



Hope & Glory

GLASS HOUSES



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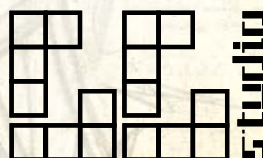
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Welcome to a new world...

On the 21st of October 1852, the citizens of London and Paris were awed at the sight of the western sky turning suddenly a strange shade of purple and red.

The first seismic shocks were felt all over the world in the following hours, and by the dawn of the 23rd of October, the giant waves hit the coasts of Europe. In the evening of the same day, while the tremors continued, catastrophic waves also hit the coasts of Asia. Whole cities, blasted by the earthquakes, were submerged by the sea. Millions of lives were lost.

Then the Black Rain began, washing the ruins and leaving behind a thick layer of ashes. Dark, impenetrable clouds hid the sun, and the Thirty Years Winter began.

In the Northern Hemisphere crops failed, snow-bound cities went up in flames as the populations rioted and the governments tried to find a solution, the means to survive.

One hundred years have passed now since the Catastrophe, and humanity has survived.

In the former colonial domains of Africa and South America. In the blasted plains of China. Among the remains of the Japanese archipelago. In Russian palaces sealed against the howling winds of the steppe. In the land that once was India. With sacrifice and ingenuity, with courage and hope, new nations have crawled back from the brink to claim the new world.

Science is a beacon to the future.

From the frozen wastes of Europe, where the mammoth roam, to the proud Zulu Nation of Africa, from the technological wonders of the Anglo-Indian Raj to the mist-shrouded shores of Lost America, these are the stories of a new, strange world.

A faint pencil sketch on aged, textured paper. It depicts a woman in a long, flowing dress with a high collar and long sleeves, standing behind a large, spoked wheel. To her right is a tiger, also positioned as if on a wheel or platform. The drawing is light and sketchy, blending into the background of the paper.

Glass Houses
by Davide Mana

1.

It was when the friends of the bridegroom, now well in their drinks, began the third song celebrating marital bliss, that Lucinda decided she needed a smoke, and slipped back through the porch doors. Bracelets and anklets jingling, she stepped swiftly along the dark, cool corridor.

The old mirror in front of the Colonel's library gave back a face not her own. The make-up excessive and vulgar, the gold nose ring too big and tacky, her full lips painted a deep maroon that contrasted starkly with the blue and copper of her saree.

Her mother had not been pleased. That had been the idea.

"You come to your sister's wedding looking like a common whore," the mater had hissed. Lucinda had enjoyed the contempt like a glass of bitter liquor. But the Colonel had just harrumphed, and turned his back, and the rest of the guests had simply ignored her, saving their gossip for later. So, why not take advantage of her social invisibility?

At the end of the corridor, she leaned against her father's studio door. The blue stone set in her navel hitched like hell. She just wanted to rip it away, plop down on the sofa and have one of the Colonel's cheeroots. The door swung silently open, she backed in, closed, turned and froze. There was a man in there, in the penumbra, wearing a severe black sherwani over which a shock of white hair shone like lamplight. He

stood by the big geographical globe in the corner, his fingers gently stroking the surface, following the lines of lost continents and forgotten nations.

Lucinda held her breath, instinctively, and the topaz chose that moment to detach from her contracted belly, and rebound on the wooden floor until it was lost somewhere in the shadows.

The man turned. "Miss Gadakari," he smiled genially. "My apologies. I did not mean to startle you."

He was somewhat familiar. An acquaintance of the Colonel's, for sure. But she could not place him. She stood against the door, one hand still on the handle. A single blade of light filtered through the curtains, cutting the room in two. It ran between them like a wall.

"I was just," he went on, gesturing at the globe, "admiring this wonder, while I was waiting for you."

"Were you?"

He took a step forward, skirting around the tiger pelt on the floor, until he stood in the middle of the room, between the stuffed chairs and the low rosewood table.

"Yes," he said. "I was contemplating what was lost to us. The world of our fathers."

"I did not mean that," she replied, guardedly.

A flash of white teeth against his tanned skin. "I know."

With a bow, he presented her with a calling card. A gold ring with a red stone shone on his hand. She picked the card between fore and middle finger, her blue and gold nails too long to handle it easily. It was creamy, finely-textured. She held it into the ray of sunlight. The card read 'George G. Reaper', in a clear, unadorned font, and nothing else.

She squared her shoulders, and slipped the card in her bosom. "Mister Reaper," she said, "may I know the reason you were expecting me?"

"Of course. I wanted to congratulate you for your wonderful mise-en-scene of the Mac—"

"Don't!" She snapped. A brief curl of her dark lips. "Please."

Reaper chuckled. "I am sorry. We bow to Max Beerbohm. Your wonderful mise-en-scene of the Scottish Tragedy. Is this more acceptable?"

"We people of the stage have our superstitions," Lucinda said.

"Indeed. And your affectations. Anyway, your adaptation work masterful."

She felt bitterness creep in her voice. "A pity the critics did not share your opinion, sir."

The old man shrugged. "Critics are just assassins without a work ethic," he said with a smile. "And to many, boldness itself is a sin."

She curtsied. "You flatter me, sir."

"No flattery, really. Are you taking the show on the road?"

"Not in the foreseeable future, no," she replied dryly.

Again Reaper flashed his smile. "A pity," he said. "And yet, I count myself lucky for the misfortune of our contemporaries."

She arched an eyebrow. "Again, sir, you flatter me," she whispered. She caught herself. She grimaced, and cleared her voice. "As the critics did not fail to point out, my work was hardly a success," she said, loud and clear. "We only had two nights..."

"Oh, it's not about the show, not really, wonderful as it was. My luck is of another nature." His voice took a sudden serious turn. "What if I told you my office is seeking the services of an unattached, bold young woman with exactly your set of skills?"

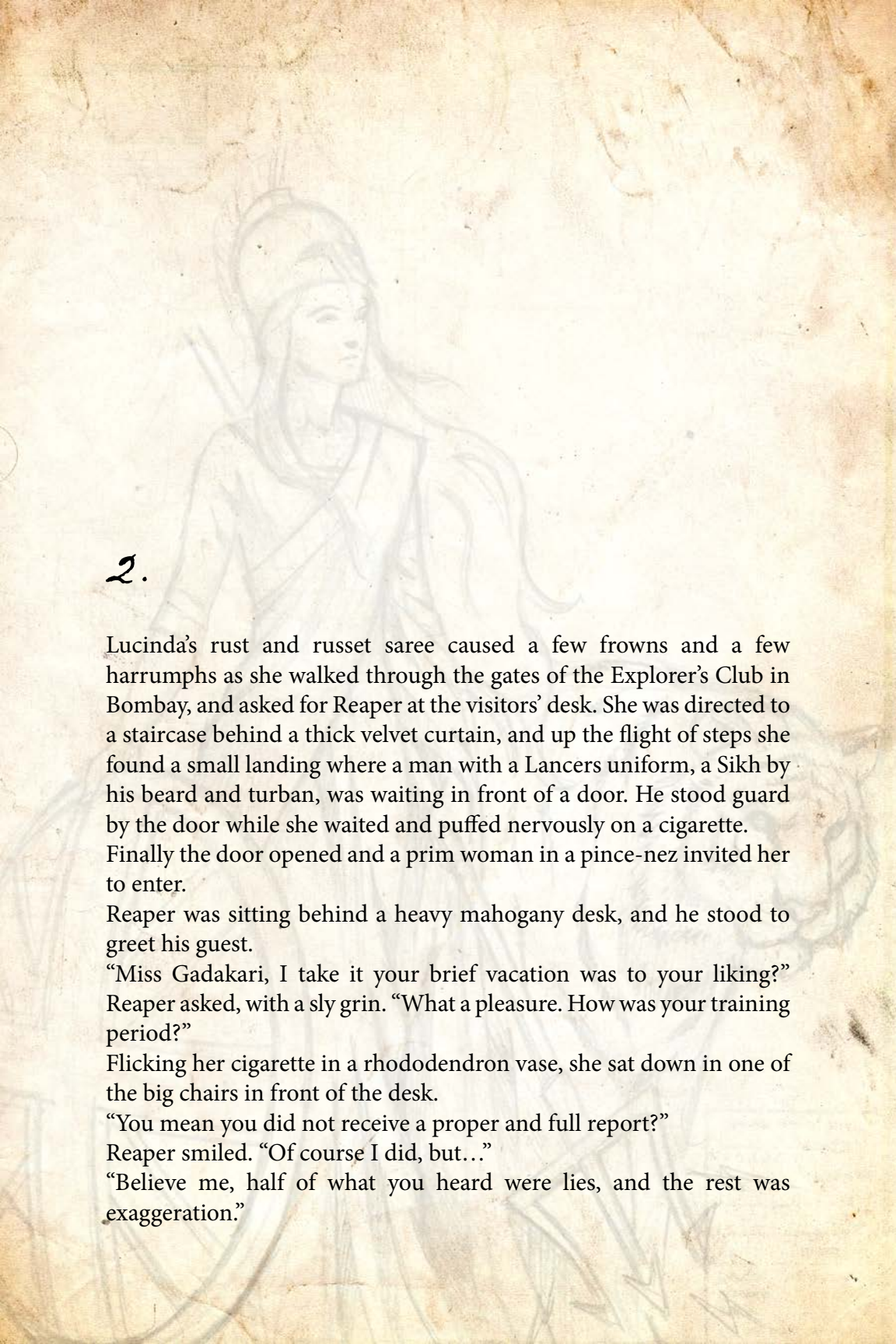
Outside, an elephant trumpeted. The groom and the bride were leaving, the guests cheering.

"Your office?"

"People of old called us the Star Chamber," he said. "All rather melodramatic, I think. Which, on second thoughts, might please you."

The room, with its hunting trophies and old dusty bookshelves suddenly felt very small, and dark. The Star Chamber was a name that hailed to centuries before, well before the Catastrophe, and the fabled reign of the first Elizabeth. It was the stuff of romances and chillers.

Lucinda surprised herself as, bangles jingling on her wrist, she motioned for Reaper to sit down. "Tell me more," she said.



2.

Lucinda's rust and russet saree caused a few frowns and a few harrumphs as she walked through the gates of the Explorer's Club in Bombay, and asked for Reaper at the visitors' desk. She was directed to a staircase behind a thick velvet curtain, and up the flight of steps she found a small landing where a man with a Lancers uniform, a Sikh by his beard and turban, was waiting in front of a door. He stood guard by the door while she waited and puffed nervously on a cigarette. Finally the door opened and a prim woman in a pince-nez invited her to enter.

Reaper was sitting behind a heavy mahogany desk, and he stood to greet his guest.

"Miss Gadakari, I take it your brief vacation was to your liking?" Reaper asked, with a sly grin. "What a pleasure. How was your training period?"

Flicking her cigarette in a rhododendron vase, she sat down in one of the big chairs in front of the desk.

"You mean you did not receive a proper and full report?"

Reaper smiled. "Of course I did, but..."

"Believe me, half of what you heard were lies, and the rest was exaggeration."

"Undoubtedly. But I would rather listen to your impressions, and not your instructors' assessments."

"Ah! Not what I was expecting, and I'll be aching in unnameable places for weeks, but yes, it was all that you promised, in a way, and then some."

Reaper cleared his voice and sat back with a sigh. He placed his elbows on the top of the desk and put the tips of his fingers together. "Chakilpora," he said.

Lucinda gave him a stare. "Never heard of."

"A small Princely State halfway up the Himalayas. There's a railway node. The Rajah of Chakilpora maintains a small force and de facto holds the gate to the high passes."

Lucinda squinted. "The Rajah of Chakilpora does ring a bell, now that you mention it," she said. "Big beefy sort of guy, mustaches, fancy operetta uniforms. Has an eye, let us say so, for actresses and dancers. Used to have a box at the Victoria Theater..."

Reaper smiled. "Excellent."

He stood again and unfurled a large map on his desk.

Lucinda frowned at the strange arrangement of colors, and stood in turn to get a better look.

"This is a map from 1838 of the old reckoning," Reaper said.

"Ten years before the Catastrophe," she whispered.

"The Princely States," Reaper's fingers traced a pattern of pale and dark green flecks on the map, "were not an invention of John Company. They were the product of the slow dissolution of the old Mughal empire. But indeed the Company took advantage of the fragmentation."

"They conquered what they could, and bound by treaty what they could not."

Reaper smiled faintly. "Some of the monarchs considered it expedient to ally themselves with the Company."

"Better a bad treaty than a much worse invasion," Lucinda mumbled.

"Exactly. And when in 1860 the Company mutinied, many of the Princely States sided with the Crown, of course."

A second, much more familiar map was stretched over the first. Lucinda noted the big yellow splotch of the Company dominion, squeezed between the Himalayas and the red of the Anglo-Indian empire.

"Of the original six hundred states, more than half were integrated into the Raj in the last century or so, and about one hundred remain as fiefs

and allies of the Crown. Chakilpora being one of the latter. A small mountain kingdom, in a very strategical position, the Rajahs have not been shy in showing their sympathy towards the Company, in the last three decades."

Lucinda put the tip of her index finger on Chakilpora and the tip of her pinky on Delhi. "John Company's closer than John Raj," she said. "And yet," Reaper observed, "they owe their independence to the benevolence of the Crown, not to the Company's policies. A fact that we are about to remind them of."

He rolled the maps and sat, motioning for his guest to do the same.

"And no," he went on, "we are not sending two companies of armored troops as a reminder."

He opened a drawer and pulled out a thick envelope.

"An envoy of the Office of the Interior is about to pay a visit to the Rajah of Chakilpora in the next weeks. Officially mister William James Vikram will be there to discuss a new trade deal, but in fact he will be offering the Rajah the opportunity of becoming part of the Raj."

"We know you've been a bad boy, but we are willing to make up and let you play with the grownups," Lucinda grinned.

"Something like that, yes."

Reaper opened the envelope and produced a series of folded papers.

"You are leaving for Chakilpora tomorrow morning," he said.

