

Five for Heaven

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Dear Esther

Thank you for your last and apologies for the shocking delay in replying. I'm delighted to hear the twins are doing so well. Three years old already? It doesn't seem possible. Mind you, it feels like decades since I was in England so perhaps it is.

I'm glad to hear things are going somewhat better with the Council and your new team. I still can't say I regret leaving in the slightest, but you will be unsurprised to hear that it's not much different anywhere else in terms of bureaucracy. For example, there is now a Shanghai Municipal Council which regulates gambling, prostitution, and shamanic activity (!), or at least tries to. This is new since Lucien lived there and is not so far proving a happy arrangement for anyone, as far as I could see before we had to leave.

The 'had to' there is the reason for the delay in replying—your letter arrived after we'd gone, and took a while to be forwarded. It turns out that the Municipal Council firstly has rather strong views on foreign shamans and the undesirability thereof, and secondly is headed up by not one but two personal enemies Lucien made in his time here. Laws

about association with criminal enterprises were invoked, as were old warrants, and to cut a long story short, we carried out what Lucien insists on calling my first midnight flit and are now in Japan.

You probably didn't expect that. I certainly didn't.

We are in a place called Nagasaki on Kyushu island. Apparently this is one of the very few ports that allowed foreigners during the period Japan was closed off from the world, and it remains a very cosmopolitan place—which the rest of the country, or the little we have seen of it, is not. It's a busy city but very beautiful in parts (wonderful temple buildings, I wish I could draw), bustling with activity, and with plenty of English speakers, which is a relief because I'm not getting any better at languages. Lucien seems to absorb them without effort, and Jenny has a remarkable gift for making herself understood (she can now swear in seven languages and counting). I take tuition for three hours a day and have reached the stage of being able to comprehend very simple sentences on a small range of subjects, if people speak slowly. This will be a great deal of work for nothing if we find ourselves in India or Afghanistan in a few months, but the way to travel with Lucien, I have learned, is to accept events in a spirit of calm resignation, without complaint. Or, without much. It's not as though he listens anyway.

We arrived two months ago, in time for the hanami season (cherry blossom). The whole city is planted and surrounded with cherry trees, which all come into bloom at once, and it is quite remarkable how this bustling commercial town simply stopped to appreciate the flowers. People go for long walks

and take picnics and sit under the cherry trees and recite poetry. Also, drink. We sat in the dappled shade in the hills with pink and white snow falling around us, and it was quite remarkably lovely. I cannot imagine all London stopping to look at flowers once a year, but it would be so much a better place if we did. (If we had flowers, of course.)

I can't tell you how much I've learned, Es. If all I'd done on my travels was to come to Nagasaki for the cherry blossom (or seen the Hagia Sophia, or, or...), it would have been eye-opening enough for a lifetime. As it is, I have more memories and have seen more wonderful things than I can well believe. I do wish you and Dan would come and visit. You know Lucien's offer stands. Can't Joss and your new pair hold the fort for six months? (Joke.)

The main news, for which I'm sure you will be impatiently skimming, is of course Jenny. I'm actually writing this letter to distract myself because the happy event is taking place as we speak, with vocal protest. I won't send it until I can tell you the result.

I will admit to you (rather than saying it out loud) that it's a little frightening. I don't recall if I told you but Merrick's first wife died in childbirth, along with the baby, and he is thus very worried, though concealing it as best he can. Naturally Lucien's response is to provoke him to argument. I suppose he knows what he's doing. I just wish to God it was over, although probably not as much as Jenny does.

I won't write more on that now. Odd to think it will all be over when you read this. You could skip to the end to find out what happens, I suppose.

Lucien is very taken with Japan, which he had not visited before, and is itching to explore more of the country. His wanderlust is a remarkable thing: I truly did not appreciate the sacrifice he made in staying in London for so long. I don't share his urge to be always moving, even if it brings us to so many remarkable lands, and I am enjoying the prospect of a lengthy sojourn here. All going well with Jenny, we intend to stay until the baby is weaned.

