

CLOCKWORK MENAGERIE

by Karen Kincy

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To Talya, for loving Konstantin.

1914

ONE

Pity the clockwork dragon had been so violent.

Konstantin pushed his goggles over his head. Tugging off his leather gloves, he ran a hand over the clockwork beast's crimson scales, cold and smooth under his skin. Scars marked the enamel, raw steel glimmering in rough arabesques. If only he had a bigger laboratory. The bulk of the dragon's body rested on concrete, its head lying on a trolley, its tail looping among the wires powering the technomancy equipment.

"Falkenrath."

Konstantin jumped. Tonight, he had been alone in the laboratory; the other archmages and engineers had gone home long ago.

When he identified the interruption, his heartbeat skipped for an entirely different reason.

Captain Theodore Himmel smiled with a wicked glint in his honey-gold eyes. He smoothed his waxed mustache with steel fingers, still outfitted with the mechanical arm Konstantin had built for him.

"Are you alone?" Himmel said.

"Yes, which is why you shouldn't—"

Without any regard for who might walk in, Himmel marched over and kissed him. When Konstantin gasped against his mouth, Himmel growled out a groan as if savoring the taste of him. The

captain tasted rather like peppermint himself, Konstantin noted absently, his mind not quite done cataloguing and analyzing.

His lips insistent, Himmel deepened the kiss, his tongue sliding into Konstantin's mouth, shamelessly bold. Heat scorched Konstantin's skin, his knees faltering as his muscles surrendered. Himmel supported him with his steel hand cradling his neck, the other gripping his hip. That was rather distracting.

Part of him wanted to seize Himmel, but the rest of him seized control.

He broke away, more than slightly breathless. "Theodore."

Himmel grinned. "You were saying?"

"You shouldn't startle me."

"It was worth it."

Konstantin licked his lips, tender from the kiss. "We can't be seen."

"Perhaps we should go somewhere more private." Himmel had eyes of molten gold.

Desire muddied Konstantin's thoughts. "I'm in the middle of an experiment." That sounded feeble even to his own ears.

Himmel glanced at the workbench, strewn with notes and papers stained by countless cups of coffee. "Don't you ever sleep?"

"Yes." Konstantin blushed. "I have a cot in the back of the laboratory."

Himmel's eyebrows shot heavenward. "You haven't been sleeping at the hotel?"

"The laboratory proved more convenient."

Himmel laughed, shook his head, and advanced with a determined glint in his eyes. Konstantin backed against the

workbench. Trapped by Himmel's arms and the narrow press of his hips, he could feel the captain's—

"Theodore." He gasped. "Please."

Himmel swept everything off the workbench. Papers cascaded down and fluttered to the floor; pens rolled out of sight.

Konstantin's jaw dropped. "My research!"

"Your what?"

"All over the floor, out of order, and—God, Himmel!"

Konstantin dropped to his knees and started stacking papers into piles. Luckily, he had clipped the most important documents together, so it wasn't an utter disaster. He clenched his jaw and drew a calming breath.

Himmel's hand settled on his shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"Is that all?"

"I didn't know what you wanted."

Konstantin gritted his teeth. "It took me days to write down all this data. I can't afford to make any mistakes." The biggest mistake of all would be to let Himmel take him to bed. God, why he couldn't stop imagining him naked?

"Konstantin." His name brought him back to reality. "What are you thinking? You have that faraway look again."

"Do I?"

"Like your head is in the clouds."

Some of Konstantin's anger slipped away. "You should know, as an airship captain."

Himmel groaned at the pun, the sound reminiscent of how he had groaned during the kiss. Konstantin's trousers became rather

tight, though he didn't dare correct that inconvenience here in the laboratory. How mortifying.

"Look at me." Though Himmel's command was gentle, Konstantin struggled to obey. His thoughts abandoned him and left him adrift. He hadn't the slightest idea of what to do. "Your eyes are beautiful. Blue like the sky."

No one had ever looked at him like this before. Remembering to breathe, he sucked in air. "You are the expert on atmospheric con—conditions." He stammered at the stroke of Himmel's knuckles over his cheek.

"Come to the hotel with me. I can think of a better use for your bed."