He pushed the documents towards her.

Lucinda picked up a train fare ticket and studied it with a grimace. "Second class?"

"You will happen to be in Chakilpora and you will certainly..." Reaper grinned. "Ah, catch the eye of the Rajah, and be a welcome guest to his palace."

"How much welcome?"

Reaper made a show of being shocked.

"Miss Gadakari, I am offended by your presumptions! But let's say welcome enough to take a look behind the scenes."

"Am I just supposed to go knock on his door?"

Reaper handed her a set of identification papers. "You are Claire Williams, an actres on her way to Kabul, a good friend of the Rajah of Bunti..."

"That I never heard of, but will obviously vouch for me."

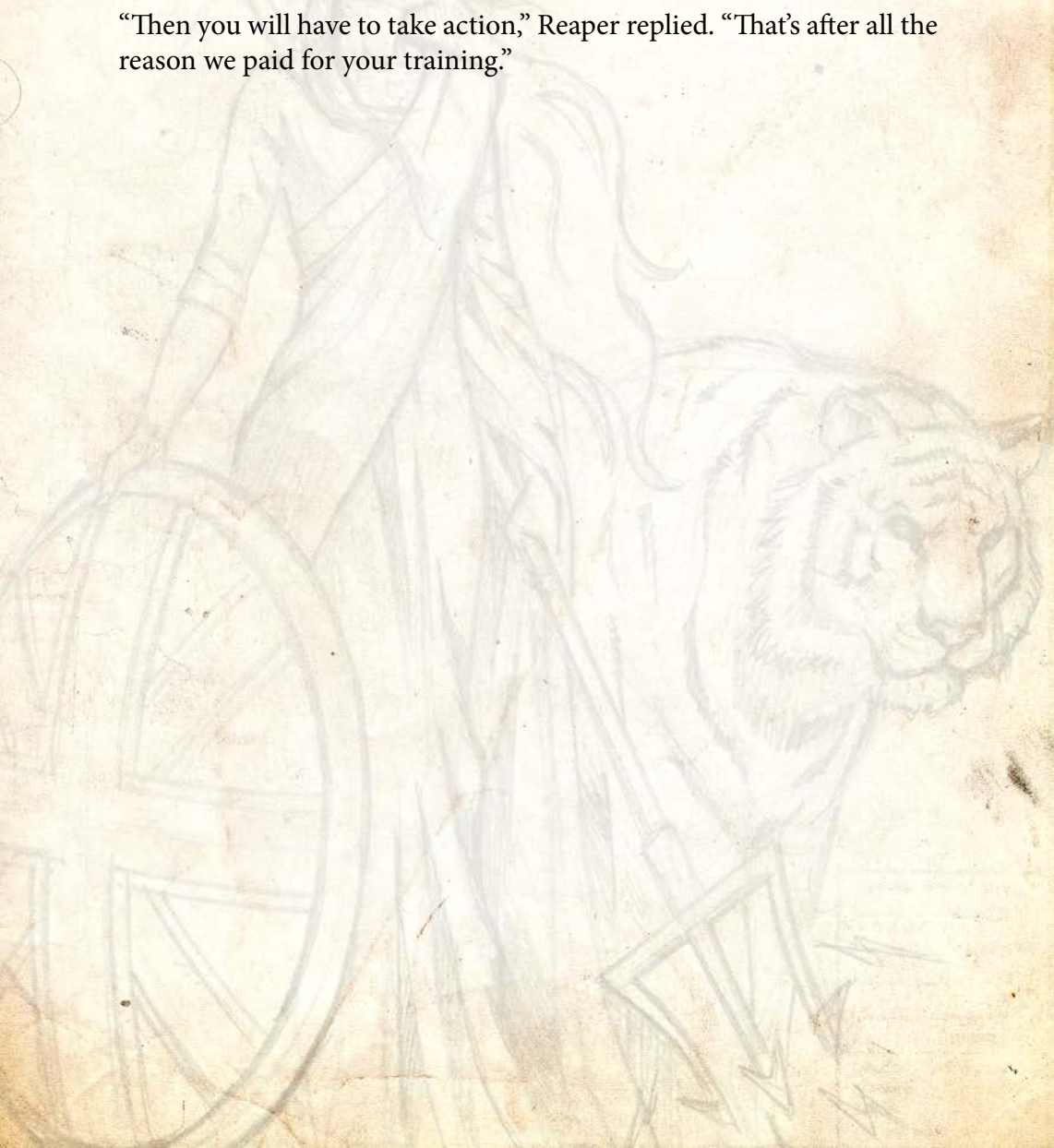
"Of course."

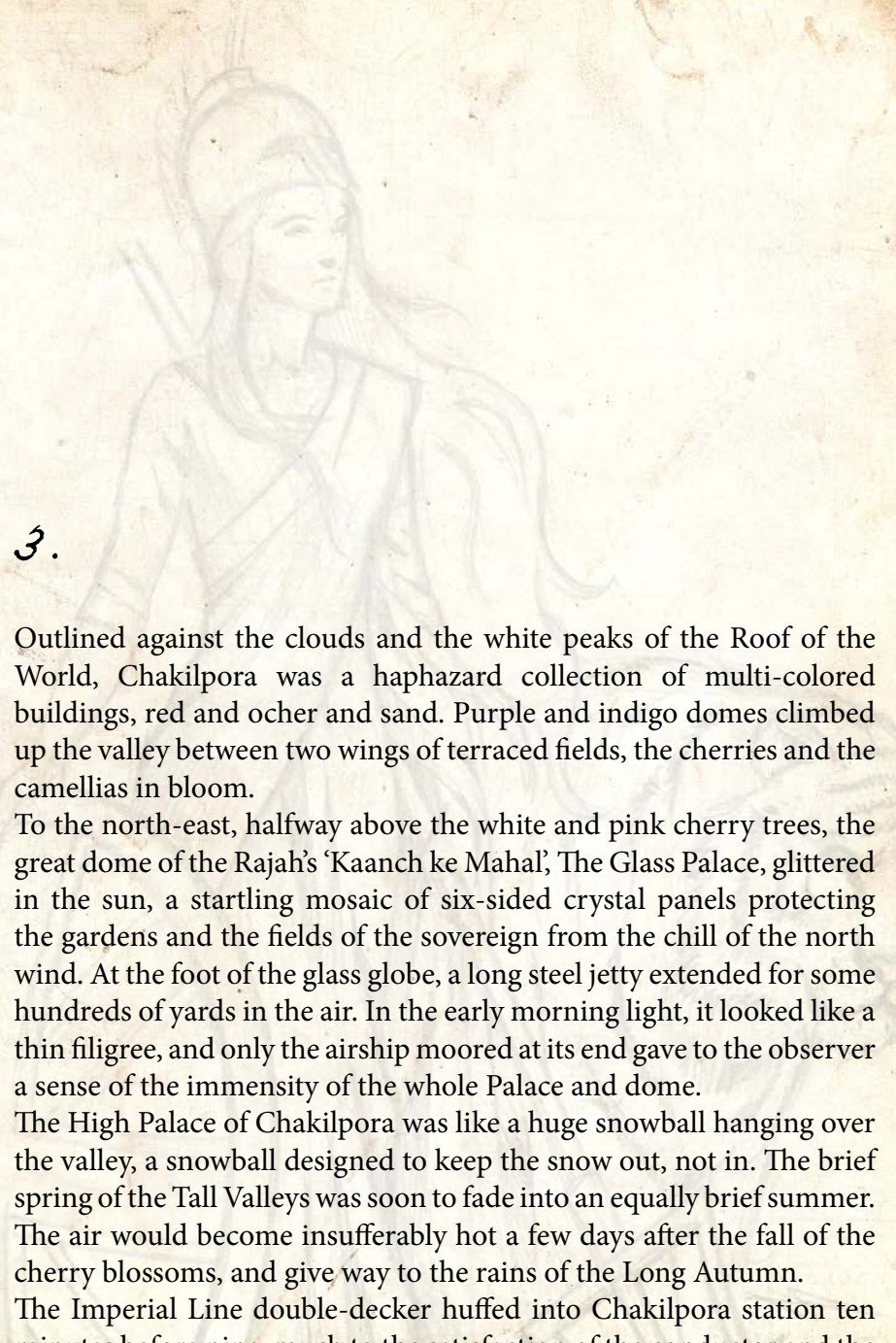
"And so, having my credentials as a strumpet been verified, what will I be supposed to do?"

"Our office," Reaper said, "has good reasons to believe that our Ministry's delegation will not be the only one playing the field in Chakilpora. We suspect John Company will be trying to interfere in some way, to maintain its hold on Chakilpora and on the route to Central Asia. By acting behind the scenes, you will assess the situation, and make sure the Ministry delegation does not blunder into something unpleasant."

"And what if they do?" she asked, placing the papers back in front of him.

"Then you will have to take action," Reaper replied. "That's after all the reason we paid for your training."





3.

Outlined against the clouds and the white peaks of the Roof of the World, Chakilpora was a haphazard collection of multi-colored buildings, red and ocher and sand. Purple and indigo domes climbed up the valley between two wings of terraced fields, the cherries and the camellias in bloom.

To the north-east, halfway above the white and pink cherry trees, the great dome of the Rajah's 'Kaanch ke Mahal', The Glass Palace, glittered in the sun, a startling mosaic of six-sided crystal panels protecting the gardens and the fields of the sovereign from the chill of the north wind. At the foot of the glass globe, a long steel jetty extended for some hundreds of yards in the air. In the early morning light, it looked like a thin filigree, and only the airship moored at its end gave to the observer a sense of the immensity of the whole Palace and dome.

The High Palace of Chakilpora was like a huge snowball hanging over the valley, a snowball designed to keep the snow out, not in. The brief spring of the Tall Valleys was soon to fade into an equally brief summer. The air would become insufferably hot a few days after the fall of the cherry blossoms, and give way to the rains of the Long Autumn. The Imperial Line double-decker huffed into Chakilpora station ten minutes before nine, much to the satisfaction of the conductor and the stationmaster.

Mechanical porters took care of the passengers' luggage while the travelers disembarked and took stock of their destination.

Lucinda stepped down from her second class compartment and with a rather unladylike grunt arched her back, vigorously massaging a buttock. She was wearing a pink tunic under a quilted vest, and a split skirt of blue silk, the same color of the shawl covering her hair. With a wide belt cinching her tunic and her black riding boots, she looked like a piratical sort of princess.

People eyed the strange woman as she walked to the gates of the station, there to hail a cab: a proud woman walking with long bold steps, a clockwork porter clicking behind her, a trunk and a large duffel bag piled on its loader.

A cabbie hopped down from his perch and opened the door to his vehicle. Lucinda instructed the porter to deliver the luggage to her current destination, then slipped a 10p coin in its feeding slot. Chiming gratefully, the porter clicked his way along the pavement.

The cabbie climbed back on his seat. "Where to, ma'am?"

"The Rajah's Gardens."

"Aye aye, ma'am!"

He released the brake and the cab moved, pistons hissing, and soon they were lost in the crowded streets of Chakilpora.

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Lucinda walked along the neat lanes of the gardens, trying unsuccessfully not to look up every two or three steps. It was disquieting, in a way, to walk in the shadow of the Palace in the Clouds.

The great dome of the Palace hung over the city and the park like a great cloud made of glass, the docking bays and the iron jetties thin to the point of almost invisibility for the distance, projecting in the air like thin masts of an unreal ship. It was so far it seemed unreal, and yet as she walked in its shadow, Lucinda found it impossible to ignore its mass, its monstrous weight.

The dome sat on a massive rock spur that stretched out from the side of the mountain. A network of iron buttresses rose out of the rock, and supported the sides of the glass bubble. In the distance, a waterfall poured from the side of the dome, turning into vapor well before it reached the valley floor six thousand feet below.

Finally taking her eyes off the dome, Lucinda followed the curved path through the gardens. Nannies were gossiping on benches while their wards played in the lawns, improvising cricket matches or flying steam-powered tin birdies. She passed a man in a Royal Guards uniform, a pretty girl in a blue saree on his arm, and finally reached her destination, the Rajah's conservatory.

With a shrug, Lucinda pushed the crystal doors and entered the warm, greenery-filled glass house. Inside, potted plants, small trees and statuary had been placed strategically, defining different spaces inside the hothouse. There was a majordomo terminal in front of the doors. A man in a prim black coat stood to greet the newcomer. Behind him, a clockwork soldier tick-tocked, standing to attention, and Lucinda could not say whether it was an antique curiosity or a functional, if ancient, security system.

"Ma'am," the man in black said.

Lucinda smiled and walked up to the desk. From her pocket she retrieved her calling card and the Marajah of Bunti's letter of introduction.

The man in black made a show of studying her card, and then quickly scanned the letter.

"I see, ma'am..." he said courteously. "If you would be so kind to allow me..."

He picked up a telephone and pressed a button. He smiled at Lucinda and turned his back to her, and talked briefly, too softly for Lucinda to catch his words.

The conversation took about one minute.

As the man put down the receiver, the conservatory shuddered and moved, causing Lucinda to stagger and squeal. She looked through the transparent walls. The entire glass building was slowly climbing up the mountainside, cog-like wheels scaling a set of iron rails.

"If ma'am pleases," the man said, gesturing towards one of the alcoves, "Tea will be served in a moment."

He smiled. "The transfer will take about one hour," he added.

Feeling slightly dizzy, Lucinda sat on one of the big wicker chairs, and soon a young footman in a red and gold uniform arrived with a tray and placed a teapot and a teacup on the low table in front of her. There were also a plate of honey cakes, cream, and sugar cubes.

"Is it all right if I smoke?" Lucinda asked.

The servant nodded, and lit her cigarette. Then he was gone.

She looked out, beyond the greenery. The city was growing smaller beneath them, and already she could see a large portion of the valley.

"Sure they know how to impress the visitors," she said to herself.

She poured herself a cup of tea

A few minutes later, she saw another hothouse, identical to the one she was riding in, running on tracks down the mountainside.

