



Hope & Glory

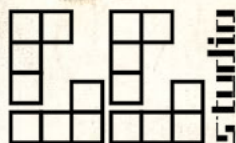
SKETCHES OF CHINA



Davide Mana



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Sketches of China

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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.

Sketches of China
by Davide Mana

1.

"Never give a sword to a man who can't dance."

Confucius

And so it was, in the year one hundred and seven of the Great Peace, the good people of the Sinkiang territories long lamenting the ravages of the dread migoi, the Munificent Heavenly King Hong Taiehn, fourth Son of the Father, sent forth one of his Eyes, and with him one of his Hands from the Dream-City of Nanjing, and they went west, to bring the Justice of the Lord to those peoples, and the wrath of the Almighty to any foul creature tormenting them.

For was it not said, "My hand has the power to kill in heaven and earth: behead the evil ones, spare the just and alleviate the pain of the people"?

The Judge assigned to this mission was Judge Haw, and he traveled on a sleigh from Nanjing to the wild stretches of the western territories.

2.

A rotten pain tormented Judge Haw. It felt like a blunt, cheap blade trying to cut his brain into very thin slices, without having the courtesy of first taking it out of his skull.

He pushed his glasses up his forehead, and massaged his eyes with his fingers and thumb, gently. He pinched the bridge of his nose, and took a deep breath.

"Do you really believe it?"

He looked up. "What?"

Lady Yeh, Right Hand of the Great Peace, stared at him coldly. She was uncannily tall, with raven black hair and a long face in which black eyes burned like coals. Her long metal nails clicked on the arm-rest of her couch. "At this business with the migoi," she said. Her voice was a clear alto, warm and starkly at odds with her aloof demeanor.

Haw leaned back in his couch and closed his eyes. His glasses fell back on his nose.

"There is no such a thing as the migoi, despite what the people in the mountains say about them."

He opened his eyes again, and she was looking at him, an eyebrow arched skeptically.

"How can you be so sure?" Her eyes grew larger as a thought came to her. "You have scoped them? You, or one of yours?"

In that moment he could see how young she was, and green, a kid on her first trip out of the capital, on her first mission after years of training. Haw chuckled, sympathy coloring his opinion of his companion. If only the poor girl had known, he mused, the pain and fatigue that Scoping even a small thing like a lost wallet would cause to one of the Eyes. Just imagine, burning one's brains out to make sure there were no hairy ape-men living in the hills.

"There is no need for that," he said, patiently. Lady Yeh was not a woman of the world, for all her icy attitude and razor-sharp steel fingernails.

"Then why are we enduring this?" she said.

She pointed at the frosted window, at the white expanse of nothing through which they were traveling.

"Because we have our orders," he said, trying to find a more comfortable position, "and our Heavenly King does not appreciate insubordination."

She stared at him. "I had been warned," she said.

"About what?"

She shook her head. "About nothing."

"Don't play games with me, young lady. Do you really think I cannot find a thought in your head now I know it's there?"

"There's talk," she said, blushing.

"That's likely. People have mouths, after all."

"They say that you are being sent as far from the Throne as possible, that this is no investigation, but exile."

"Our Heavenly King is not one for exiling, my child," Haw said. How old was she, really?, he wondered.

"There. Again you are flippant when mentioning the Fourth Son!" Haw sighed. He picked a bowl of caramelized ginger root from the side table, and offered it to her. "It's just an old man's way of making light of fleeing time," he said. "People do not get exiled for such harmless quirks."

She stared at him. He covered the ginger root bowl, and chewed pensively.

The landscape was so uniformly white and level, it was hard to gauge the speed at which they were traveling. Once these had

been rice paddies and barley fields, but now nothing grew, and the snow was thick.

"How do you know, then?"

Haw turned again to Lady Yeh.

"About the migoi? Thanks to Occam's Razor."

She leaned closer, her finger-blades glinting in the light of the lamps. "What sort of razor is that?"

He smiled. "A razor of the mind," he said. "A tool for thinking clearly, created in a long gone age by a Western Master. It says that complicated explanations are unnecessary when a simple explanation is available."

She tilted her head on one side.

"What do we know about these mysterious migoi?" he asked her.

"They are furry man-like creatures, that once lived in the high valleys of the Himalayas," she said. "But after the Wrath of the Father, the world changed. Now there's snow everywhere, and the migoi walk among us."

Haw smiled. "Any proof, of all of this?"

She snorted. "The Russian Emperor uses the migoi as his troops."