However, it could be longer than that as I have been offered a job! Japanese practitioners work rather differently to England, and to what I saw of Shanghai, but Nagasaki is decidedly international, with Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch, and Russian people as well as English, and the local mahoutsukai (practitioners) are very keen to recruit some gaijin (foreigners). I hope you're impressed by my command of the language. There will of course be bureaucracy, presumably in the Japanese style (what that means I have yet to learn but it can't be worse than the Council) but the prospect of getting back to work is extraordinarily attractive.

The question is whether I can accept because, of course, they want me to agree to stay for a decent period—a minimum of two years initially. I haven't broached this with Lucien. I honestly don't know how he would

Stephen fumbled his pen at the scream. Jenny had been making a certain amount of noise for the last few hours but this was at a new level: a shriek that could tear the paper walls, followed by a torrent of obscenities.

“All going well then,” Crane muttered.

This was hell on his nerves, Stephen knew. He wanted to say something encouraging—*She’s young and strong*—but Merrick’s first wife had been young and strong, and it hadn’t saved her or the baby. “She’s in the best available hands.”

“I know, I know. Let us speak of other things. Come to that, let’s have a drink. If she’s going to be in there for hours yet—”

“Fucking *hell!*”

“Her vocabulary hasn’t improved,” Stephen said. “Do the midwives speak English?”

“I doubt they speak Jenny’s brand of English. And I’m sure Japanese women swear when they give birth, whatever anyone tells you. I would.”

“That surprises nobody.” Stephen stood and stretched. He really wanted to go for a walk. They’d been in the house all day as an entirely useless gesture of support, and it was beautiful outside, warm and fresh and green, with a whiff of sea air on the breeze. He liked sea air a great deal when he was on land.

“Shall we step outside?” Crane suggested.

The house had sliding panels that opened up onto a broad and shady verandah. Stephen slipped his bare feet into the high wooden sandals which one wore outside and which added a much-needed inch and a half to his stature. He'd worked hard to learn the Japanese rules of indoor and outdoor footwear, which Crane enforced ruthlessly in their home to make them second nature. For a man who was delighted to break all the big rules, he was punctilious about observing local customs. It was, he said, just good manners.

They both settled on the cushions they kept on the verandah. Their house was outside the city, on the slope of a hill, looking down towards the inland end of the bay, where it wasn't surrounded by the industrial port. They'd floated on a cloud of cherry blossom in March; the trees were now in full green leaf.

"She'll be all right," Crane said.

Stephen knew a question when he heard one not being asked. He reached for Crane's hand and felt the long slim fingers close round his. "Of course she will."

"It was bad last time."

"That doesn't mean it will be this time."

"It's been bloody hours."

"She hasn't even started properly, as I understand it." Esther had sent Jenny the most appallingly detailed letter about the birth of the twins, which Stephen had had to

read to her. This apparently constituted female solidarity. “Esther spent ages having pains before the, uh.” He gestured vaguely downwards. “The midwives haven’t given any indication of problems, have they?”

“Not that anyone’s told me.” Crane tipped his head back, shutting his eyes. “If it is bad—”

“I don’t see any reason for it to be bad. Women give birth successfully every day.”

“And some of them don’t, every day.”

“But if it does go bad, we’ll do whatever we have to,” Stephen persisted. “And we can’t tell what that would be right now, so shall we worry about it if it happens, and not make unnecessary plans in a futile effort to control the situation?”

Crane opened one eye to give him an unpleasant look. “I suppose you think that’s an acute observation.”

“It’s one I could have made about six minutes after our first meeting.”

“Smartarse.”

“Dictatorial swine.”