The cakes were gone by the time the man in the black coat came to her, smiling genially, rubbing his hands.

"If ma'am pleases," he said, "we are about to dock in the palace gardens.

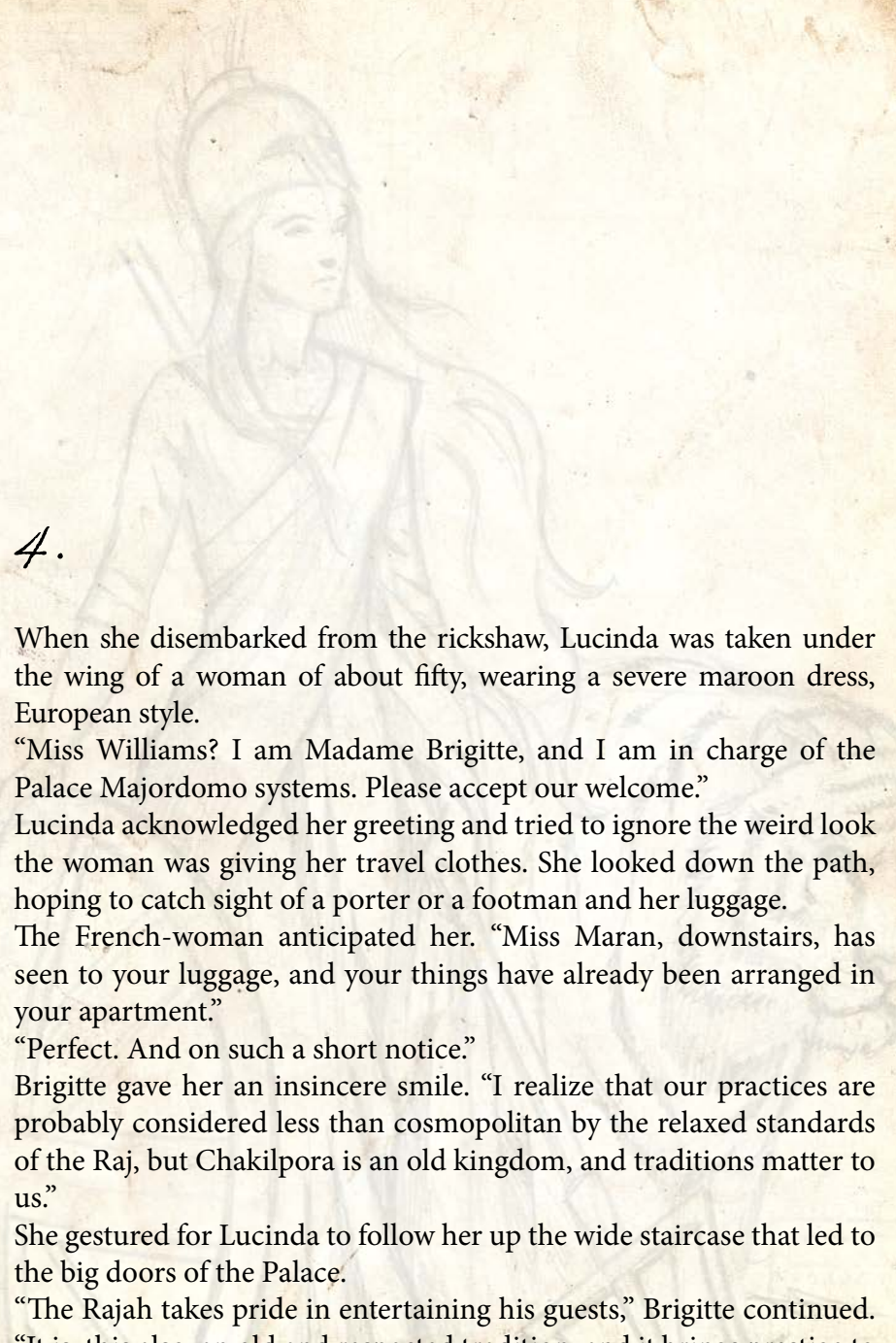
The palace majordomo has been informed, and you will be taken to your rooms."

Lucinda stood with a sigh as darkness fell on them and electric lights flared, flooding the glass house in an actinic light. They had entered a tunnel of some sort.

"On behalf of the Maharaja," the man went on, "please be welcome. Be sure that the Palace will be your home for as long as you will please to stay."

Slowly, the glass house emerged through a lawn and shuddered to a stop. Lucinda walked out in a garden that was perfectly identical to the one they had left. Same trees, same paths, same statues.

But nobody walked along the white paths, and the sky above them was fragmented in six-sided tiles. Lucinda stood, nose up in the air, as a mechanical rikshaw sped towards her.



4.

When she disembarked from the rickshaw, Lucinda was taken under the wing of a woman of about fifty, wearing a severe maroon dress, European style.

"Miss Williams? I am Madame Brigitte, and I am in charge of the Palace Majordomo systems. Please accept our welcome."

Lucinda acknowledged her greeting and tried to ignore the weird look the woman was giving her travel clothes. She looked down the path, hoping to catch sight of a porter or a footman and her luggage.

The French-woman anticipated her. "Miss Maran, downstairs, has seen to your luggage, and your things have already been arranged in your apartment."

"Perfect. And on such a short notice."

Brigitte gave her an insincere smile. "I realize that our practices are probably considered less than cosmopolitan by the relaxed standards of the Raj, but Chakilpora is an old kingdom, and traditions matter to us."

She gestured for Lucinda to follow her up the wide staircase that led to the big doors of the Palace.

"The Rajah takes pride in entertaining his guests," Brigitte continued. "It is, this also, an old and respected tradition, and it brings prestige to the house."

Or to be exact, Lucinda thought, the arrangements that allowed the maharajahs to hold a grip on their Princely States included the privilege, for Raj citizens, to take advantage of the princes' hospitality. They crossed a vast entrance hall, their steps echoing under the high domed ceiling, and then Brigitte took a corridor, and led Lucinda through a series of twists and turns, alcoves and small parlors, and finally to a long shadowy corridor, and an ornate door.

"Here's your apartment," Brigitte said.

She took Lucinda in a small tour of the apartment. There was a cozy parlor-like hall, with two couches and a small table. The bedroom was taken up by a big four-poster bed, heavily curtained with mosquito netting, overloaded in cushions and pillows. Lucinda's trunk had been parked in a corner of the room, by a large double door that led to a balcony overlooking the gardens. The bathroom was tiled in gold and red, a large pool set into the floor, warm water pouring through an artificial cascade.

"This is perfectly satisfactory," Lucinda said.

"Of course," Brigitte smiled. "You can use the majordomo to request services or assistance from the staff or, should you prefer, speak to a human member of the staff by using the telephone in the parlor. Just dial double zero, the majordomo system will re-route your call."

"Double zero."

"Yes. Dial one to summon a maid."

"I see."

Brigitte took a step to the door, and then turned. "The Rajah will greet his guests in the Peacock Hall at nine, and dinner will be served afterwards."

"The Peacock Hall."

"First corridor on the right, then down the staircase. You can't miss it. Or, in the unlikely circumstance should you get lost, ask any servant or member of the staff and they will give you directions."

And with a stiff courtesy, the Frenchwoman was gone.

Lucinda stared at the door - she had not been given a key, nor there was one in the lock. The Rajah apparently did not believe in locked doors.

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The latticework of the dome cast a diamond-pattern against the sky. Alone on the balcony, wearing a dramatic black and yellow saree, Lucinda appreciated the way a nightingale in a cage felt. Vast and spacious the dome might be, but to her it felt like a trap anyway.

"I see you are admiring our crystal sky."

The young Rajah was standing by her side, holding a glass of Maharati champagne. He was striking in a black silk jacket encrusted with medals, and he knew it. He gave her a rakish smile. She smiled back and lifted her own glass in a silent toast.

"It is an impressive structure," she said.

"A work of art and a marvel of engineering," the Prince said. "My father was a visionary. But come," he said, offering her his arm, "let's rejoin the party before gossip-mongers start plying their trade!"

Lucinda took Prince's arm.

"The Maharaja of Chakilpora won't certainly fear gossip," she cooed.

"Ah, my dear lady, better men than I have been brought low by rumors."

They re-entered through the balcony doors. The mechanical band was playing some lighthearted salon tune, and the guests were scattered in the circular hall, drinking, smoking and chattering in small groups.

She felt a lot of eyes on her silk-wrapped body as the Prince led her to the refreshments tables, and ordered one of the servants to pour champagne. Two men were talking softly by the table, and the Prince's arrival interrupted the discussion.

"My dear Mrs. Williams, let me introduce you the Raj's envoy, mister Vikram of the Ministry of the Interior."

Vikram was a man in his early sixties, with gray hair brushed back from his ample forehead. The old man gave her an owlish stare from behind his round glasses. Beneath a shock of pale hair, his face was lined and thin, dominated by a big nose. He bowed and kissed Lucinda's hand murmuring some unintelligible greeting.

"And Captain Trevanian, of the Flying Ostrich."

Trevanian was young, broad-shouldered and clean-shaven, with an insouciant smirk and an ironic glint in his clear eyes. He bowed briefly, and in a single glance took her in from the tip of her soft slippers to the red bindi between her eyebrows.

"I think I saw your ship moored on one of the flying jetties," Lucinda said, shaking his hand. "A Company ship, right?" She stared at him, and he stared back with an ironic glint in his grey eyes. "Your name," she said. "Trevanian, is Russian."

He smiled. "Armenian, madame. My grandfather was one of the Strays." She bit her lower lip. "I am sorry."

"I am not. Simon Trevanian was a kind and resourceful man, and my family owes him much. I do owe him much. I am proud of being of his blood."

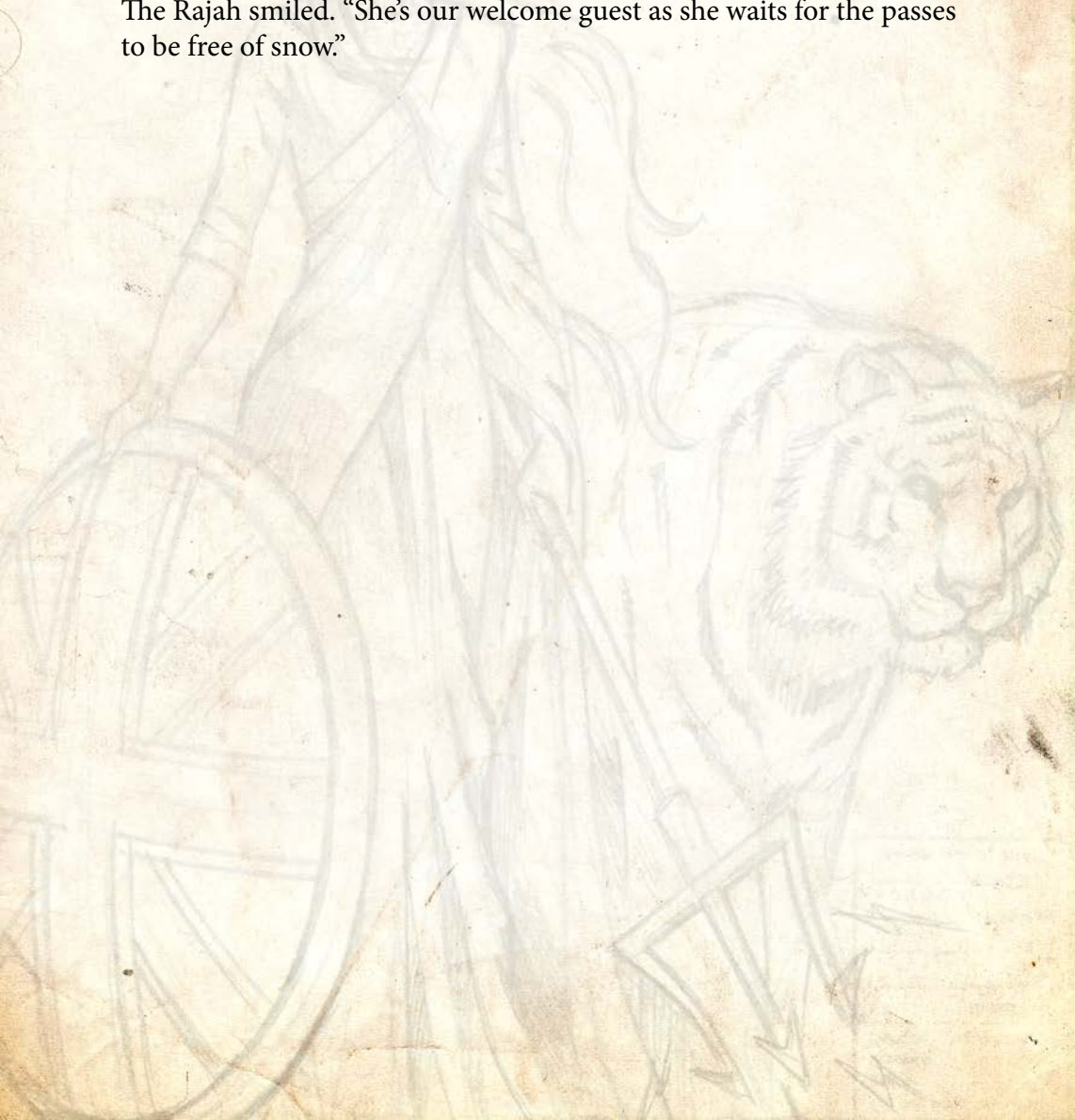
"I did not mean..."

"Of course not," he cut her short.

"Mrs Williams," the Prince said genially, "is a thespian and a mistress of the stage, currently traveling to Kabul, where she will entertain our troops with her charm and her beauty."

"And with a selection of poems by Shelley," Lucinda added.

The Rajah smiled. "She's our welcome guest as she waits for the passes to be free of snow."



5.