"Does he? I saw the Cossack, when I was in Tsaritsin. They are beastmen, indeed, and foul beyond belief, and yet they are not migoi, that are the stuff of mountainmen's legends."

"But..."

He lifted a hand. "But that's not the point, really. The Razor I mentioned works another way. What are these phantasmal Migoi doing in Sinkiang?"

"They rob the stores of the local warlord, they steal food and supplies."

"And do we really need to invoke the presence of evanescent beastmen from mountains one thousand leagues away, to explain cattle-rustling and tax dodging?"

Lady Yeh smiled. There was nothing young or naive in her smile.

"I see your point, Master," she said.

"We will find nothing but an avid warlord, and proof that the accounts have been doctored, and the tax money embezzled," Haw said, again watching the landscape outside. A thick snow had started to fall. They heard the engine shift gears, and the sled jumped forward, and settled at a lower speed.

"Then he will feel the Hand of the Fourth Son," she said, grimly.

3.

And thus, late in the afternoon of the following day, they came to a small walled hamlet in the empty waste and the driver, whose name was Three-Fingers Shen, stopped the engine and jumped down, and sought the counsel of his illustrious passengers.

"Master," he said, "the engines need refueling, and the wind blows cold from the mountains. I spotted the smoke of chimneys from a village, seven li to the east, and we could be there by sundown, and seek shelter. This is the reason why I stopped here."

"You did well," Judge Haw said. "What lands are these?"

"By your leave, Master, the lands of Ya'an."

"What sort of country is this?"

"If you will pardon me for saying so, Master, it's a poor country peopled by ragamuffins and cutthroats, people that make their soup with snow. A warlord rules over these lands, but I do not know his name."

"It has been said that a good commander is benevolent and unconcerned with fame," The Judge said. Then he turned to his companion.

"What do you think, my Lady Yeh? Fancy a meeting with some ragamuffins and some cutthroats?"

4.

About one hour later, the sleigh stopped again, and again Shen jumped down from his post, and threaded in the snow to go bang on the circular door of the settlement.

A man in a fur cap peeped over the wall. "What do you want?" he asked, in a thick-accented voice.

"Sanctuary for the night, for me and my passengers."

The man straightened up, or walked on a stool, and standing with his head and shoulders over the rim of the wall, nodded towards the steam sled. "Who's traveling in that thing?"

Three-Fingers Shen bowed, and gestured. "The honorable Judge Haw, Eye of the Great Peace, and his companion, the Lady Yeh, hand of the Fourth Son, traveling to Sinkiang on the Heavenly King's orders."

"You are far away from the road to Sinkiang," the man said, and chuckled. "Maybe your Eye is not so far-seeing as they say."

"Or maybe he just goes where he pleases, as an agent of the Great Peace would."

"Maybe he should give me proof of his powers," the guard said.

"Maybe his being here is portent enough."

The man over the wall grunted rudely. "A great portent this is indeed. Stay there, and I will inform Lord Dambijaa, who is master of this

fortress, of the coming of an Imperial Judge and his Lady companion. Because he was waiting for them."

And he was gone.

Shen hastened back to the sled, where Haw was waiting for him on the access hatch, his hands hidden in his sleeves. "We were expected. The lord of the place is called Dambijaa," Shen said. "The gate guard is informing him of your coming."

Haw pulled his goatee. "That's not a Southern name," he said. "Is he really the man they say was born of a witch and a demon, and thus has no navel, and is immortal?"

Before Shen could answer, the round door rolled on one side, and the passage was open for the sled to go through. Shen hopped back in his box, and started the machine again, carefully driving it through the gate.

They entered a square around which shacks huddled together as if seeking each other's warmth. There was a heavy smell of dung fire in the air, and a thin crust of iced snow covered the flagstones.

Three soldiers in age-old uniforms marched towards the sled, and stood stiff as ramrods.

Judge Haw climbed down and greeted them with a serious, solemn nod. The chief of the trio was about to speak when the Lady Yeh stepped by the side of the Judge, and the man stood, his mouth hanging open. The Lady Yeh was wearing a thick, fur-lined silk overcoat of green and purple, and her long black hair was done in a complicated hairdo through which she had stabbed a number of steel spikes. She was standing with her arms crossed, the four-inches long finger blades glinting in the light of the lamps.

She scanned the square, wrinkling her nose at the bad smell.

The man finally found his voice again.