Konstantin retreated from his touch. "I shouldn't. I—"

"Stop working. For one night."

He blinked fast, mind scrambling for words. "I can't do this with you, Theodore."

Himmel's eyebrows descended. "Do what?"

"You—me—together." If only he could stop spluttering.

"Why?" Himmel said it evenly enough.

Konstantin dusted off his knees, his heartbeat thundering, and stared at the scattered papers. "I never have," he whispered.

"Pardon?"

"I've never been with a man. With anyone." Konstantin blurted out the confession. "Please don't laugh at me."

Himmel coughed. "I'm not laughing." Was that a hint of a smile? "Though I'm glad you aren't angry at me for your paperwork."

Konstantin scowled. "I didn't say that."

“Let me make it up to you.”

“How?”

Himmel lowered his gaze. “I’ll take things slow.”

Stomach sour, Konstantin knew he must be cruel to a man who cared for him so much. “This is illegal,” he murmured.

Himmel barked out a laugh. “You think I don’t know that?”

The law in Prussia punished unnatural fornication with imprisonment. Austria-Hungary, Konstantin’s homeland, was no more forgiving. God, once, he had been naïve enough to scour the legal texts for loopholes, but even royalty and the rich suffered the consequences. Just thinking about it made him sick.

Konstantin swallowed hard. “I can’t risk my career.”

“I would risk mine.”

He stared at him. “Would you?”

“For a night with you.” Himmel sounded husky.

Konstantin stepped away, distancing himself from a future he could never have. “I wouldn’t.”

Himmel jerked back, as if slapped, before lowering his gaze. “Understood.”

Regret stung Konstantin. “Theodore.”

“Good night.”

Himmel turned on his heel and strode from the laboratory, leaving Konstantin alone again. Alone like he had asked.

The weight of silence bent his shoulders. Kneeling, he started sorting through his papers, but the formulas and numbers jumbled into nonsense. And no equation could solve the conundrum inside his heart.

Konstantin slept on his cot in the laboratory, like he did so many nights. It seemed strangely pitiful when he woke in the gray light of dawn. Dull pain squeezed his chest, no matter how many cups of coffee he drank.

He drifted outside and stared at the water with bloodshot eyes.

The Frisches Haff, a freshwater lagoon, rippled like silver silk along the coastline of Königsberg, a lace of ice edging the coast. The city still slept, only the seagulls already awake and squabbling over breakfast.

Where was Himmel now? Asleep in bed? Alone?

Maybe he had found another man. Surely an airship captain such as himself would have his pick of clandestine affairs. And in the Navy, before his promotion to zeppelin commander, who knew how many men there had been.

Konstantin held his cup in both hands and watched the waves. Damn it, he recognized the sick gnawing in the pit of his stomach—envy. He wanted Himmel to stay away from other men. He wanted him all to himself.

Even if he could never have him.

Sagging against a boulder, Konstantin pinched the bridge of his nose. He couldn't do this. He had a clockwork dragon to dissect. A war to win. Wearily, he straightened and poured his lukewarm coffee into the lagoon.

Back to work.

Konstantin laced his fingers and cracked his knuckles. His hands steady, he took up the blowtorch and burned the clockwork's dragon belly. The crimson scales blackened and melted away to reveal the metal guts within.

How fascinating! The smooth interlocking steel resembled the coils of a centipede.

He donned a pair of goggles with magnifying lenses and leaned so close, his nose almost touched the enamel. Sidestepping along the length of the dragon, he stopped at its gemstone eye. With a screwdriver, he loosened the gem from its socket. When held to the light, the jewel glimmered like a golden waterfall.

Chrysoberyl, but like none he had seen before. His breath snagged in his throat.

Could it be Siberian chrysoberyl? That extremely rare mineral exhibited the Silvestrov Effect, a magical resonance being tested in experimental technomancy. Certainly a practical application for enchanted eyes.

He had never seen Siberian chrysoberyl outside of the latest scientific articles, since the Russian government kept a chokehold on its distribution. Whoever built the clockwork dragon needed approval from the Tsar himself. It would be marvelous to talk with the technomancer who engineered the dragon, but of course that would be consorting with the enemy. This war really was a shame, and a waste of perfectly—

“Archmage Konstantin!”