They sat in companionable silence for a while. Things seemed to have quietened down a little inside. Stephen kept hold of Crane’s hand, realising that he was doing it, and that he’d taken it without thought. Three years out of England, free from English law and a lifetime’s fear,

were undeniably having an effect. Give him another three years and he'd probably be unfit ever to go back, a thought that gave him no pangs of sorrow at all. No wonder Crane had hated his native land so much. It was a great deal easier to hold one's country sacred if you didn't have anywhere to compare it to.

"Would you mind very much if we had to go?" Crane asked suddenly.

The words were too close to Stephen's line of thought. "Go what? Where? Not home?"

"Christ, no, not at gunpoint. If—" He indicated the inside of the house with his thumb, a gesture Stephen took to mean, *If Jenny dies in childbirth and I am obliged to take her widower on some endless trip to God knows where as an effort to distract him from his grief and pain, like the last time.*

"It won't happen," he said firmly. "And if it did, nothing else would matter, would it?"

"No."

"If the worst happens we'll do whatever Merrick needs. More generally, if you're asking whether I like it here...yes. I do."

"I thought so." Crane paused, then said, "You look comfortable. More than you did in Shanghai."

"We weren't there that long."

“We were there for two months. Same time as we’ve been here.”

“Is it? I suppose it is. Maybe.”

Crane eyed him. “You like it more.”

“I do,” Stephen said. “It’s beautiful and interesting and a lot less overwhelming than Shanghai, and of course it helps there are more foreigners here. But to be honest, I also like that it’s new to you. I’ve enjoyed you showing me places you loved, but—this feels like our new place, not your old one.”

“Right,” Crane said. “I should probably have thought of that, shouldn’t I?”

“Not really. I wanted to visit Constantinople and Shanghai and so on. But I wouldn’t mind staying here for a while.”

“Well, we shall, all going well, while Jenny gets on her feet and the baby gets older.”

Stephen shot him a cautious look. “What would you think about longer?”

Crane gave that a moment’s consideration. “Are you looking to settle down?”

“I’d like to stay somewhere. Not forever,” he added hastily, “but long enough that I can learn to conduct a conversation and make some friends. I’d like a few more months off seasickness.” He took a deep breath. “And

the thing is, Lucien, Yamada-sensei has offered me a job. He wants an English mahoutsukai. He'd prefer one who spoke Japanese too, of course—"

"But you're working on that," Crane said. "Do you want to take it?"

Stephen shifted on his cushion. "Look, you've given me this whole new wonderful life as a travelling gentleman of leisure, and I really do love it, I can't tell you how much. It's been wonderful. But it's also been three years, and, well—"

"You're itching to work. I'm not entirely unobservant."

"So are you," Stephen pointed out. "I did notice that all the people we met in Shanghai were commercial contacts, not friends."

"Those *were* my friends, but I do know, sweet boy. Sometimes it's enough simply to be; sometimes we need to do."

Stephen loved him in many moods—the generous giver, the domineering lover—but he sometimes thought this was how he loved Lucien most, in the moments of clear understanding, without passion or judgement or self. When he felt entirely seen, and known.

"Yes," he said. "I'd like to work, and I like Nagasaki. I'd like to take the job and stay for a couple of years and make a home with you. But I'd only like all that if you're happy too. There's nowhere I want to be that isn't

with you. And of course that means Merrick has to be happy, which means Jenny does too. It's all or none."

Crane tugged his hand up and brushed a kiss over the knuckles. "Merrick doesn't care where we are, trust me. Jenny will doubtless be busy, all going well."

"And what about you?"

"Beloved, this is one of the most thriving commercial ports on this side of the world. I look out around me"—he gestured at the hill-slopes and the blue bay—"and I see jam. Lots and lots of jam. And I'll tell you what else I see."

"What?"

"You, happy. I am aware that you had a life before I uprooted you, and that you aren't one of Nature's drifters. I don't want to force anything on you—"

"Liar."

"In the way of living arrangements, you trollop. Shall we stay, then?"

"I'd like to try. I don't mean forever of course, but I would like to live somewhere, not just pass through."