"My lord Dambijaa welcomes the illustrious Eye of the Great Peace in Ya'an, where my lord pleases himself to reside for the season. If you will follow me, I will lead you to your quarters, as my master wishes to make your acquaintance as soon as possible, and the sunset is near." Judge Haw nodded benevolently, and gestured for the man to make way.

He followed the sergeant, the Lady Yeh two steps behind him. Then came the two guards, and finally Three-Fingers Shen, carrying a trunk and a large bag.

5.

The lord of Ya'an held court in what had once been a barn, but had now been refurbished, adding a large brazier at the center of the floor, and a wealth of carpets and furs, shutting out cold drafts and the howling wind. Oil lamps hung from the rafters, and a small orchestra played popular music in a corner, for the enjoyment of the people crowded around the embers. They were a collection of uncouth men, sporting an assortment of scars and a collection of sharp implements, and of young women, in various state of intoxication and undress. They were gorging themselves on big chunks of roasted meat and rice, and drinking liberally. Over them all, Dambijaa sat enthroned on a chair over which a bear fur had been draped, looking like a barbarian king. The warlord's chair was on top of an old table, to give the warlord a higher vantage. His concubines laid stretched on the steps of the makeshift dais, smoking thin long pipes and looking bored. There was little doubt the man was a warlord and the rabble on the floor part of his army, both from their dress, and their weapons, and their demeanor.

"The esteemed Judge Haw, Hand of the Fourth Son, and the Lady Yeh his companion, Hand of the Great Peace," the sergeant announced, basking in the brief moment of general attention.

Dambijaa big rough face split in a wide smile, and he stood, arms outstretched. "Judge Haw!" he exclaimed, jumping down the table. He was big, and broad-shouldered, his head as bald as a marble and as shiny. He was not of Han descent, but neither Mongolian. He wore a big black and red coat with cartridge-belts crossing his chest, and jodhpurs tucked into shiny cavalry boots. A large gun sat on his hip, its grip inlaid with mother of pearl.

He crossed the room in long, bold strides. "Such a pleasure," he said, his voice echoing under the ceiling, "to meet another loyal servant of the Great Peace!"

He stopped at about three paces from Haw, and bowed deep, placing his hands on his chest. "I welcome you like a brother long lost," he said, "and hope your stay will be peaceful, and fruitful."

The Judge bowed back, and smiled in turn. "My intrusion is inexcusable," he said, "but I welcome the benevolence of the mighty Lord Dambijaa."

The warlord nodded, and then glanced at the Lady Yeh, that was staring at him with her cold, steely gaze.

He burst into a thunderous guffaw, and slammed his hand on the thin shoulder of Haw. "And having thus exchanged false pleasantries as the protocol demands," he said with a grin, "come now my friends and join our party, and protocol be damned."

A chorus of laughs rose from the guests, and the music started again. Girls in peasant jackets ran at the foot of the throne, and placed there a pile of cushions under a big wolf fur, and Haw and the Lady Yeh were invited to sit down.

"We have rice, mutton, and good drinking wine," Dambijaa said, hopping back on his seat, "and what else is there but to pass the night away, safe from the cold and the razor wind? We'll eat, drink, and talk, because there is much we need to discuss."

"Is there?"

The warlord became serious. "I was informed of your coming," he said, "and took to the road to meet you. We should work together, in the interests of the Heavenly King, and of the Great Peace. But there will be time for this. Now drink."

6.

Despite the uncouth atmosphere and the raucous merriment, the Judge and the Lady were treated as fit for the Eye and the Hand of the Heavenly King, and they were offered warm tea and refreshments while their quarters for the night were prepared. In their simple travel clothes, they still attracted an inordinate amount of attention from the courtiers, a diverse, many-colored crowd sitting on couches and cushions on the two sides of the great polished floor.

Dambijaa was mockingly courteous, and Judge Haw dispassionately gracious, and the Lady Yeh was silent, menacing and alluring, and much of the evening was idled away in small talk. Finally, the host cleared his voice and "So, Judge haw," he said, "this is the first time I share a room with an Imperial Eye. This is a very pleasant opportunity." "Few cherish the opportunity of sitting in the same room with an Imperial Eye," Haw replied, with a small bow.

"And fewer still have a second occasion," the Lady Yeh said. Her voice chilled the room for a moment.

"I am no man to pass an opportunity to wonder at the marvels of the world," Dambijaa said. "Would the Judge Haw be so kind to give us a demonstration of the powers he wields in the name of the Fourth Son?"

Haw picked his cup, and took a long sip. Here was another boor thinking he was some kind of parlor performer, one that would pull rabbits or colored rags out of his sleeves.