He jumped and pushed the goggles over his head. A lab assistant hovered nearby. Heinrich, was that his name?

“Yes, what is it?” Konstantin tried not sound irritated.

"A telegram boy just delivered this. It's from Vienna."

He plucked the message from the man's sweaty hands and opened the envelope.

Urgent your presence required at embassy use utmost discretion

Konstantin squinted at the telegram. What in heaven's name were the Archmages of Vienna scheming? Would this reassignment drag him away from the clockwork dragon? He had only just started the dissection.

If only he could hide in his laboratory. Sighing, he relinquished his goggles.

The walk to the hotel wasn't unpleasant. Brisk wind ruffled his curls, and a begging seagull gobbled up a biscuit crumb he found lingering in his coat pocket. The gray stone exterior of the hotel was about as welcoming as one could expect from the Prussians, though at least the woman behind the desk smiled at him.

Konstantin trudged upstairs and unlocked his room. His bed looked unwrinkled, since he hadn't slept here a single night. He rummaged in his wardrobe, found a suit, and shaved as quickly as one could with a straight razor.

When he bounded downstairs, he collided with Himmel in the hall. "Pardon!"

"Steady there." Himmel caught his arm. "What's the hurry?"

Konstantin retreated from his touch and eyed the captain's uniform. "The embassy telegraphed me. Said it was urgent."

"They asked you, too?"

"Apparently."

They walked to the doors together. Konstantin's heart hammered against his ribs, and he hoped Himmel didn't notice.

What if someone had seen them kissing? What if this was an official reprimand?

Himmel whistled for a taxi. The auto slid to a stop. "Share a cab?" So he was acting as if nothing had happened between them.

Guilt gnawing at his stomach, Konstantin gave him a quick smile. "Thank you."

They sat in silence as the taxi drove to the embassy. Himmel stared ahead like a soldier on parade. When it came time to pay, Konstantin handed the cabdriver the silver marks before Himmel could do anything chivalrous.

The Embassy of Austria-Hungary stood at the heart of Königsberg. The building looked as stiff-backed and pompous as the bureaucrats, in Konstantin's rather unimpressed opinion. With Himmel at his side, he climbed the granite stairs and entered an echoing lobby. The secretary nudged her glasses up her nose.

"Konstantin Falkenrath." He dipped his head. "And this is Captain Himmel."

"Please, have a seat. The ambassador will see you shortly."

Himmel dropped into a chair and rubbed his forehead. "Wonder what he wants."

Konstantin swallowed, though he seemed to have stopped producing saliva. "Perhaps this has something to do with Tesla?"

"Still obsessed with that inventor?"

Konstantin coughed and looked at the ceiling.

"Gentlemen?" The ambassador sported a well-cut suit and impressive walrus mustache.

Konstantin sprang to his feet and shook the man's hand. "Archmage Konstantin. I received your telegram this morning."

"Baron von Bach. Austria-Hungary's ambassador to Russia."

"Sir." Himmel saluted, his face a serious mask.

"And you must be our airship captain. Please, this way." Von Bach ushered them through a door. "We have little time to lose."

Sitting in front of the ambassador's desk, Konstantin tried not to fidget like a schoolboy singled out by his professor. Von Bach drummed his fingers on a stack of paperwork. "As you are aware, Russia sees fit to attack us with clockwork wasps and dragons." Apparently, he didn't appreciate the finer points of technomancy.

Konstantin raised his eyebrows. "Yes?"

"I need an archmage to accompany me on a critical diplomatic mission to St. Petersburg. You will act as my scientific attaché, and Captain Himmel will provide us with the freedom to observe Russia from the air."

St. Petersburg? Russia?

Konstantin slumped his chair and blinked several times, but the ambassador's face didn't evaporate like a bad dream.

"Understood," Himmel said, already taking orders.

"Sir." Konstantin sat upright. "I'm in the middle of examining the clockwork dragon. Many experiments require—"

"I'm afraid they will have to wait. Vienna gave me the go ahead."

"Did they?"

"This mission to Russia is our highest priority."