A murmur rippled through the guests and they all turned to the door. Two beast-men, broad-shouldered and wearing thick felt coats had just entered the hall, placing themselves at the sides of the door. They were clearly a savage strand of humans, rough-featured, with sharp dark eyes glinting under thick brows, and massive jaws hinged over wide necks. The larger one had a mechanical right arm, and both were studying the people assembled in the room.

Then, placing a pale hand on the mechanical shoulder of her guard, a ghostly figure entered the hall. She moved so smoothly, it was like she was ice-skating on the marble of the floor. She was tall and thin, and very Russian. She cast a bored-looking stare on the guests, her lips curving in a tired smile projecting a sensation of supreme ennui. She wore a long, form-fitting dress that looked like a pool of ink, over which a galaxy of crystals glittered. If those were real diamonds, Lucinda mused, the dress alone was worth a rajah's ransom. Then there was the silver filigree tiara crowning her complicated hairdo, and the long dangling earrings that looked like chandeliers. The Russian woman was so pale and alien that Lucinda found it hard to gauge her age. The white hair contrasted starkly with the dark lips and fingernails, and pale blue veins were visible at her temples, and where the lace of her sleeves left her wrists and hands exposed.

"If you will excuse me," the Maharaja bowed, and went to greet the newcomer. Vikram murmured some excuse himself, and followed the Prince. Lucinda and Trevanian remained silent for a moment. He placed his empty glass on a passing tray.

"Here's your Russian," Trevanian said with a tightlipped smile.

"Countess Ekaterina Beloselskaya, straight from the Czar's Winter Palace in Pryozersk."

"She certainly knows how to make an entrance."

"Doesn't she?"

The Rajah was doing the honors, while the Russian countess glided on his arm. The two Neanderthals in Cossack uniform stood to attention by the door.

"The Russians arrived by land five days ago, through the high passes."

"Despite the snows and the bandits."

Trevanian nodded. "The Countess takes pride in these extreme gestures. A Russian thing, I imagine. She is here with her own retinue: two maids, one cook, her driver and five Cossacks."

"Five of those beast-men?" Lucinda fought the impulse of giving a soft whistl.

"They are impressive," Trevanian nodded.

"But no match for a good Company Gurka?"

The captain shrugged. "They are brutal and fearless, always a successful combination when dealing with badly armed revolvers, poor peasants or Turich tribesmen." He squinted at the two Cossacks. "But I think on a battlefield, against disciplined troops, the story might go differently."

Lucinda started walking along the edge of the hall, Trevanian by her side.

"You seem to know an awful lot of things about Chakilpora's palace and its visitors," she said.

"I have often been a guest. This is the last civilized docking station before the Hump."

"The Hump?"

He nodded. "The course over the mountains, through the High Passes, to the plains of Central Asia."

She glanced at him. "And how does the Czar take a Company airship entering his domains?"

Trevanian shrugged again. "I guess he would not be pleased, should he ever learn about it."

Lucinda gave him a coquettish smile. "I promise I won't tell him."

Trevanian laughed.

The dinner was a monument to abject boredom as everybody sat around a long table aglitter with fine china and silver. Table arrangements had been made so that Lucinda was sitting between an old professorial type that blushed every time he turned to her, and a retired officer of the Engineers, that tried to entertain her with anecdotes about the torsion momentum of steel bars.

If nothing else the food was excellent. At the far end of the table, the Rajah sat on a small throne, the Ministry envoy mister Vikram on his left and the ghostly countess Beloselskaya on his right. Trevanian had been assigned a place by the Russian's side. He did not seem so displeased. Whatever they discussed, was completely lost to Lucinda. She managed to steer the mindboggingly boring conversation of her two neighbors and ask some discreet questions.

"William Vikram?" the colonel said. "He travels with a secretary and a valet. There is much talk about what will come out of his talks with the prince, as the counselors, the political staff and hanger-ons fear Chakilpora will be swallowed up by the Raj, and the palace and the house will lose prestige."

"This is his second visit," interjected the professor, adjusting his glasses. "He appears to be a very frugal individual. A gentleman of the old school, if you catch my drift. And apart from gossip and wild speculation, Vikram's presence has so far been very discreet."

The colonel harrumphed.

"And what about that diaphanous creature, Countess Beloselskaya?"

"Gorgeous creature, if diaphanous indeed," the professor said, casting a glance in the direction of the Russian woman.

The colonel coughed. "If you like the bloodless, vaguely disquieting sort."

Lucinda pinched her lower lip between thumb and forefinger. "One thing's for sure, she sticks to the prince like a veritable clam."

"Probably trying some," the colonel glanced at Lucinda, "bedroom maneuver to bring the Rajah around to support the Csar's policies."

"And yet," the lady on the other side of the soldier said, leaning over in a conspiratorial whisper, "I have on good authority that the countess is not sleeping with the prince."

Lucinda arched an eyebrow. "No?"

"Everyone downstairs is positive. There is nothing there."

The main course was served, and the conversation drifted to more prosaic matters. The colonel's lady friend chattered like a garrulous bird, and soon Lucinda shut her piercing, unpleasant voice off. By the time the dessert arrived, Lucinda was exhausted and bored to death.

Then, one of the guests asked the Rajah about the hunting event that had been planned for the day after tomorrow. Conversations quietened as a bright smile lit the face of the prince.

"Yes, I have something special in store for you," the Rajah said. "It will be a hunt worth remembering, of this you can be assured."

The talk turned to guns and the best way to kill a tiger. Lucinda sighed as the professor started lecturing her on the tiger's senses, pointing out that among the felines tigers were the only species to hunt by sight and sound more than by the sense of smell.

"This is simply ridiculous!"

Everybody turned and stared at countess Beloselskaya. "You would exclude me from the hunt because of my sex?!" the woman exclaimed, an amused smirk on her black lips.

"Women don't usually take part in the hunt," the Rajah said softly. The silence was such around the table, that it would have been possible to hear a pin drop.

"Maybe your soft Anglo-Indian women, yes," the Countess said, arching a well-penciled eyebrow. "I assure you that hunting and killing are far from alien to a Russian woman of the blood."

Lucinda saw an opening. "I wouldn't be so fast dismissing the Anglo-Indian women, your grace. Any woman of the Raj can hold her own facing a ferocious beast as well as any flower from the gardens of the Csar."

There was a ripple of murmuring around the table. "Hear hear!" somebody muttered.

Ekaterina Beloselskaya stared at Lucinda from underneath her heavy eyelids, and brought a sharp-nailed finger to the side of her chin. "Really?"

Lucinda grinned. "I think I'll show you on the field, your grace."

One of the Rajah's cousins laughed out loud. "My prince, it looks like you won't have to go to the woods to meet tigers!"

Everybody laughed.

“And such fascinating tigers indeed!” The Rajah lifted his hands in mock surrender. “Who can oppose the will of a woman?” he said, causing more laughter.

Conversations began anew. Lucinda held the glare of the Countess for one long minute, until the Russian bowed her head with an ironic smile.





6.

The following day was spent in idle pursuits, as the Rajah was engaged in talks with Mister Vikram. The two of them were holed up somewhere in the Palace, and the guests were left to their own devices.

Lucinda took the opportunity to explore the Palace and the grounds. The dome enclosed an area of a little over four square miles, and the landscape had been accurately designed to give the impression of a far larger space. All lanes were curved and screens of trees and flower bushes were strategically placed to break the view, hiding the artificial horizon. Only from the upper levels of the palace it was possible to look beyond the trees, at the valley two thousand meters below, and at the surrounding peaks.

The Palace itself was a rambling, sprawling pile of red and white stone, a collection of wings, dependences and out-houses that recorded one thousand years of refurbishings, redesigns and expansions. Then, fifty years after the Catastrophe, the old Rajah had it dismantled, stone by stone, and rebuilt inside the dome. The thought of the cost alone of such an operation was enough to make her reel.

In her leisurely tour of the property, Lucinda got lost three times, twice inside the palace and once on the grounds. In each of these occasions, anyway, she promptly found a servant that provided her with directions, and in one case even a sketch map, to put her back

on track. Apart from the Rajah's private quarters, which occupied the whole western wing of the palace, only two other areas were denied to Lucinda - the eastern woods, where the hunt would take place the following day, and the power stations, where the water falling from the high glaciers was channeled through mighty tubes, and fueled the turbines that provided the energy for the whole structure. Only the outlet of the system was open to the visitors: a vertiginous balcony, its iron parapet hanging over the mouth of the conduit through which the water tumbled into the void. Here Lucinda had her lunch served, and she sat watching the roaring waterfall turn into a cloud a few hundred yards below.

Back to the palace, she was greeted by an informal buffet for tea. The talks were over for the day, and the Rajah, mister Vikram and the Russian countess were chatting amiably on the patio, surrounded by the other guests. Lucinda felt the Russian's eyes on her as she climbed up to join them.

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A light breakfast was served on the southern veranda for all the hunters and their companions and hanger-ons. Sitting alone on the balustrade, Lucinda had some tea and a coriander cake, . She watched as the Russian countess and captain Trevanian arrived, she with her usual complement of Cossacks, he with a lean Chinaman in a sailor's uniform that would probably act as his gun-bearer. When Trevanian saw her, he smiled and bowed. He picked a glass of tonic water, and walked up to her.

"Ready to hold up the honor of the Ladies of the Raj?" he quipped.

"This is a strange hunt we are about to begin."

The man crossed his arms, and turned towards the forest that extended on the eastern side of the palace. "How, strange?"

"The arrangements are not what I would expect for a tiger shoot," she said. "No lures were set during the night."

The common practice with tiger hunting was to set up a number of tied-up animals - goats, or cows - to find out in what sector of the hunting ground the tiger was hunting.

"Have you been stalking the grounds by the moonlight?" the Company man asked. She did not care to answer.

"For all the mise-en-scene," Trevanian said, sipping his drink, "this is a very small place. You don't need a kill to know where the beast is hiding."

Lucinda nodded, but still looked unconvinced. Tigers being in the habit of killing their prey, have a taste and then take a nap in the vicinities before finishing their meal, the system was ideal not only to locate the tiger, but to be sure it would be close by, and drowsy because of the ongoing digestion.

A team of mahouts led three big elephants on the lawn, each equipped with a howdah.

Lucinda patted her thighs, and produced a cigarette box. "Do you have a light?"

Trevanian struck a match and offered the flame for her.

A screech echoed under the dome, causing all the guests to turn to the east, where a number of birds rose from the trees, scared. It was high-pitched and overdrawn, like monstrous nails being dragged on a cyclopien blackboard.

"What...?"

The Maharaja stepped on the balcony, sporting a hunting jacket with cartridge-holders on the breast and shoulder pads of leopard skin.

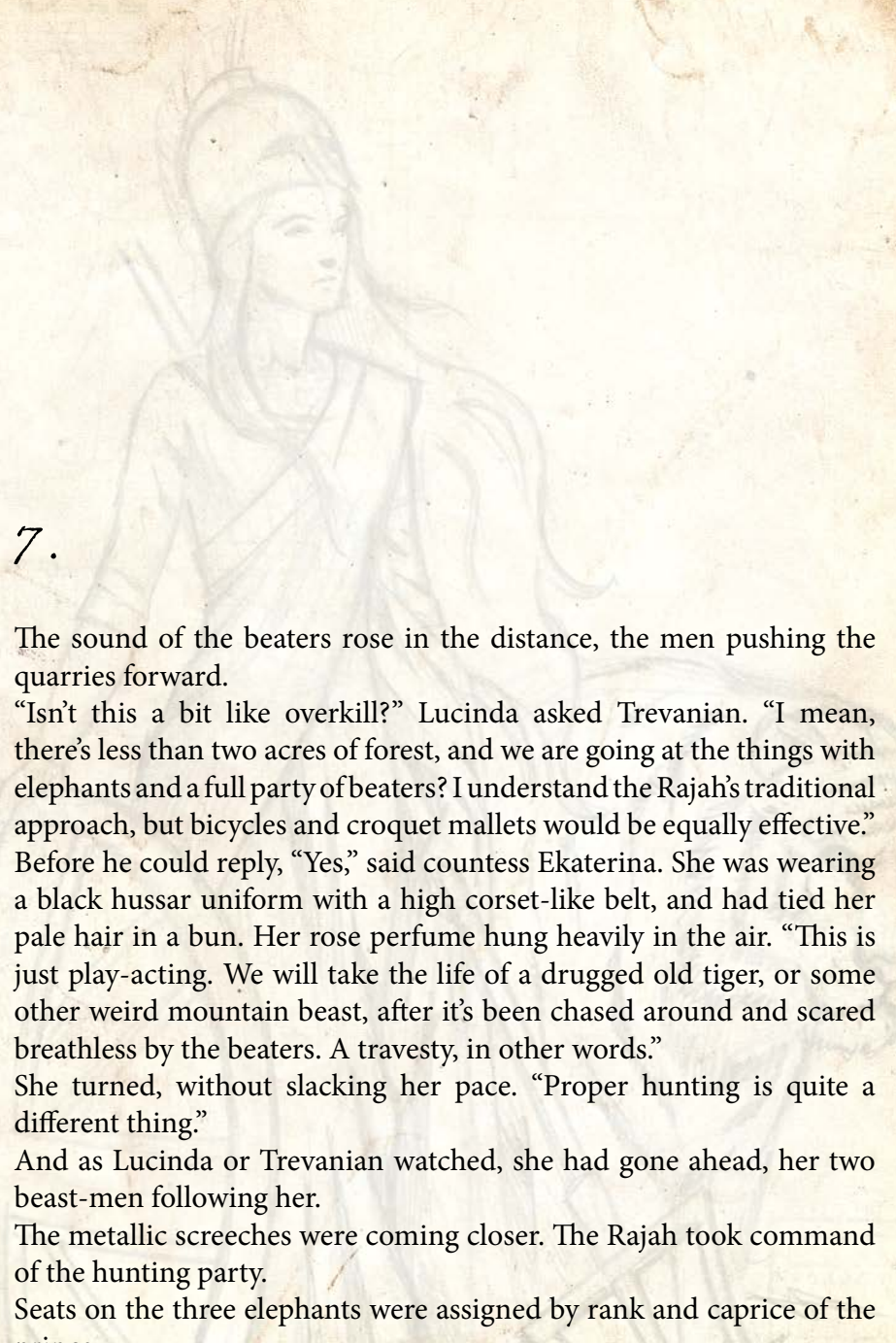
"Are we ready, gentlemen? Ladies?"