"The Eyes of the Great Peace are no fairground entertainers," the Lady Yeh said.

The warlord's face turned red.

"What the Lady Yeh means," Haw said, "is that power comes for a price. Mine is not a pleasant job, and my talents, for what they are, are not conducive to merriment. You, my lord, would not ask your executioner to entertain your guests."

Dambijaa laughed, roughly. "You are too humble, Judge Haw. And I am sure an exhibition of your talents, just like an exhibition of my executioner's, would not only entertain, but educate my court. And is it not our duty to educate the people, so that they may not err?"

Fine, you barbarian, Haw thought, you asked for it.

He stood, and bowed courteously. "I cannot deny an opportunity for education," he said.

He walked slowly around the floor, slowing down his breath.

Most of the guests were well into their cups, their minds relaxed and fuzzy, like a background of chirping crickets to him.

He moved to the center of the room, and stood in front of the dais and the throne, and the man sitting on the throne on the dais. There was a sharp note of preoccupation, growing in volume in the cacophony of Dambijaa's thoughts, like a shrill alarm bell ringing now too late for the warlord to do anything. Haw squinted, his eyes two slits behind his glasses. He could see the posture of the warlord change, his breath become shallower, a slight but still noticeable dilation of the pupils. Fear.

He took a step forward. He hid his hands in his sleeves, folding his arms over his chest, and tilted the head back a little, staring at the man on the throne, that was now sweating profusely. The single note of fear had expanded into a thick rolling cloud of panic, and was engulfing any other thought in the man's mind. The wives were starting to feel physically uncomfortable, fear spreading like a virus.

The guard at the right of the throne was looking at Haw with fright-glazed eyes. The Judge gave him a thin, fleeting smile, and watched his back stiffen, his knuckles pale as he grasped his halberd.

There were sounds now, as people changed position on their seats and tried to find relief for something they could not name.

Dambijaan's hands were closed like claws on the armrests of his throne, and he was leaning forward, his eyes fixed on the judge, like he was just waiting for a sign and he would spring up and sprint out of the room, out of the palace, out of the city and into the snowbound wilderness.

Then Haw...

... pushed.

It was like initiating a cascade of dominoes, a slight tap on an unnamed horror momentarily surfacing in the warlord's conscious mind opening the floodgates of fear. The guard let go of his halberd, that crashed to the ground with a sound that echoed under the high ceiling, followed suit by a chorus of gasps, cries and exclamations. Dambijaa was standing, his face pale, his eyes feverish, his hand on the grip of his gun.

He stood like that, panting, staring at Haw, color slowly returning to his rough face.

Haw bowed to him.

"What is this?" the warlord asked, his broken voice failing to convey his indignation.

"Education, my lord."

He turned and offered his hand to the Lady Yeh. She stood, gave a long silent look at the warlord, and they exited the room, the eyes of every one of the courtiers on their backs.

7.

"Despite the sound of the revels echoing in the streets of Ta'an throughout the night, Judge Haw and the Lady Yeh slept well, in soft beds well provided with furs against the cold, and the following morning were woken up by an insistent knocking on their door. Three-Fingers Shen, who had slept on the floor by the door, wrapped in a dusty duvet, sprang up and opened the door, to admit none else but the warlord, Dambijaa. The man was wearing a different overcoat, this one periwinkle blue and purple, and a fur cap over his bald head. He asked for the Judge, and paced the floor of the antechamber, impatiently, while the servant went and informed his master.

"The brute is paying you back for last night's scare," the Lady Yeh said, "by waking you up before dawn."

Haw was unconvinced. He put on his brown traveling qingpao and went to meet the visitor.

"Your game, last night, was quite impressive," Dambijaa said, as a preamble.

Judge Haw bowed.

"It makes me hope together we will be able to face the mystery that plagues this region."

"A mystery?"

The Lady Yeh came into the antechamber, and gave an interrogative glance at the Judge. Dambijaa bowed, murmuring a greeting. The Lady Yeh squinted at him, her razor fingers clicking nervously.

The warlord barked an order, and his men retreated, closing the doors behind them. He stood alone with his guests. He cast an interrogative glance at Three-Fingers Shen.

Judge Haw waved a hand, dismissing his man. "Go and check that the sleigh is all right."

Shen bowed and was gone.

Dambijaa took a deep breath, and his shoulders fell.

"I guess the news about Ya'an do not reach the Heavenly Court," he said.