Heat rushed to Konstantin's face before draining and leaving him cold. He would have to leave the dragon to collect dust, and miss the next prototype of the Colossus, the biggest and best Eisenkrieger built to date.

But Russia...

Perhaps he could meet the dragon's technomancer.

Konstantin squared his shoulders. "When do we leave, sir?"

Von Bach smiled. "We fly out tomorrow."

TWO

Konstantin entered the belly of the whale, walking into an airship hangar more massive than any building he had ever seen. Steel ribs arched sixty meters overhead. Daylight glimmered on the silver skin of a zeppelin.

The *Nachitgall*, as sleek and trim as its nightingale namesake.

Himmel whistled low. "She's beautiful."

"She's yours to command," Baron von Bach said.

That put a spring in Himmel's step. He hadn't looked this happy in weeks.

As the ground crew walked the *Nachitgall* from its hangar, Konstantin frowned at the black double-headed eagle on the zeppelin's fins—Austria-Hungary's coat of arms. Would the ambassador's presence really protect them? Bombs and bullets didn't care about diplomatic immunity. They would be leaving the safety of the Hex behind, the magic of the Archmages too far away to negate gunpowder.

"Falkenrath!" Himmel clapped him on the shoulder. "Ready?"

Konstantin faked a smile. "I hope so, Captain."

"I love it when you call me that."

Good lord, how could he be this shameless? Himmel grinned and steered him across the field. After the *Nachitgall* docked at a mooring mast, they climbed the stairs to its nose. Wind whistled past the gangway, stinging Konstantin's eyes. He ducked into the zeppelin and stepped aside to let the ambassador pass.

Von Bach led them down the corridor, following the curve of the underbelly to the gondola beneath. Bamboo and canvas paneled the walls, a luxury lacked by most military airships. They stopped on the port observation deck and peered out the slanting windows. Frost glittered on the grass far below.

Von Bach glanced at Himmel. "Estimated time until arrival?"

"Eleven hours, sir."

"Gentlemen, make yourselves comfortable. Upon our arrival in St. Petersburg, meet me at the embassy for a debriefing."

Himmel saluted, always fond of formality, and strode away.

After the ambassador left, Konstantin settled in a wicker chair with a sigh. The launch of a zeppelin should be thrilling, but he couldn't help thinking something would go terribly wrong. Was this mission a mistake?

With a jolt, the *Nachitgall* cast off from the mooring mast and powered its engines. Rumbling vibrated inside his ribcage. They floated high over Königsberg, the cathedral's spire a needle pricking the sky, and followed the eastern lagoon. Once the icy water vanished over the horizon, it was a short flight to Russia.

Enemy territory.

Pines bristled below like the pelt of a black wolf. He touched his fingertips to the cold glass, searching for signs of war.

"Falkenrath."

Konstantin flinched. "God, Himmel, what did I say about startling me?"

Lingering by the windows, Himmel clasped his hands behind his back, skin linked with steel. "A storm is headed our way. If we

gain altitude, we might be able to evade the turbulence." He spoke in a brisk professional way.

"You haven't come to talk about the weather, have you?"

Himmel stared at the toes of his polished boots. "Join me in my quarters."

Join? In his quarters? For?

Konstantin sucked in a breath and tried not to babble. "May I ask why?"

"I need you to take a look at my arm."

"Of course."

What a fool he'd been. Himmel would hardly demand *that*. Technomancy, though—that was something he could handle.

Konstantin raised his eyebrows. "What seems to be the problem?"

Himmel beckoned him and walked toward the nose of the zeppelin. They entered the captain's quarters, furnished with lightweight wicker upholstered in blue. The sheets on the bed were made with military precision. Konstantin caught himself staring at the dent on the pillow, imagining Himmel sleeping alone.

Damn, those were dangerous thoughts. He fiddled with a pen on a desk.

Himmel took it away from him, his fingers rough with calluses. "Konstantin."

"Sorry."

Himmel gave him a funny look, like he wasn't sure why he was apologizing. "Could you adjust the wrist mechanism?"

"I would need my toolkit, but yes. Why?"

Himmel held out his mechanical arm and rotated it clockwise. The gears whirred before jamming and jerking counterclockwise.