"Very fair. It's a different experience."

"And of course, it makes things easier that you don't have any established enemies here."

“Yet,” Crane said. “It’s only been two months. Give me time.”

“Ha ha.”

“You think I’m—Jesus!”

Jenny’s scream ripped through the air. It was entirely different in quality from her earlier cries, it shrieked *woman in bad trouble*, and Stephen, who had fought side by side with her for years, was on his feet, out of his clumsy wooden clogs, and running through the house while Crane was still untangling his crossed legs. He yanked the sliding panel of Jenny’s room open with a force that sent it juddering back, and skidded to a halt.

Jenny, kneeling on the bed, screaming, naked, face twisted with pain. Merrick, chalk white, holding her hand. Two midwives, both intent on Jenny. Blood. And a bulging *thing* that Stephen’s judiciary-trained mind registered very briefly as some sort of gargoyle-type affliction before he realised.

“Oh,” he said, inadequately.

“Mr. D,” Jenny said through her teeth, a gasp or a plea.

She hadn’t called him that in years. She’d called him that when he’d been her mentor—not her friend, not her companion, but the man who had trained her and looked after her and would have died for her because that was his job. That was what she’d called him when she’d needed him.

Her other hand was white-knuckled on the bed. Stephen stepped forward, grabbed it, and gave her everything he had.

He was vaguely aware of Merrick on the other side of the bed, and Crane at the door, but mostly he felt Jenny's fingers digging viciously into his as he pushed strength into her, and she pushed life out.

Jenny gasped shrilly. The midwives moved around her. There was blood. And then there was a squalling cry of startling volume, and Stephen stared in blank disbelief as his eyes, ears, and less usual senses all informed him that a room that had held six people now held seven.

"It's a baby," he said. "Lucien, it's a baby!"

"What were you expecting?" Crane was grinning madly, an expression that usually heralded poems about the moon. He stalked round to slap Merrick on the shoulder. "Congratulations, you old dog. Excellent new trick."

Merrick was whispering to Jenny as she lay on the bed, looking as incredulous as Stephen felt. Jenny didn't seem quite so impressed with the miracle of birth overall, but she reached out for the small, squalling bundle the midwife gave her, and smiled in a way he didn't recognise but wanted to see again.

"Akachan," she said hoarsely. "Little red thing."

"Akachan," a midwife agreed, before turning on Stephen and Crane. Stephen couldn't understand the torrent of

Japanese, but he very much got the message of *not welcome, go away*. They staggered back to the main room, where Crane moved straight to the bottles.

“I need a drink. Sake or the plum stuff?”

“Whatever’s closest,” Stephen said. “That was... You know, blood and screaming are normally bad things in my line. I’m feeling very confused. Good Lord.”

Crane passed him an earthenware cup. Stephen downed it in one and held it out for a refill. “That was a girl, wasn’t it?”

“So it would seem. I’m already picturing Merrick welcoming her suitors, the poor bastards.”

“I’d be more worried about Jenny if I were them.”

“True. Bugger me, Stephen, we’ve a girl. A juvenile Merrick. Miss Saint-Merrick, with her father’s charm and her mother’s sweet and retiring personality. What a day for the world. There’s probably rains of frogs in England as we speak. Crystal balls shattering, soothsayers running around screaming—”

“Shut up,” Stephen suggested.

Crane lifted his cup. “To the little one. To Nagasaki and a new job, may it not be the same as the old job.” He tapped the cup to Stephen’s. “To us.”

Es—

Just a very quick note to finish this and catch the next boat. We are staying, so letters to the address above will reach me for the foreseeable future. Jenny is well and has a healthy girl weighing seven pounds who is called Lucy. This was her idea, it seems, and Lucien has quite possibly never been so pleased and proud about anything in his life. He reacts with much sarcasm, and fools nobody.

I am as happy as it is possible for a man to be.

With love to you all

Stephen