"There are indeed more talked-about provinces," Judge Haw admitted. The warlord smirked. "I believe that. And yet twice in the last two months I sent messengers to the Court, asking for support."

The Judge sat down, and gestured for Dambijaa to do the same, but the warlord shook his head. He pushed a hand in his pocket instead, and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper, that he placed on the table in front of the Judge. "You ever saw something like this?"

It was a rough woodcut print.

A rough, almost childish sketch of an Angel, her fiery wings extended, occupied the top of the sheet. Simple ideograms were stamped at the bottom, so smeared they were hard to read despite their simplicity.

"The Time is Now," Judge Haw read. The Lady Yeh stepped behind his chair, and looked over her shoulder.

"What is this?"

"It's propaganda," Dambijaa said grimly. "I am facing a revolt."

"A revolt? Here in Ya'an?"

The warlord nodded. "It's spreading fast, and already the north and the west of the province are in the hands of the rebels. This rabble is harassing the villagers, hambushing my men. They steal the taxes money and raid the food stores. They burn and pillage, and yet they elude me, and refuse to engage me in a proper battle."

The Lady Yeh pointed her steel index finger at the sheet of paper, stabbing the flame-winged Angel in the heart. "You don't need the Eye of the Heavenly King," she said. "You need a general, and an army."

Dambijaa chuckled. "Am I not a general? And is not mine an army, that held this land for five years without any disturbance? Do you think this is the first riot I face?"

Judge Haw looked him in the eye. "What's different, then?"

Dambijaa stretched a hand, and tapped his finger on the paper, close to the Lady Yeh's claw.

"This," he said, "is different. I cannot fight an Angel."

8.

"There was a mighty portent," Dambijaa said. "Six months ago, two hundred li to the north. I was on my way back from a tour of the villages, along the frozen river. Pacify the peasants, collect the taxes due, show that I am not a bogeyman for sending scared children to sleep, but a real person, with real soldiers at my command."

He shrugged, waving a hand. "We strike a few villages, burn down a shack or two, scare the wits out of the rabble. It's good for both the order, and the morale of the troops."

"I see," the Judge said.

"We had been traveling along the river for about a week," the warlord went on, "pushing south as the cold winds from the northern steppes pushed dark stormy clouds our way. We were about two days from Ya'an, mid-morning like, and all of a sudden the sky changed. The north was still brewing with a might storm, and yet the black clouds that had been a monotonous sight for the last hours were now showing a gold and scarlet hue, like a second sun was burning in them. And as we watched, just like a sun a flaming orb descended in an accelerated sunset, and in a matter of minutes settled on the horizon, and subsided, while still projecting its colors on the black and purple clouds."

He stared at Judge Haw. "It was uncanny."

The Judge pulled his goatee, and glanced at the Lady Yeh.

"I imagine you investigated this event," Judge Haw said.

"Did I not! Of course, I took ten men with me and we rode there, to see what had caused such a thing." He grinned. "Although I had quite a good idea of what it could be."

"An airship," the Judge said.

Which meant foreign devils, of course. The Third Son had banned airships and flying machines from the skies of the Great Peace sixty years before. The sky was the dominion of the Good Lord, of his First Son Ye-su, his Second Son Hong Xiuquan, of the saints, the Angels and the heavenly courts. No man was supposed to disturb the skies with gas bladders, motors or machinery.

Dambijjaa nodded. "An airship."

He crossed his arms, and his eyes took a far-away look.

"We got there one hour before sunset. The heat from the flaming ship had melted the snow, and the ground was soggy. There were remains of the mysterious ship scattered all over the landscape, in a radius of about three li. Some as small as a single bolt, others long strips of light clear metal, warped and contorted like windblown festoons.

"And right in the middle of that wasteland, sat a grotesque mass of contorted steel, more steel than I ever saw in my whole life, huge loops and bent beams. They were slowly sinking in the muddy ground, and despite the cold wind, they still radiated a great heat, so that the air itself rippled like the surface of a lake."

"Our lord Dambijjaa has the soul of a poet," the Lady Yeh said, mockingly.

But he would not be mocked. "I was not always a soldier, my lady."

"And then?" she asked. "What of this Angel you told us about?"

"And what has all this to do with rioting peasants?" the Judge asked.

The warlord nodded, and sighed. "It was five weeks after the skyship disaster," he said, "that rumors started spreading. Merchants, the odd traveler. They told about this place in the north, a hamlet called Sìzh dànjlī. They said an Angel of the Lord Father appeared there, and the people were worshipping her."