“That’s not good.” Konstantin headed for the door. “I’ll be right back.”

As he strode to his cabin, his mind clicked like a thousand tiny gears. Being in Himmel’s cabin wasn’t scandalous. The crew wouldn’t talk. Would they? He grabbed his toolkit with sweaty hands and hurried back.

Himmel sat on his bed, his head bowed, staring at his mechanical hand as he flexed his fingers. He looked oddly sad.

Konstantin cleared his throat. “Would you mind removing it for me?”

Using his teeth, Himmel loosened the straps and buckles, better at that task already. When he removed the gauntlet, he revealed his crippled hand, his fingers curled like claws ever since the airship accident.

Konstantin’s heart squeezed, but he didn’t say a word. He placed the arm on the table, pulled up a chair, and opened his toolkit.

“Well?” Himmel stood far too close behind him. “What’s wrong with it?”

“I haven’t had a chance to find out yet.”

Armed with a screwdriver, he loosened a plate of steel from the delicate wiring and clockwork within. The brass gears looked dull and darkened by grime, like they had been in contact with something corrosive.

“Seawater?” Konstantin said.

“Pardon?”

“Have you been exposing this arm to seawater?”

“I may have exposed it to one or two tide pools.”

Konstantin looked sideways at him. “It’s not completely waterproof.”

“I’m a Navy man.” Himmel laughed, a wonderfully rough sound. “I’m going to get wet.”

Konstantin swiveled in the chair and peered up at him. “Were you performing naval maneuvers in a tide pool?”

“Hardly.” Himmel snorted. “Trying to catch a crab.”

“What?”

“I hadn’t seen a crab that big. Königsberg was a boring city. Why are you looking at me like that? Don’t judge me.”

Konstantin smiled. “I’m allowed to judge you if you ask for my help.”

“Fine.” Himmel rolled his eyes. “Can you fix it?”

“With a bit of oil. Lubrication solves a lot of problems.”

“It certainly does.”

Was he referring to a rather indelicate act? Konstantin stared at his knuckles, his face burning, and pretended he hadn’t heard.

Himmel cleared his throat. “Thank you for your help.”

“Any time.” Konstantin squeezed a few drops of machine oil onto the clockwork. “There, try this.”

Himmel buckled on the arm before rotating his wrist again. “Perfect.”

Konstantin smiled. “Let me know if you need anything else.”

When their eyes met, his smile faded. A moment hung between them. If he wanted, he could pluck it like a fruit.

A forbidden fruit.

Konstantin stepped back, distancing himself from Himmel and the need in his eyes. Or maybe the need in his own heart was stronger. This unknown force couldn't be questioned or quantified by a tidy scientific theory.

"Allow me to apologize," Himmel said. "I should have been a gentleman from the start."

Words choked Konstantin's throat, until he didn't think he could say anything at all. Himmel stood and walked to the door. His message was clear—their time together was done. For now, or forever, it didn't matter.

Konstantin walked out the door and left the captain to his quarters. Though, more than anything in the world, he wanted to stay.

~

Six hours until St. Petersburg.

Fiddling with his cufflinks, Konstantin hovered at the threshold of the dining room. Himmel wasn't here. Of course, the captain dined with his crew; how ridiculous to hope otherwise. He walked to an empty table.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. "Archmage Konstantin?"

"Baron von Bach!" Konstantin said. "Care to join me?"

"Yes, please." The ambassador claimed a seat and flagged down a waiter. "The menu?"

The waiter slid across a paper neatly typed with tonight's dishes. "I recommend the Rhine Salmon a la Zeppelin."

Von Bach chuckled. "I wasn't aware salmon were flying fish."

Was he supposed to laugh? Konstantin faked a smile.

"I'll try the salmon." Von Bach waved away the menu. "With a glass of red wine."

"Yes, sir. And you, sir?"

Konstantin had no idea. He grabbed the menu and pretended to give it some thought. "The salmon as well, please."

"Anything to drink?"

Konstantin shook his head, already flustered around the ambassador. Drinking would undoubtedly make him redder in the face.

"Don't suppose you already speak Russian?" said von Bach.