Once again, the scream rent the air, and was answered by a similar call in the distance.

"As I promised, today's prey will be something different."

And he walked down the staircase, to the lawn where the gun bearers and the runners were waiting.

Lucinda and Trevanian followed, joining the hunting party.



7.

The sound of the beaters rose in the distance, the men pushing the quarries forward.

“Isn’t this a bit like overkill?” Lucinda asked Trevanian. “I mean, there’s less than two acres of forest, and we are going at the things with elephants and a full party of beaters? I understand the Rajah’s traditional approach, but bicycles and croquet mallets would be equally effective.” Before he could reply, “Yes,” said countess Ekaterina. She was wearing a black hussar uniform with a high corset-like belt, and had tied her pale hair in a bun. Her rose perfume hung heavily in the air. “This is just play-acting. We will take the life of a drugged old tiger, or some other weird mountain beast, after it’s been chased around and scared breathless by the beaters. A travesty, in other words.”

She turned, without slacking her pace. “Proper hunting is quite a different thing.”

And as Lucinda or Trevanian watched, she had gone ahead, her two beast-men following her.

The metallic screeches were coming closer. The Rajah took command of the hunting party.

Seats on the three elephants were assigned by rank and caprice of the prince.

Lucinda found herself sharing her howdah with countess Ekaterina and with the prince's cousin Lakshmi, a young woman with a spunky smile and a big express rifle.

"The men think we are to be kept away," the princess said. "But we'll show them!"

The Russian gave her a bored look. She was handling with ease a big double-barreled gun. She placed herself to the front of the howdah. Lucinda and Lakshmi took the left and the right side respectively.

The elephants advanced abreast towards the thicket, the servants and the aides de camp spreading behind them. The metallic screeches were now very close, and the pachyderms were showing signs of nervousness. Then something crashed through the greenery, running in the open space in front of them and stopping suddenly at the sight of the three great beasts.

Lucinda leaned forward to get a better look. The creature looked like a big ostrich, about fifteen feet tall, with massive feet and a great curved raptor beak at the end of its muscular neck. Its feathers were black and blue, and it slapped short wings with every step. It turned this way and that, screeching. It stopped. Then it did an about-to and sprang into the trees again.

All the hunters were very excited at this novelty.

"What sort of beast is that?" Lakshmi whispered.

"A dinornis," the Countess replied without turning. "They are said to be common in Australia, and in the Borneo. The Rajah did more than keep his promise. They are intelligent, aggressive beasts, and their behavior is harder to predict than a tiger's."

She looked at Lucinda, and a smile crept on her black lips. "This will be a fun."

The first excitement finally subsided, the mahouts drove the elephants in the trees, following paths that had been neatly designed to appear natural. The men took the lead, leaving the three women behind. The party proceeded in silence, footmen and beasts spreading and following the great bird's trail.

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When the attack came, it was fast and furious.

The Countess was on her knees, gun at the ready, when a blur of black feathers and talons jumped out of nowhere landing in front of her. She

was knocked back by the elephant rearing as the dinornis attacked the mahout, the beak coming down and snapping at the elephant driver's neck.

Lakshmi and Lucinda screamed. The elephant gave a terrible bellow as a second bird attacked its flank, ripping long gashes in its thick gray hide.

Ekaterina fired her gun, causing the first bird to jump away, but a third animal was attacking the elephant, and the pachyderm was backing desperately, and trying to stave off the birds. Lucinda got one of the dinornis in her sights and fired, but the howdah was rocking too violently to aim. The shot went wide as the howdah belt was torn by the big bird's beak, and the whole structure toppled.

Lucinda blanked for a moment.

The next, she was crouching on the ground, her two companions lost somewhere in the undergrowth. She shook her head to clear it and watched in awe as Ekaterina Beloselskaya stood up and faced the charge of one of the dinornis. The beast lunged to snap at her, but the Russian rolled away at the last minute, a long thin blade shining in her hand, a red bleeding streak appearing on the leg of the bird. The monster turned, ready to attack again, this time moving slowly, with more caution.

Lucinda saw Lakshmi, trying to sneak towards her, limping, her clothes torn in the fall. A second dinornis burst through the vegetation and attacked the princess, but suddenly there was a huge brute grasping the beast by its neck and tearing it away. The beast-man with the mechanical arm wrestled with the monster, allowing the princess to run away. The bird screeched and tried to free itself from the Cossack's hold, but to no avail. Then suddenly it lifted one of its massive feet and kicked the beast-man in the chest, pushing him back. Three parallel gashes opened on the beast-man's chest, but he roared and stood, the dinornis rushing and toppling him. The primitive man and the ancient bird rolled on the ground in a deadly embrace.

Lakshmi gasped as a shadow fell on Lucinda. Without turning, Lucinda rolled on her side and avoided the beak of the third dinornis. As she stopped in a crouch, her short dagger flashed in her fingers. The bird looked at her, tilting its head just like a chicken would, and took a step towards her. Then its head exploded.

The Rajah was standing by the trees with a shotgun, a beast-man rushing by him and towards the small clearing where the Countess

was still dueling with her dinornis. The Cossack lifted his gun, but his mistress barked an order, and he lowered the barrel.

Supporting the limping Lakshmi, Lucinda took a few steps towards the clearing, watching in fascination as the white-haired Russian danced around the giant bird. The animal was bleeding from a number of wounds, and tended to favor his left leg. It looked around, taking in the woman with the sword, the gun-toting beast-man. The rumble and bellows of the incoming elephants decided it. It turned on its good leg and started running for cover.

With a roar of frustration, Ekaterina pursued it, and before it could dive into the shrubs, with a swift fluid move she threw her long thin blade at it. The sword flew through the air with a metallic twang, and stabbed the creature in the side. The dinornis let out a rattling screech of pain, but it continued to run.

Men were pouring into the clearing, carrying guns and shouting. An elephant somewhere bellowed. The Rajah and his cousins ran to Lakshmi.

About one hundred yards off, they found the body of the dead Cossack, its mechanical arm still gripping the neck of the bird that had killed him.

"He was a good servant," the Countess said, accepting a canteen somebody handed her, and taking a long pull. "He did his duty as such." She stared Lucinda in the eye, and gave a brief nod.

"The one that got away," she said then, turning to the Rajah. "It will not go far."

She tucked a stray length of pale hair behind her ear. "I want its heart. It's my privilege."

8.

"I mean, she ate it! Raw!"

Vikram nodded. He and Lucinda were standing by the buffet, on the southern patio overlooking the piers and the valley below. "It is not unheard of. It is apparently a common practice among the Cossacks." Lucinda stared at him. "And no mistake."

She shuddered at the memory of Ekaterina Beloselskaya being handed the big chunk of red muscle, and biting into it, blood running down her chin and splattering the front of her dress. "Russians are sick."

"There's talk..."

She turned at him. "Talk? About the Csar and his aristos?" She sniffed. "Yes, I guess we have all heard stories. Penny writers just love them... Count Orloff the Csarist Vampyre seducing young proper British maidens and all that sort of trash. I was in a play once, playing the part of the seductee." She made a face. "It was pretty racy, now that I think about it."

The diplomat just stared at her.

Lucinda shrugged. "Never mind. It's been a long day."

The dinornis affair had brought to light another face of the good Rajah.

"Importing illegally dangerous faunas," Vikram shook his head. "Endangering his guests, two of the animals still missing..."

"And this is a small contained place," she said. "One would imagine it must be rather easy, tracking down two fifteen-feet tall ostrichs."

Vikram sighed. "They should have fenced off the hunting grounds," he said. "I guess that would have somewhat spoiled the intended fun," Lucinda replied.

The whole palace was talking about the events of the day. Captain Trevanian had been summoned in the prince's apartments as soon as the hunting party had crawled back to the palace, and the Company man had been handed a harsh dressing down, at least based on what the servants were saying.

Which seemed to suggest the good captain was the one that had provided the animals for the Prince's amusement, and him acting so innocent before the hunt!

"And yet," she said, picking another glass of champagne, "I wonder if the whole thing could really be blamed on someone. I mean, I really have not the faintest on these birds and the possibility of training them..."

Vikram looked around, as if hoping for an escape route. Lucinda just smiled, and turned to display her black and violet saree to the best effect.

"The foresters and the hunt-master have been dismissed," Vikram said. "And it looks like captain Trevanian will be persona non grata from now on, if we are to lend credit to the rumors."

Lucinda wondered if the Company's Board of Directors was aware of the Captain's animal trading business. Somehow she doubted it.

"Which we of course won't," she winked. "And yet, somehow Trevanian's disgrace should make your work easier, right?" she said. She hated to admit it, but she was actually enjoying this role of the clueless strumpet as much as she enjoyed the old owl's embarrassment.

Vikram adjusted his tie pensively. "If Trevanian was the Rajah's major contact with the Company then yes, this might mean a possible shift in allegiances. The Princely States potentates have a common attitude of capriciousness, and they tend to put face, so to speak, above more material interests. But I will pursue the Ministry's guidelines for the Accession of the Princely States as is. Taking advantage of this morning's unfortunate incident would be, I think, unfair. And if you would excuse me, I see my secretary and he seems to be..."

"Of course," she smiled in return.

Lucinda watched him go, a bit miffed at his obvious relief. Then she put down her empty glass, and waved amicably at the professor and the colonel, that were coming towards her.

9.

The next morning, a little before nine, Lucinda left her room and walked swiftly down the corridor to one of the servants' passages. She was wearing the simple uniform of one of the palace chambermaids. Without any makeup and face jewelry, she was just another Anglo-Indian girl in a cheap cotton dress.

By following similarly-attired girls, she soon located the laundries, where she retrieved a set of fresh sheets and then made her way back to the guest wing. The notes she had taken after "getting lost" two days earlier allowed her to get her bearings and soon she was walking down a corridor very similar to the one where her room was. The no-locked-doors policy of the palace allowed her to get in.

The air was thick with strong tobacco and rose perfume. Lucinda was piqued in finding that Countess Ekaterina had a larger suite of rooms than her own. And a larger bed.

She dropped the sheets on the unmade bed, and swiftly scanned the bedroom. She quickly went through a big chest of drawers. Apparently everything about the countess was black, lacy or embroidered. Lucinda chuckled at the idea that it would be fun to find a pair of darned stockings or refitted underwear, but everything was pristine and terribly expensive.

One drawer contained various travel accoutrements: a multi-function arm-band, a half-sleeve with brass fittings, a watch, a thermo-barometer and other wilderness utilities; a set of anti-snow goggles rested by a military-grade voice projector.

A locked armoire contained a full-length black fur, shiny and soft, the hussar-like uniform from yesterday, and a selection of shoes, slippers and boots.

Sniffing in exasperation, Lucinda moved to the bathroom and the boudoir. A quick check of the vases, pots and bottles on the dresser confirmed her suspicion that the countess' pale features were artificially enhanced. There was talk, in certain circles, of the Russian aristocracy's passion for chemicals. She even found the blue pencil the woman used to underscore her veins to give the impression of a translucent skin. A small coffer held a variety of jewels, all of the silver, diamond, onyx and jet variety. A leather pouch in a drawer held a set of glass syringes, each filled with a bluish, vaguely fluorescent liquid.

The clock was ticking. Lucinda took a perfunctory look at the parlor, then sat at the *écritoire* in the library. Papers, writing implements, a personal majordomo terminal, a set of drawers holding odds and ends, and one of them locked.

This now was promising.

She slipped her picklock from her sleeve and opened the drawer. A bundle of papers, in Cyrillic. She cursed under her breath. A big leather wallet, holding East India Company bonds, for a total worth of five thousand guineas, plus as much money in Raj tender. Underneath it all, a folder.

"And now please hold your hands up, milyy..."

Lucinda closed her eyes with a sigh, and held her hands up, turning slowly.

The countess was standing in the doorway, ghoulishly gorgeous as ever in a wide-shouldered, high-waisted black dress. Her hair was up, a white soft cloud framing her pale face. She was holding a multi-barreled gun.

Lucinda caught her perfume, and cursed herself for the distraction.

"I always thought the idea of doing without locks and keys would lead to some unpleasantness," the Russian woman said. "No, stay where you are. We'll wait for the palace guards to arrive. The guests could do with a little scandal to warm things up, don't you think?"

"The other guests will love it."

Ekaterina smiled. "No pleading, no stupid attempts at a justification. I appreciate that in a thief."

Then her eyes flared as she saw the open drawer, the handwritten papers on the desktop.

"But maybe we are not dealing with a common thief," she said, a cruel smirk curling her black lips.

"I can explain..."

"Ah, now we get the excuses. Not a thief at all."

The Russian waved her gun. "Move away from there. On the couch."

Lucinda stood and took three steps to the couch by the bookcase.

Ekaterina moved in parallel, still covering her with her gun.

"Put your hands under your thighs."

Lucinda complied, her brain racing like a trapped rat, looking for a way out, and finding none.

The Russian passed her gun from the right to the left hand, and tapped some keys on the majordomo. The machine played a recorded message.

"I will be out of my room until noon. Please leave a message."

Lucinda's eyes widened as she recognized the voice. Pieces of a puzzle she had never really contemplated fell into place.

"Come here," Ekaterina snapped in the microphone. "We have caught ourselves a pretty little spy."

Then she sat on the desk chair, placed the gun in her lap, lit a black cheeroot and smiled sweetly at Lucinda and, "Now we wait," she said softly.

10.

The majordomo clock was chiming the half hour past eleven when the door opened and hasty footsteps were heard in the other room.