"Her? A female Angel?" Judge Haw smiled.

"So the stories told. She came down from the sky on wings of fire, and was said to be the messenger of the Lord Father."

"Which is bad," the Judge said. "Because why should the Lord Father send one of his Angels to some backwoods hovel, when his Fourth Son sits on the Heavenly throne in Nanjing?"

"Exactly," Dambijaa said. "Which is why I went to this place, Sizh dānjī, to ascertain the facts with my own eyes."

"But you found nothing," the Judge said.

"Then the troubles began," the warlord said, grimly. "Burnt villages. Whole communities vanished into thin air. Then somebody started killing my men, attacking my patrols. I recruited reinforcements, but things only got stranger. My men met opposing forces, first in some villages to the west, close to the mountains, then north. And the rumors, and those prints started appearing, about an Angel raising an army in the west. I sent for help, and no help came."

He stopped his pacing and stood in front of the Judge.

"But now you are here."

9.

"Do you trust him?" the Lady Yeh asked.

Judge Haw took a sip of tea, and looked outside the window. The sled was crawling through a featureless plain. Dambijaa was riding with Three-Fingers Shen, up in the driver's box, and from time to time, one of his men passed them by. They were four, riding single-threaded runners, their engines blowing black smoke.

"Unexpected circumstances make for strange bedfellows," Haw said.

"That's not an answer."

He shrugged. "Then let us say that, present company excepted, there is no one that I would trust more, given the current circumstances."

To her interrogative look, he replied "He is not a stupid man, and as he said himself, he was not always a soldier. He's a barbarian, but not a beast. He sees an opportunity in this strange story, and he is making the most of it, using every tool at his disposal."

"Including ourselves."

Haw smiled. "Including ourselves."

"He is honestly scared, and worried. And we should be too."

"Scared?" she asked. "Or worried?"

"Certainly worried. Rebellions are not unusual, but this one sounds different."

"What do you make of this Angel story?"

The Judge placed his cup neatly on the folding table, and took a deep breath. "It is a dangerous question, my lady," he said. "The sort that causes men to be exiled, or their head be forcibly parted from their shoulders."

The Lady Yeh stared at him. "How so?"

"Because it is one of those questions in which reason has to confront orthodoxy."

She crossed her arms. "You do not believe in Angels?"

Not for the first time, the Judge wondered if this young, inexperienced Hand had been assigned to him not to serve and protect him, but to gather incriminating proof against him.

The existence of Angels, along with all the celestial cohorts in the service of the Lord Almighty, was no matter of debate, but the accepted truth, as laid down by the Second Son, founder of the Great Peace, vanquisher of the Manchu, the one that had guided the Chung Kuo out of the long winter caused by the hated Manchus' loss of the Heavenly Mandate.

A smile crept on Haw's lips as he watched a threaded bike run past the sled window, raising two tall wings of snow. Not out by far, he thought, were they of the long winter.

"Why do you smile?" the Lady Yeh asked.

"Nothing, a fleeting thought. I let it go, and it is gone."

"You have not answered my question."

He poured himself more steaming tea, buying time. He read her posture, the width of her pupils, the slow, incessant drumming of her long, long steely nails.

"I think your Angels to be not any more real than your migoi," he finally said.

"Which means somebody will have to feel the Hand of the Fourth Son," she smiled.

10.

Sizh dānjī was four houses and a barn without a roof, huddled around a well. A single chicken stared at the Lady Yeh as she climbed down from the sled. The bird was perched on a window-sill, its feathers puffed up against the cold.

Dambijaa motioned for them to follow him and hastened to the barn. He pushed the doors open and stood by the side for them to enter.

"Here it is," the warlord said.

A large chunk of metal sat on the dirt floor, a thin crust of iced snow covering it. It was dented and scarred, as tall as two men and about ten paces long. A piece of wreckage. Judge Haw walked slowly around it. He pulled his beard pensively. The impact had smashed much of the mechanism, and bent the transmission rods. Oil leaked from a number of places, like open wounds. Judge Haw placed a hand on the broken propeller.

"It crashed through the roof a moment before the sky became alight," Dambijaa said.

"How do you know?"

The warlord barked an order. One of his men brought an old man, dragging him by an arm.

"This is Old Man Chu," Dambijaa said. "He was the only man left in the village when we got here. I told you I'd be back, didn't I, old man?"

Old Man Chu looked like a ghost. His clothes were in rags and his skin was cacked with grime and spotted where the cold had left burn marks. His feet were wrapped in dirty pieces of cloth, and he smelled like something dragged out of a sewer.

