comfort for the rest of our days." Taking Jessaline's hands, she stepped closer, her eyes going soft again. "And I am so very much looking forward to those days, Jessaline."

"Yes," said Jessaline, who had been wondering just which of her many sins had earned her this mad fortune. But as Eugenie's warm breast pressed against hers, and the thick perfume of the magnolia trees wafted around them, and some clockwork contraption within the workshop ticked in time with her heart . . . Jessaline stopped worrying. And she wondered why she had ever bothered with plans and papers and gadgetry, because it was clear she had just stolen the greatest prize of all.

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## N.K. Jemisin

N. K. Jemisin is the first author in the genre's history to win three consecutive Best Novel Hugo Awards, all for her Broken Earth trilogy. She lives and writes in New York City. Essays and links to her work can be found at [nkjemisin.com](http://nkjemisin.com).



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