"Here in the study," the Countess called.

A man stood on the door, breathing heavily, trying without much success not to look too disheveled.

Lucinda arched an eyebrow. "Mister Vikram."

The diplomat walked slowly into the room, running his hands down the front of his formal black jacket.

"What does this mean?"

The Countess snorted. "It means someone's not been as discreet as he was supposed to be." She nodded towards Lucinda. "The Company sniffed something out, and sent this strumpet to pry in my underwear." Vikram's eyebrows arched. "The Company?"

Always confuse your adversary, always mislead. If there was a single lesson that her six-week training had burned in Lucinda's brain, was the necessity of always maintaining a smoke screen between herself and the rest of the world. Sitting there for over two hours, answering with well-acted reluctance to the questions of the Countess, had given her all the time to weave herself an armor of lies. And the best lies are those built on half-truths.

"Do you really think," she asked Vikram, smiling a self-satisfied smile, "that someone acquiring enough Company bonds to cast a vote in Council would have gone unnoticed?"

Vikram stared at her and then at the Countess. "You assured me the bonds had been acquired through a variety of sources," he said indignantly, "that they were untraceable."

Lucinda chuckled. "Untraceable? Nothing that has to do with money or power is untraceable for the Company."

The Countess shook her head in pity. "And you suspected that Tai Pan dandy?"

Vikram ran a hand through his hair. "What now?"

Ekaterina looked at Lucinda. "I guess our friend here will have a tragic accident."

"You think they will buy it?" Lucinda asked.

The Russian laughed. "It's not a matter of buying it, my dear. The Rajah has no interest in starting a scandal, especially one involving a dead actress. Your accident will not attract any undue attention, believe me."

Vikram started pacing the room, up and down. "I don't care about this trollop!" he said. "What I am worried about is our deal."

The Countess smiled ironically at her prisoner. "Aren't men simple in their worries?"

"Especially greedy men."

Vikram stopped and stared at the two women. "I don't find any of this amusing in the least!"

"Which does not surprise me," the Russian said. "I guess things being as they are, your peaceful retirement as a member in good standing of the East India Company Board of Directors is out of the question. We will probably have to go back to our original offer."

Vikram grimaced.

"That was very generous," the Countess added.

Lucinda chuckled. "What's it, old man, are you less than thrilled at the perspective of spending the rest of your life in a snowbound Russian palace, surrounded by bat-crazy albino ghouls? Because that's what they offered you, right? And what for?"

"You should keep your pretty mouth shut, girl," the Countess said.

"Or else? Are you going to kill me twice?"

The Russian grinned. "I could simply hurt you. A lot. So much so that you might greet death as a relief."

Vikram huffed, shaking his head. "Enough of this!" he hissed. "Let's get over this sad affair, and then try and go back to our business."

"Do we need to gag you?" the Countess asked, waving her gun to have Lucinda stand up.

"As if my opinion mattered," she replied.

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From her rooms, Vikram recovered her black and yellow saree, and she had to strip in front of the Countess and put it on.

"We can't let them find your body in a servant's uniform, can we?"

"Not if you want to make it look like an accident."

The Countess curtsied, an ironic smirk on her pale face.

They left the Russian's apartment and took a lonely corridor, reaching the gardens through a side door. The Countess held Lucinda tightly, walking by her side, arm in arm, the pepperpot gun pressed in the girl's side. The Countess' rose-scented perfume was so thick on her skin Lucinda choked. Vikram walked two steps behind them.

They walked through the garden, zigzagging around flowerbeds, by all means looking like two friends in intimate conversation, a dapper gentleman, his hair in disarray, following them.

"So this is how it's going to be," Lucinda said, keeping her voice level. "I will have some terrible accident, but the talks will go on."

The Countess smiled mirthlessly.

"And because the man whose duty is to convince the Rajah accept the Crown's offer is working against such offer, there will be a fall out."

"Oh, believe me," the Countess whispered, "the Rajah will be so outraged, relations between Chakilpora and the Raj will go back to the last century."

"And the Raj will probably blame the Company, traditionally Chakilpora's close ally."

"Such a perceptive woman. What a pity your life is going to be so short." Lucinda grimaced. "And while the Raj and the Company are engaged in some diplomatic struggle over the Rajah's loyalty, the Czar will offer a friendly hand across the mountains."

They were out of the gardens, and walking along the path that led to the rim of the dome, and the balcony overlooking the mighty waterfall.

"You wait here," the Countess said over her shoulder. Vikram stopped, his mouth working like he would have liked to say something, but words failed to come out.

The two women continued along the path. Soon the gravel gave way to the iron grille of the outer rim of the dome, and they were on the balcony. The outgoing pipe was a high metal arch on their right, water thundering through and dropping down forever. The valley was a faint patchwork of green and pink terraces far down below, houses and roads little more than pale filigree wavering in the mist.

Lucinda placed her hands against the glass of the dome.

"So what?" she asked. "Am I going to crash through this three inches crystal and fall all the way down? I should at least be riding a bicycle, to gain momentum."

The Countess grinned. She pointed the gun and with a rock-steady hand shot four bullets against the glass. The six-sided panel cracked, fissured and snapped, and with the final shot exploded in a cascade of glass shards. The wind's howl overwhelmed the roar of the waterfall.

"A tragic accident," the Countess chuckled. She turned the smoking gun towards Lucinda. "And now you jump."

The wind caused their clothes to flap, disrupting their hairdos.

"You'll have to shoot me," Lucinda said, carefully measuring the distance between her and the Russian.

"Do you think it would make any difference? Have you ever seen a body fallen from an airship?"

"I favor different amusements."

Lucinda looked over the Countess' shoulder. Vikram was standing alone, about two hundred yards behind them.

"Do you really expect some knight in shiny armor to come and rescue you?" the Countess spat. "This is not a romance novel."

A high metallic screech echoed over the din of the wind and the water.

"I don't need rescuing, you hussy!"

As the Countess glanced over her shoulder, Lucinda slid forward, in a crouch, and punched her with both fists in the solar plexus. The Russian took two steps back, trying to keep her balance.

Behind her, a monstrous wingless bird charged Vikram, trampled him as it made for the balcony.

The Countess fired her gun at Lucinda, the bullet slamming in the girl's shoulder, then turned to fire her last bullet at the charging dinornis.

The bullet hit the animal in one eye, killing it instantly. The beast

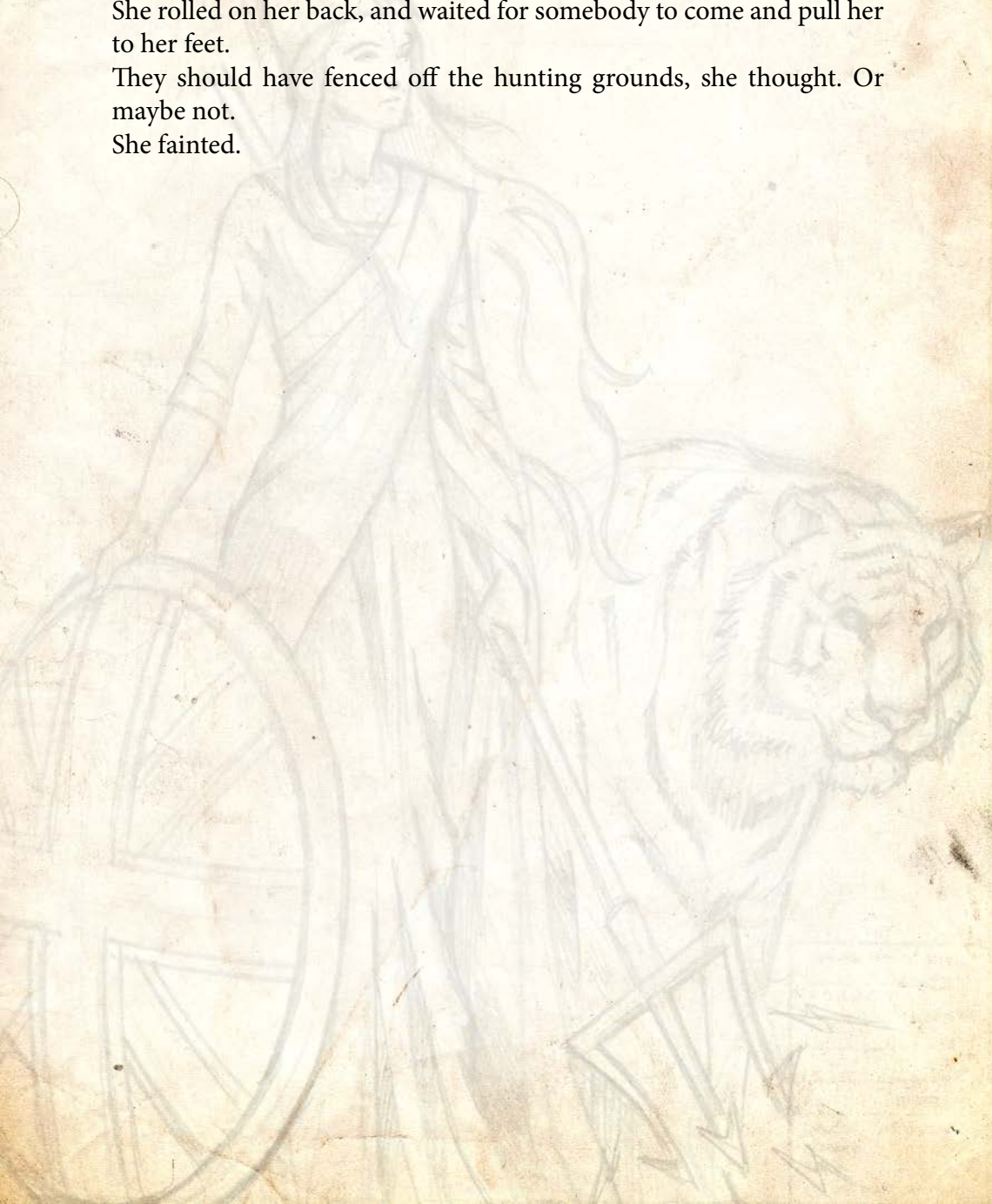
kept running. Carried by its momentum, it steamrolled the Russian, trampling and dragging her along as it fell through the broken glass pane, and down into the valley.

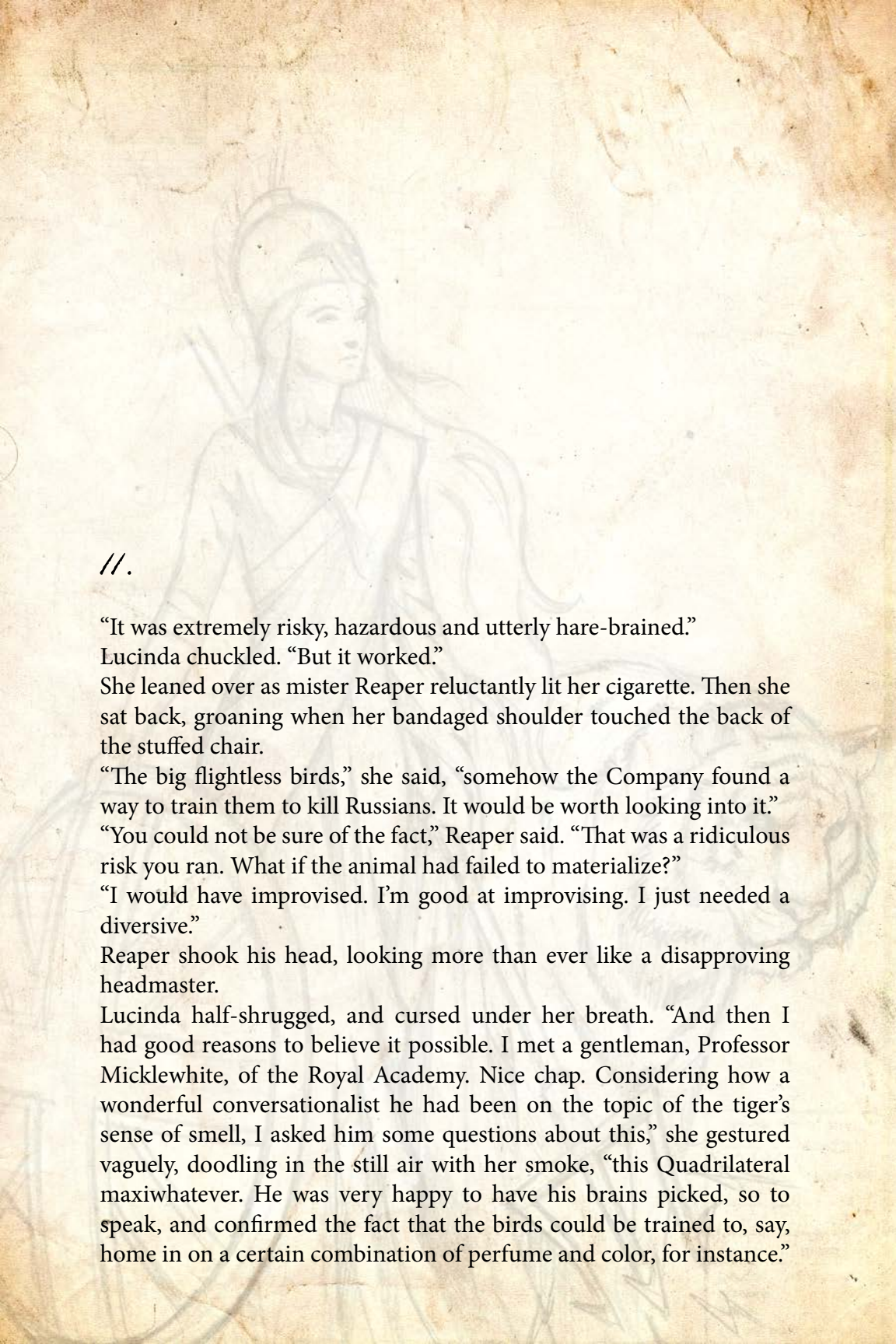
Cursing in fifteen colors, and holding her bleeding shoulder, Lucinda crawled to the edge and looked down. She only saw the mist, where the falling water turned to vapor.