"You left him here alone for six months?" Judge Haw asked, incredulous. Chu's rheumy eyes focused on Judge Haw and the Lady Yeh his face went pale and he fell to his knees, hitting the frozen ground with his forehead.

"Stand up, old man," Judge Haw said, walking up to him and placing his hand on his shoulder. The man was trembling.

Haw traded a glance with the warlord, that tapped his temple with two fingers. The Judge sighed, and helped the man up.

Chu's mind was a jumble of immediate concerns - cold, hunger, fear - and strangely colored memories. Haw tried to soothe him.

"What happened here, old man?" he asked.

He got flashing images of a sky on fire. The pounding heartbeat and burning lungs of a run in the snow. The roof of the barn smashed. People screaming.

"You were out in the fields," he said. "Hunting?"

Chu gave him a childish smile, and nodded. "Rabbits," he said.

"And the sky was alight," Haw said.

Fear, again. "We knelt down and prayed."

Dambijaa snorted. "Tell Master Haw about the Angel."

Chu swallowed dryly, and nodded to himself. "She came down from the sky, her silken wings on fire. She landed in the fields, one li from the village." He looked around, and Judge Haw nodded for him to go on. "We took her in, but she would not wake up."

Patience was not one of the warlord's virtues. "So what did you do with her?"

"We placed her crystal coffin in Fat-head Hsu."

Judge Haw waded through the confusion in the man's mind. The woman's coffin was made of brass and aluminum, with a thick glass lid. The box was scarred, dented and carried burn marks, and there was an ominous crack on the glass, but still it seemed to be functional. Suspended in a bright blue light, the woman floated in a clear liquid, bubbles escaping from her nose, her pale hair spread out around her head in a golden halo.

It was a moment, then it was gone.

“What happened to the woman with golden hair?” Haw asked, his grip on the man’s shoulder tightening.

Valves snapped opened in the sides of the box and the thick, oily liquid poured out, flooding the dirt floor of the room. It had a sweet, slightly metallic smell. It was sticky and dense under their soles. Then, locks clicked open, and the top of the box opened and slid on one side. Pale hands gripped the edges of the box, and the blond woman sat up, gasping, her hair plastered to her face. The tubes detached themselves from her arm as she leaned out of the box and retched, cleaning her lungs of the fluid. Then she looked up, and her blue eyes blazed.

Chu let out a long wail and crouched again on the floor. The Judge stepped back, his mind reeling.

“Well?”

Dambijaa took a step towards the Judge, but the Lady Yeh stepped between them. “Stand back,” she said.

The warlord smirked and turned his attention to the cowering Chu. He kicked him in the ribs. “Drop it!” he said.

Judge Haw nodded to the Lady Yeh, and squatted down by the old man. “What happened then?” he asked, softly. “After she woke up?”

Again Chu let out a long wail.

“What happened?” Haw asked again, his voice barely audible.

“She went away,” Chu sobbed. “She took everyone with her.”

The warlord kicked him again. “And why are you still here, then?”

The sound that came from the lips of the old man caused Judge Haw a pain in his chest.

“They left me alone,” the man cried, tears digging through the dirt on his face. “I was not worthy...”

And then the sobs drowned his broken voice.

//.

They saw the flames rising from the houses of Ya'an from a mile away, and at that point it was too late. Men carrying rifles rose from the holes in the snow where they had been hiding, and one of them shot one of the men. The man fell off his saddle and the tracked runner continued for a few yards, and then collapsed in the snow, black smoke rising from its exhaust.

Three-Fingers Shen pulled the brake and lifted his arms, ignoring the barked orders that Dambijaa was shouting in his ears.

One of the ambushers, swatted in a thick jacket and a scarf, pounded on the sleigh door with the stock of his gun.

Judge Haw placed a hand on the shoulder of the Lady Yeh, pacifying her.

"I can kill them all." She said.

"And then? Shall we try to outrun them and abandon the city?"

"The two of us together..."

The Judge chuckled. "Can't take on a whole army. And that's not the reason we are here."

She stared at him. "The reason we are here?"

Judge Haw shrugged. He opened the door, and got out, his hands up, an easy smile on his face.

The man with the gun grunted, and sent two of his men in. There was a shout, a sharp exclamation, a shot rang out. The Judge turned sharply, and called for the Lady Yeh.