"No." His heart skipped with an unpleasant thump. "Why would I?"

Von Bach stared at him with watery blue eyes. "You do understand our destination is Russia? You at least have a phrasebook?"

"I don't."

Von Bach's mustache twitched. "Well." After the waiter poured his wine, he took a deep drink. "We have translators."

Himmel probably spoke Russian. He wouldn't look like a fool in St. Petersburg.

"Remember," von Bach said, "this is a *diplomatic mission*." He tapped the table twice to punctuate the words. "As my scientific attaché, you will observe and advise me on matters relevant to magic and technology."

Konstantin straightened in his seat. "Specifically?"

"Look, but don't touch."

He grimaced. "I meant what sort of technomancy might we encounter?"

"Whatever the Russians won't keep hidden from us. Our diplomatic immunity only extends so far in St. Petersburg."

"How far?"

Von Bach drank more wine. "If you poke around where you shouldn't, you might be shot. Or shipped off to Siberia."

He sounded so casual. Fear stabbed Konstantin's stomach like an icicle.

"That would be rather unproductive, wouldn't it?" Von Bach smiled. "Good God, man, relax. Russians aren't so terrifying."

"I'll take your word for it."

The waiter served their salmon. Konstantin ate the fish mechanically, barely tasting the buttery sauce or parsley garnish.

How long would the ambassador keep him in Russia? Why had he ever agreed to this?

If he even had a choice.

Konstantin excused himself before dessert. After dinner, he paced along the starboard observation deck as sunset reddened the clouds. He didn't know where they were. Russian wilderness rolled below, snow and mountains and endless trees. A village glimmered by a river before vanishing into the shadows.

Pacing was unproductive, and he hated feeling so useless.

Konstantin returned to his cabin and cracked open a textbook on his pillow. Lying on his stomach, he squinted at the words.

The magical conductivity of electrum varies, depending on quality, and may not always be suitable for technomancy. For instance, electrum

with a certain proportion of gold and silver may be ideal for metalworking applications; but it is possible to create a non-magical alloy from these elements. The proportions of naturally occurring electrum should be referenced when manufacturing the alloy in a laboratory.

The word *electrum* certainly had evolved since ancient times. To the Romans, it referred to both the alloy and amber.

Himmel had electrum eyes. Gold so pale it looked silver in the light.

Christ, concentrate! Konstantin glowered at the words, though the textbook was innocent. With a growl, he tossed it aside and turned off the light.

He wasn't accustomed to sleeping on airships. The massive engines droned in his ears. Wind buffeted the zeppelin and jostled the gondola. He tugged the blanket over his head and pressed his face into his pillow.

Slowly, the heat of his body warmed the sheets.

Konstantin opened his eyes to Salzburg, Austria. Snow sugared his hometown, candles glowing in his cottage's windows.

When he unlocked the door, Himmel waited for him. "Late again?"

"I'm sorry, I—"

Himmel kissed him as he dragged him inside, his lips silencing his excuses, his hands scorching his cold skin. "You're frozen."

Konstantin laughed. "You're not."

"Let me warm you."

This sounded sensible enough, considering—

God, Himmel's hands. He slid them under Konstantin's shirt, his fingers branding him, and reached lower. Unbuckling his belt, unbuttoning his trousers. Konstantin backed into the room and fell onto an armchair.

"Careful." Himmel's tone invited him to be reckless.

Flames crackled in the fireplace, reflected in his eyes. His chest heaving, Konstantin waited for him to make the next move.

Himmel kneeled before him. "What do you want?"

Konstantin wished the captain would relinquish control. "Kiss me," he whispered.

He tilted his head to meet Himmel's lips. He opened his mouth to let his tongue taste him and moaned at the thrill of it.

He wanted more.

His fingers shaking, Konstantin tugged Himmel's shirt over his head. He skimmed his hands over hard muscles, scarcely believing he was touching a man this beautiful, too breathless to stop. He explored Himmel's skin with his fingertips, the captain's eyes simmering with restraint. Konstantin kissed him again.

A little lower, this time.

Rewarded with a gasp, Konstantin smiled against his flat stomach. "You sound surprised."

"Surprise me more."