She rolled on her back, and waited for somebody to come and pull her to her feet.

They should have fenced off the hunting grounds, she thought. Or maybe not.

She fainted.





//.

"It was extremely risky, hazardous and utterly hare-brained."

Lucinda chuckled. "But it worked."

She leaned over as mister Reaper reluctantly lit her cigarette. Then she sat back, groaning when her bandaged shoulder touched the back of the stuffed chair.

"The big flightless birds," she said, "somehow the Company found a way to train them to kill Russians. It would be worth looking into it."

"You could not be sure of the fact," Reaper said. "That was a ridiculous risk you ran. What if the animal had failed to materialize?"

"I would have improvised. I'm good at improvising. I just needed a diversive."

Reaper shook his head, looking more than ever like a disapproving headmaster.

Lucinda half-shrugged, and cursed under her breath. "And then I had good reasons to believe it possible. I met a gentleman, Professor Micklewhite, of the Royal Academy. Nice chap. Considering how a wonderful conversationalist he had been on the topic of the tiger's sense of smell, I asked him some questions about this," she gestured vaguely, doodling in the still air with her smoke, "this Quadrilateral maxiwhatever. He was very happy to have his brains picked, so to speak, and confirmed the fact that the birds could be trained to, say, home in on a certain combination of perfume and color, for instance."

"Quaternary megafaunas," Reaper corrected her. "I happen to know Professor Micklewhite, and I am familiar with his many talents. As it happens, he is a member of the Explorer's Club, this same institution, you know?"

Lucinda nodded and then her eyes turned into blazing slits. Her mouth formed a perfect O as she stubbed her cigarette in a vase of petunias.

"You double dealing...!"

"My dear miss Gadakari, have you ever heard about putting all of your eggs in the same basket, and the consequences thereof?"

Lucinda was aghast. "Of all the smug, complacent, manipulative recreant..."

The man behind the desk waved a hand. "Please."

"How many men did you have there, taking care of the Chakilpora business?"

He gave her an innocent look. "Five? Yet I still maintain you took an unrequired risk."

She huffed. "I think that's none of your business," she grimaced, "sir."

"Oh, it is too. The Crown has invested quite some time and money in your training, and it would be a pity should it all go to waste because you like to gamble in such a way. Good agents are a rare commodity."

He stood, handing her an envelope. "You had better understand that once you serve the Star Chamber, your life no longer belongs to you."

She glared at him and opened the envelope. She stared for a long minute to the cream-colored card.

"Is this real?"

"Do you think I would forge that signature?"

She arched an eyebrow. "Yes, you'd go to any length, if it were expedient."

Reaper bowed slightly. "You flatter, miss Gadakari."

Lucinda chuckled, waving the card in the air. "And I could never show this to anyone anyway, right?"

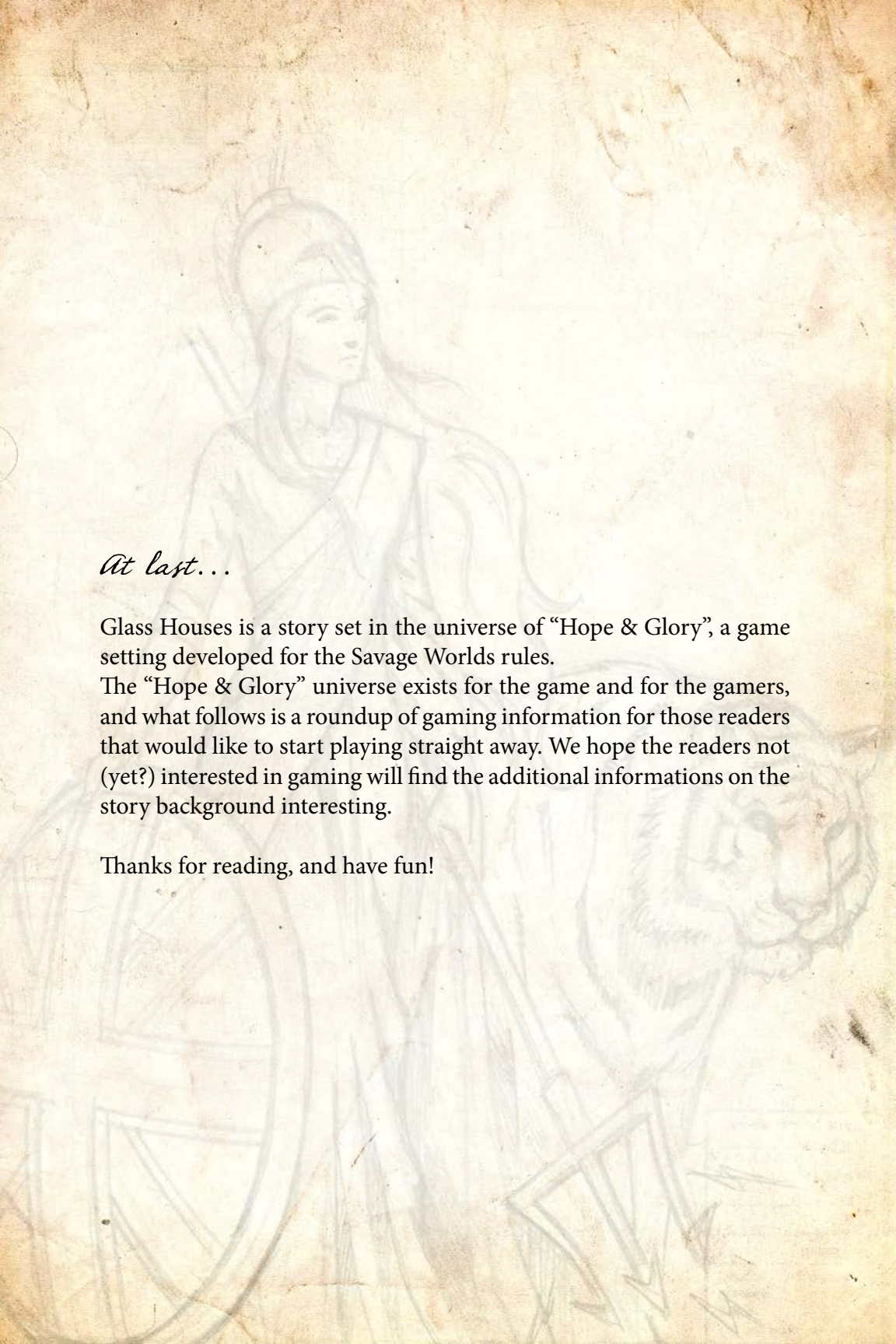
The old man sighed. "It's been a pleasure seeing you, miss Gadakari. I wish you a pleasant convalescence."

Lucinda stood.

"Shall we meet again," he said, "say in one month's time?"

"Make it three weeks. You know where to find me."

"Of course."

A faint, light-colored illustration serves as a background for the page. It depicts a woman with long, flowing hair, wearing a crown or tiara and a long, draped garment. She is looking towards the right. Below her, there is a large, stylized illustration of a tiger's head and front paws, also looking towards the right. The entire illustration is rendered in a light, sketchy style that blends into the aged, textured paper background.

At last...

Glass Houses is a story set in the universe of “Hope & Glory”, a game setting developed for the Savage Worlds rules.

The “Hope & Glory” universe exists for the game and for the gamers, and what follows is a roundup of gaming information for those readers that would like to start playing straight away. We hope the readers not (yet?) interested in gaming will find the additional informations on the story background interesting.

Thanks for reading, and have fun!

The Savage Appendix: Gaming stats

Dinornis

Dinornis, also called Giant Moa, are the tallest bird that ever lived, with the females of the largest species standing 3.6 m (12 ft) tall, and one of the most massive, weighing 230–240 kg (510–530 lb) or 278 kg (613 lb) in various estimates.

Feathers are reddish brown and hair-like, and cover most of the body except the lower legs and most of the head (plus a small portion of the neck below the head). The feet are large and powerful, and the birds has a long neck that allow them to reach tall vegetation. In relation to its body, the head is small, with a pointed, short, flat and somewhat curved beak.

Attributes: Agility d6, Smarts d6 (A), Spirit d8, Strength d12+1, Vigor d8

Skills: Fighting d8, Intimidation d8, Notice d10.

Pace: 8; **Parry:** 6; **Toughness:** 9

Special Abilities

- **Beak:** Str+d6, AP 2.
- **Easy to Train:** Dinordis are quite easy to train, using the right combination of smell and colors. A Dinordis can learn up to half his Smart dice “commands”. Each command requires a Smarts (-4) or Survival (-2) roll from a trainer and two weeks of time.
- **Frenzy:** Dinordis are quick and deadly beasts. They can do a single bite attack or a two Talons attacks per round, the latter without suffering any multi-action penalties.
- **Size +3:** They are tall as two men.
- **Talons:** Str+d4, AP 2. Heavy Armor.





Countess Ekaterina Beloselskaya

Attractive, amoral, loyal to the Czarist cause, the Countess is an agent of the OKHRANA, the Czar's feared secret police (her uncle is the deputy-director of the Foreign Affairs Section).

Cold and cruel, she considers anyone not directly related to the Russian court a second-class human being, but she can mask her true feelings in order to carry out her missions.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d8, Spirit d10, Strength d6, Vigor d8

Skills: Fighting d6, Healing d4, Notice d8, Intimidation d8, Persuasion d8, Shooting d8, Stealth d8, Streetwise d6, Survival d6, Taunt d8.

Charisma: +4; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 5; **Toughness:** 6

Edges: Attractive, Connections, Level Headed, Noble.

Hindrances: Arrogant, Vengeful (Minor)

Gear: Dagger with garter sheath (Str+d4, Range: 3/6/12), three full sets of superior quality gowns and accessories, a large selection of drugs and poisons in a concealable leather pouch (Notice roll opposed to the Countess' Stealth to find them: she has at least one Lethal, Paralysis, Knockout poison with her), 400 guineas in jewels.

Special Abilities

- **Cold Pallor:** Ekaterina sports a very pale complexion, and her skin is very cold. Part of this exotic appearance is fruit of makeup, but the rest is fruit of advanced Czar's drugs. She gains +1 to Vigor rolls, +2 to rolls to resist cold.
- **Retinue:** The Countess usually travels with a maid and a bodyguard.



Captain Arthur Trevanian

Captain Trevanian is a Tai-pan, one of the merchant-princes of the West India Company.

On a personal level, Trevanian has little sympathy for the WIC and its policies, and he is known to have entertained friendly relationships both with members of the Czarist court and the Anglo-Indian Raj.

Due to his family origin (his grandfather was an Armenian refugee - one of the so called "strays" that escaped Europe after the Catastrophe), Trevanian has little hope of being elevated to the West India Company

Board of Directors, but he finds his life as a sky captain and adventurer more than satisfying.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d10, Spirit d6, Strength d8, Vigor d10

Skills: Climbing d6, Fighting d8, Notice d8, Persuasion d8, Piloting d8, Shooting d10, Stealth d8

Charisma: +0; **Pace:** 6; **Parry:** 7; **Toughness:** 6.

Edges: Ace, Block, Counterattack, Dodge, Luck.

Hindrances: Cautious, Outsider

Gear: Tulwar (saber-like sword: Str+d6, +1 Parry), Webley-Wilkinson revolver (Damage: 2d6+1, Range: 12/24/48, RoF: 1, AP 1, revolver), travel clothes, leather box pocket with 4 top-quality cigars and matches, silver brandy flask.

Special Abilities

- **Born on the Deck:** Captain Trevanian is a true air mariner. He gains +1 to any Agility-based Traits rolls until he is on the deck of an airship.
- **The Flying Ostrich:** Captain Trevanian's owns a precious airship, manned by a crew of twelve loyal seasoned air mariners. In each scenario up to five of them can join him as followers (use Soldier's stats).

Neanderthal Cossack

The Russian Empire has found a use for the tribes of beast men that have expanded on the Eastern plains, following the herds of mammoths when the ice came. The Neanderthals (because scientists identified these creatures as such) have been taken under the wing of the crown army, and are now the backbone of Czar Vladimir's army.

The Neanderthal Cossacks are famous and feared for their relentlessness and their fierceness on the battlefield, but are usually considered too volatile for more complex tasks requiring discipline and planning. Despite this, some members of the Russian court use them as bodyguards, mostly for their intimidating demeanor.

Note: True human Cossacks are usually offended at being compared or associated to the Neanderthals, that they call "begunov" (literally, "runners") because Neanderthals cannot ride (and horses are usually scared by the Neanderthals' body odor). "Obez'yana" (literally, "ape") is another derogatory term frequently used to describe Russian Neanderthals – and one granted to displease the recipients and provoke a violent reaction.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d4, Spirit d6, Strength d10, Vigor d8

Skills: Climbing d6, Fighting d8, Intimidation d6, Notice d8, Shooting d6, Survival d6, Stealth d6, Throwing d6, Tracking d6

Pace: 8; **Parry:** 6; **Toughness:** 7

Equipment: Carbine (damage: 2d8, range 20/40/80, RoF: 1, AP 2) usually fitted with a heavy bayonet (Str+d6), uniform including ammo bandolier and fur cap.

Special Abilities:

- **Mute:** Neanderthals' throats are different from homo sapiens's ones, so they are unable to speak properly.
- **Primitive Instinct:** Neanderthals are naturally gifted by a strong instinct, and gain +1 to Survival, Notice and Tracking rolls in wilderness environments.
- **Size +1:** Neanderthals are slightly bigger than humans.

Majordomo

Most Raj administration buildings, club-houses and upper class residences these days feature an Automated Administration Engine, colloquially referred to as "Majordomo".

The technology was originally applied to ship-gun aim calculation systems, but soon found civilian and peacetime applications.

The engine is a combined intercom/telephone, telegraphic mail and record-keeping machine.

