

Steel and Steam: A Conjunction of Spheres

The deck of the *Castle Wulfenbach* was a marvel of clanking machinery, whirring automata, and the faint ozone tang of lightning in a bottle. Agent Franks, all six-foot-five of him, stood out among the bustling Jaegermonsters and uniformed crew, not least because he radiated the kind of menace that made even sparks hesitate in midair.

He had not come by choice. A rare conjunction of spheres—one of those cosmic accidents that made physicists weep and metaphysicians giddy—had swept him from his world to Europa. The Baron, ruler of half the continent and undisputed master of the air, had “invited” him to dinner. Both men understood that such events are never random; the universe, it seemed, wanted them to learn from each other.

The two sat across from each other in the Baron’s private dining salon. The table was set with precision: silver cutlery, porcelain plates, and a centerpiece that looked suspiciously like a clockwork hedgehog. A discreet automaton poured wine; Franks accepted the glass, drinking it with the same utilitarian efficiency he brought to everything else. He neither savored nor commented on its qualities—wine was fuel, nothing more.

Baron Wulfenbach regarded his guest with a measuring gaze. “My intuition—sharpened, I believe, by the effect of the Conjunction—tells me more about you than any dossier ever could. You are... singular, even by the standards of my world.”

Franks’s eyes narrowed, recognizing the truth in the Baron’s words. “I know things about you, too. Things I couldn’t have learned just by looking. The Conjunction doesn’t just move bodies—it moves understanding.”

Wulfenbach inclined his head, a gesture of respect between two beings who had seen too much. “It seems our worlds, for a moment, want us to know each other as we truly are.”

The first course arrived—roast meat, dark bread, something that might have been pickled kraken. Franks speared a slab of meat with the efficiency of a man who’d eaten in far worse places. “Why am I here?”

Wulfenbach set down his glass. “It seems the conjunction that brought you here has left traces. My sensors are... perturbed. I suspect you are as much an anomaly here as I would be in your world.”

Franks nodded. “Not the first time I’ve been yanked across realities. Usually means something wants us to learn from each other.”

Wulfenbach smiled, thin and sharp. “A Spark’s dream. Or nightmare.”

As the second course was served, a hearty stew with a pungent aroma, Franks studied the Jaeger guards at the door—hulking, fanged, eyes glittering with a mix of mischief and regret. He spoke

quietly, but his words were weighty. “Your Jaegers. I’ve seen their kind before. Men who run toward Hell, not away from it. In my world, they’d be damned for what they’ve done.”

Wulfenbach’s gaze grew distant. “Most who drink the Draught do so because they have nothing left to lose. They are violent, yes, but violence is not always evil. Some find purpose. Some even find redemption.”

Franks’s voice was low, almost respectful. “I get it. The ones who survive—maybe they’re the ones who deserve a second chance. If you can take that kind of monster and make it serve something bigger than itself, that’s not nothing. The ones who fail do no further harm to the world or their souls. Lucifer would be surprised to see how many of his expected guests are wearing your colors.”

Wulfenbach’s lips twitched. “I prefer to think of it as giving them a war worth fighting. Even monsters can change, if given the right cause.”

The plates were cleared, and dessert—a dense, spiced cake—was set before them. Franks gestured at his own massive frame. “You ever wake up and forget what it was like to be just a man?”

Wulfenbach’s eyes narrowed, calculating. “I have not been ‘just a man’ for a long time. The line blurs. I find routine helps. Small rituals—morning coffee, fencing practice, reading reports by hand. They anchor me.”

Franks nodded, surprisingly thoughtful. “Pain helps. So does the job. I keep moving. Don’t let myself think too much about what I’ve lost. But... sometimes, I wonder if the pieces left are enough.”

Wulfenbach poured them both a finger of schnapps to accompany the last of the cake. “Then we do what we can with what we have. And we watch out for those who might follow in our footsteps, so they do not make the same mistakes.”

Franks raised his glass. “To monsters who remember what it’s like to be men.”

Wulfenbach clinked his glass. “And to men who do not forget what it means to be a monster.”

They drank, and for a moment, the conjunction of spheres felt less like an accident and more like an appointment.

Outside, the thunder of the engines echoed across the sky. For a moment, two monsters—one of steel, one of steam—shared a rare understanding.