The Majordomo normally features a central differential engine (normally stored in the basement) with a subset of "terminals" in the rooms of the house.

The basic terminal occupies a desk, and includes a keyboard, a set of microphone and loudspeaker, a punch card in/out slot and a ribbon printer.

Communication between main engine and terminals is granted by telegraphic lines or (in more modern models) by telephone lines.

State of the art majordomo systems also feature a tele-imaging screen.

The basic functions granted by the standard domestic majordomo are:

1. Analytical engine - the user can access from the terminal the mathematical functions of the engine.

2. Diary and scheduler - the user can keep track of his engagements and set alarms to go off as a pro-memoria. The scheduler is also used to set lunch and dinner hours and to time social events.

3. Internal communication system - the terminals can communicate telephonically (voice) and telegraphically (text) with each other. Voice recording and Dictaphone functions are included.

4. Automated information system - the majordomo can usually provide textual or voice-recorded directions to first time visitors and guests.

5. External communication - most majordomo systems allow the user to make telephonic calls or to send telegrams through the land lines (where available).

6. Entertainment - home models usually feature a "revolver" gramophone magazine, in which up to 12 recordings can be stored and played on demand.

Diffusion. The majordomo is one of the typical features of the upper class Anglo-Indian house, and it is indeed one of the marks of the Raj technology. Engines similar to the majordomo are slowly catching in the rest of the world, the Republic of Ezo being the second world market for majordomos.

The Czar himself is said to have supervised the setting-up of a majordomo device in his Winter Palace.

In popular culture: the popular 1957 novel "Proteus!", by novelist and playwright Daniel Cootes imagines the plight of a woman trapped alone in her house by a malfunctioning and possibly malignant majordomo. The novel was adapted for the stage by the author. The Imperial College of Engineers was not amused by Mr Cootes' story - nor was the sales department of Jobson, Chandra & Wilgates Ltd., the Raj's premier builder of majordomo systems.

Note. While the workings are basically similar, majordomo systems should not be confused with on-board "computation engines" used on airships. While both systems have their ancestor in the naval gun aiming engine, the airship systems are limited in functions and complexity, due to weight and maintenance issues.

The Majordomo in Play. GMs and players alike can use the Majordomo as source of information. For the former it is a simple and straightforward way to feed some useful data to the players, while the latter can use it to actively do some research. In gaming terms, consider the Majordomo as having Investigation d8 (plus the Wild Dice on almost all topics). If the players lack the skill can use the Majordomo's one, if they have it at higher level, consider the Majordomo an helper (use the cooperative rolls rules).

You need a Smarts of d6+ to benefit from the Majordomo in such a way.

Hope & Glory, croquet lawns and lost continents

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When I was younger

So much younger

than today

Believe me, I hate old men reminiscing about their youth just like you hate them, but...

I can remember a time when steampunk was a only genre. A sub-genre, really, a branch of science fiction, a cyberpunk derivative.

Now the cyberpunk thing was bogus, because Michael Moorcock's stories about Oswald Bastable had come out well before cyberpunk, but that's literary criticism for you. Back in the days there were novels, like Moorcock's, and James Blaylock's. There were comics, too - like Brian Talbot's excellent Luther Arkwright stories. And there was some anime and manga, but that was still watched with suspicion by many readers.

And that was it.

There was gaming too. I loved Space:1889 despite the clunky system. Then, something happened, and steampunk became a culture: not just books and comics, but music too (mostly good) and movies (mostly... eh).

And then the maker faires, the how-to books and the cosplayers. The conventions, the masked balls, the themed venues, the press finally catching on.

And more games!

And cultures, you see, are fun because they are deep.

You can just put on a pair of goggles and join the frolics, if that's your thing, and it's fine.

Or you can start your own retrotech project, design your own costume. You can embrace a full-time steampunk lifestyle or just listen to the music.

You can delve deep into the political side of the thing, or take an environmental stance.

You can sink into dystopian angst or soar in positivist trust into the future.

As things stand now, you can read steampunk, you can listen to it, you can play it, you can live it or you can wear it. Because steampunk is all about diversity and variety - which is fun, considering how it has its roots in the deeply conformist world of the Victorians.

2

Stately homes for the Lords

Croquet lawns, village greens

Victoria was my queen

When I started working on the world that would become the setting for Hope & Glory, I had a few ideas of my own. I wanted something different, you see, from the run of the mill "it's 1892 in foggy London" goggles-and-corsets things I saw around. And I don't have nothing against corsets and goggles, mind you. It's only that...

I wanted a retrotech world in which the best of human character could face and defeat the worst.

In which the best of the Victorians could face and defeat their worst.

I wanted steam-powered automatons and mechanical computers, yes, but I also wanted the color and exoticism of old adventure stories and planetary romances.

I wanted white minarets under the moon and sabretooth tigers.

I wanted stiff-upper-lips and barbarism, heroics and knavery.

I wanted croquet lawns and lost continents.

I wanted India, and the Far East, the deepest jungles and the deserts of Africa.

Yes, I wanted cosplayers in bright colors and silks, too, sporting extravagant costumes and not the usual corsets and goggles.

*And sing blow the winds high-o
A-roving I will go
I'll stay no more on England's shore
For to hear the music play*

I wanted my steampunk world to be different, to look different. I wanted to do a game world capable of capturing the multi-ethnic and diverse vibes currently running through steampunk culture.

So I tweaked its history to give rise to new nations, new cultures born of a mix of the old.

And now I needed to dress my characters.

What would a mixture of Victorian refugees and Indian people look like? What they would wear, what significance would they attach to certain pieces of clothing, to certain colors or patterns?

What of my African warriors, of my Chinese ESPers?

I started checking online resources, to find out about saree and poshteen, about quingpao and the strange, Confederate-like uniforms of the Ezo Republic in Japan. I stared in fascination at the gowns and fur hats of the Russians in Samarkand.

I discovered ethnic fusion and a lot of other things that had been at the fringe of my perception.

Now I knew what I wanted, but while I was quite capable (or so I thought) of bringing such details to life in words, I was and still am artistically helpless.

Then I met (virtually) Angelo Montanini.

*Land of hope and glory, mother of the free
How shall we extol thee, who are born of thee?*

Now, I will avoid any fan-boy rant here, but let it be known that for anyone growing up in the fantasy and gaming scene in Italy, the name of Angelo Montanini is HUGE.

The guy's the leading Tolkien artist in this country.

And he also is a master of fashion design, a subject he actually teaches at the European School of Design. When it comes to imagining clothes as works of art and expressions of a culture, Angelo really is the one that wrote the book.

And it turned out we had some elements in common. Not just the love of fantasy.

We love the same music, we belong to the same tribe, so to speak, and we have a similar approach to imagining our works. Maybe this is the reason why, when he got the first "bible" for the Hope & Glory project, Angelo did not dismiss it as a collection of weird ideas, but actually created a series of sketches that became models for a series of ethnic costumes, based on the Hope & Glory world.

And they are breath-taking.

Talking with Angelo I found out how his vision was informed by my text and by my loose collection of photo references, but also from a certain rock'n'roll attitude, from musical influences ranging from the Beatles to the Sex Pistols. It was like we were listening to the same records, me working on the texts and he working his magic with his brushes and pencils.

But Angelo also brought his experience from his decade-long experience at visualizing what people feel and think through their looks. The end result is fascinating because Angelo is not doing some kind of bogus ethno-anthropology game. He is capturing a spirit, which mixes cultural influences, hopes for the future and humor, social criticism, ethnic pride and a passion for the imagination.

And he is capturing it with extraordinarily vivid images, capable of firing the observers' imagination.

We could not ask for more.

Working with Angelo Montanini really added a dimension to my writing and to my world-building, and it did really rise the stakes of the whole game. It is not easy to be good enough and do justice to Angelo's visions.

But these are the sort of challenges that make us do our best.

Which is in the end the spirit of Hope & Glory.

Will we succeed?

Well, it's certainly going to be quite the ride.

Davide Mana

Arti, Italy

January 2017



Afterword - Not Last Year's Steampunk

The core concepts of this story were developed in 2014, as a short demo scenario for the Savage Worlds RPG. Called "The Snowglobe Caper", it was based on what, at the time, was just an elevator pitch and a notebook filled with notes, and a working title.

What I wanted was a different sort of steampunk/steampulp world, an exciting and diverse gaming world for the players to explore. Something that could be described as "not last year's steampunk".

In the end, that demo game was never played - and the story slowly morphed into "Glass Houses", the first story, and the first published bit of the "Hope & Glory" universe.

I hope you had as much fun reading it as I had writing it.

And talking about writing - this is not a one-man-show (even if it maybe started like one), and there's a few people I need to thank.

I am tremendously indebted to the graphical artists currently at work on the project, Angelo Montanini and Alberto Bontempi, whose vision gave body and color to what were only words on a screen. Without Angelo and Alberto's contribution, this project would be going nowhere.

I also need to express my gratitude to my long-suffering editor, miss Clara Giuliani, that helped turning my first draft into something readable and (hopefully) worth reading.

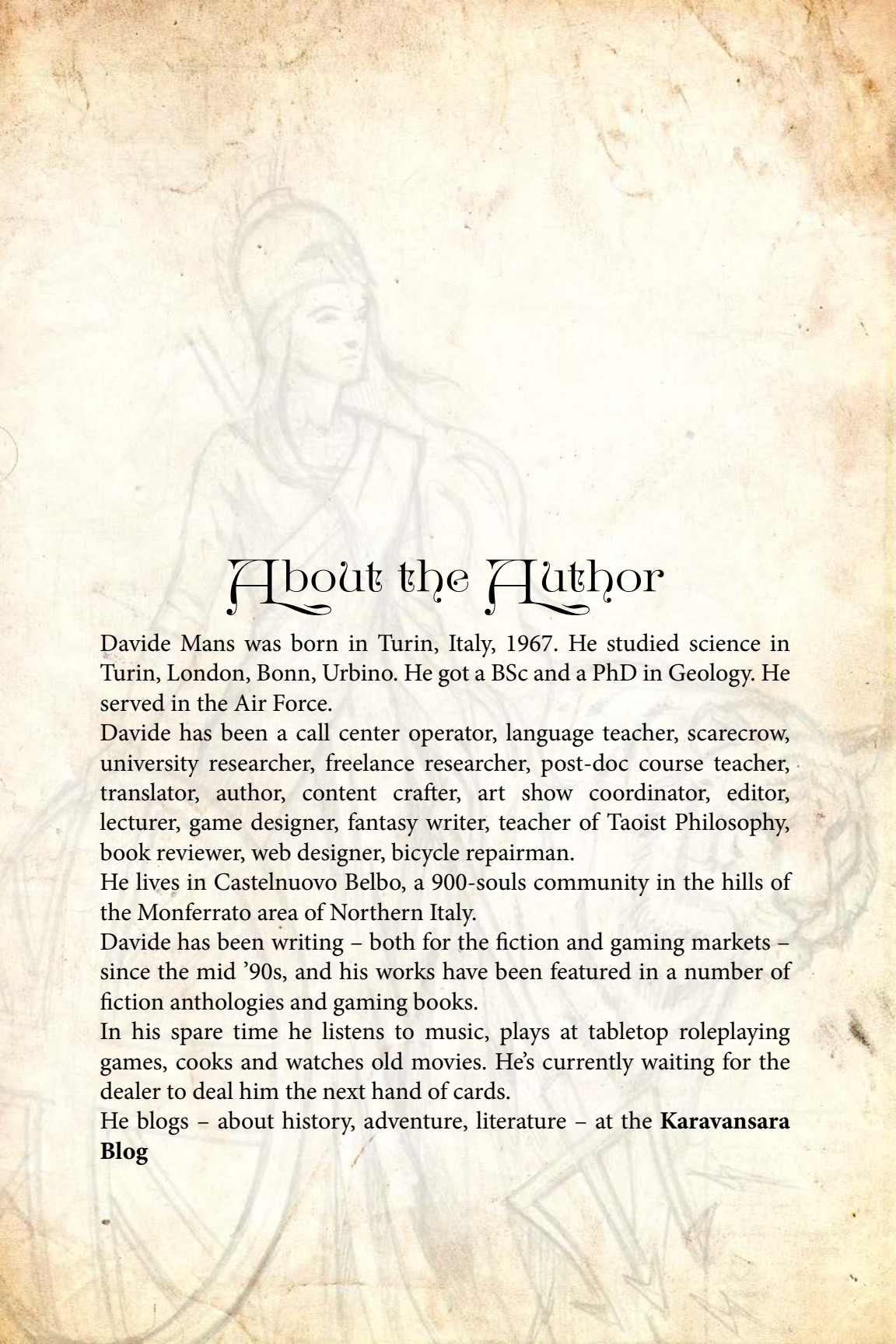
And a big thank you to Umberto Pignatelli, that took my raw notes and turned them into playable concepts in the Appendix.

Finally, a tip of the hat to the GGStudio team: Matteo Ceresa and Luca Basile, and of course our fearless leader, Gionata dal Farra.

Davide Mana

Asti, Italy

January 2017



About the Author

Davide Mans was born in Turin, Italy, 1967. He studied science in Turin, London, Bonn, Urbino. He got a BSc and a PhD in Geology. He served in the Air Force.

Davide has been a call center operator, language teacher, scarecrow, university researcher, freelance researcher, post-doc course teacher, translator, author, content crafter, art show coordinator, editor, lecturer, game designer, fantasy writer, teacher of Taoist Philosophy, book reviewer, web designer, bicycle repairman.

He lives in Castelnuovo Belbo, a 900-souls community in the hills of the Monferrato area of Northern Italy.

Davide has been writing – both for the fiction and gaming markets – since the mid '90s, and his works have been featured in a number of fiction anthologies and gaming books.

In his spare time he listens to music, plays at tabletop roleplaying games, cooks and watches old movies. He's currently waiting for the dealer to deal him the next hand of cards.

He blogs – about history, adventure, literature – at the **Karavansara Blog**