She came out and walked by his side, a smirk like a cat's after catching a lark. The Judge sighed. The men inside shouted for assistance, and five minutes later one of them was carried out, a bloodied rag wrapped around his right stump.

"Teaches him to keep the hands off a lady," the Lady Yeh said.

More men arrived from the burning city, and the Judge and the Lady, the warlord and the coachman were tied and marched to the round gate in the walls of Ya'an.

12.

For three days the leaders of the Angel's Army debated what should be done with the prisoners. On the morning of the fourth day, they were led outside of their prison. Ya'an was a ghost-town of fire-blackened ruins. There were heads on display, placed on top of poles. The prisoners were loaded on the sleigh, and started in the direction of the mountains, with an escort of horsemen.

13.

They shared the small quarters of the sleigh for five days. By mutual agreement, the Lady Yeh had her cabin by herself, while the three men shared the Judge's, taking turns to sleep in the bunk. They consumed their meager dinners crowded around the small folding table, and discussed their predicament.

"They will not dare kill two officials of the Heavenly Kingdom," Three-Fingers Shen said, none too happy. "But I fear for my own life."

"Fear is worthless," Dambijaa said.

"Any creature alive fears death, my lord. There is no shame in that."

Judge Haw sighed. "According to the leader of our escort," he said. Then he tarried.

"Come on, Master," Dambijaa said. "You read his mind?"

"Reading it is no hard task."

"And what does he know about our future?" the Lady Yeh asked.

"He knows nothing, of course. But he imagines, and maybe wishes, some developments."

"Of what sort, Master?" Shen asked.

"You have nothing to worry. In our guard's imagination, at least. He thinks you'll be offered the opportunity to join their cause." He nodded towards the warlord. "Same as lord Dambijaa."

The warlord grunted.

"And what about you, and the Lady Yeh?"

Judge Haw shrugged. "We'll be made into examples."

The Lady Yeh arched an eyebrow. "An example of what?"

"Of the Heavenly Peace being a corrupt and evil empire, something that our guard believes unquestioningly."

She lifted a hand, looking at the blades that topped her fingers. "They will cut my hands off," she said.

"Those are just the sick fantasies of one of the Angel's lapdogs," Dambijaa said. "He knows nothing about what power is, and what it means."

14.

"What I fail to understand," Dambijaa said, "Is what we are dealing with exactly..."

He pulled his legs up on the bunk, and put his hands behind his bald head.

"A survivor from a skyship," he said. "Is she from the Raj? Russian? Why should the Rani Elizabeth or the Czar, go through such a complicated ploy to start a war with us?"

"Maybe they don't want to start a war," Shen replied. He sat on the floor, wrapped in a blanket. "Not yet, at least."

"There are more nations out there that have sky ships," Judge Haw said. Dambijaa laughed. "Yeah, the Ezo Republic. Or maybe the King of Siam. Or would you blame the Zulu Nation for this?"

The Judge shrugged. "The world was once vast, and filled with nations. What if these are people out of the world's past? Americans, maybe."

The warlord looked unconvinced.

15.

The Angel held court in a stone city at the foot of the first ramparts of the western hills. The sled passed through a wide gate and proceeded along a straight street lined with red, black and white banners, the dark silhouette of an Angel standing in front of a white disc, in a field of scarlet.

"The people on the street don't look particularly happy," Shen said, his face squashed against the window. "They look scared, truth to be told. And somewhat earnest."

"Earnestness and fear are the two horses that draw the chariot of revolution," Judge Haw said.

"This was an old Tibetan outpost," Dambijaa said. "Back when the mountain-men held the traffic between east and west by the throat, filling their coffers with gold."

The sleigh shuddered to a stop in front of what had been the governor's house, and the driver jumped down, patting his arms for the cold.

A group of guards, red-black-and-white armbands on their arms, trooped by the side of the vehicle, and the prisoners were ordered to come out. Their wrists were tied, and they were marched into the building.

16.

Lieutenant Watanabe checked the controls. A simple steering wheel, a set of levers to communicate maneuvers to the engineers. Everything seemed to be disconnected. Nothing worked. The cockpit looked incomplete, like it had been put together in a hurry, or stripped down for some reasons.

She favored the second hypothesis. The ship had been stripped of all inessentials, probably to reduce weight. She turned. And to make room for the big machine with the sleeping people.

They had also soldered shut the normal access doors, two on each side, effectively sealing the gondola.

She had tried to reach the Himiko, cranking the small Marconi device, but all she had been able to get was a hissing noise.

She walked back to the sleepers.

They were all pale, all fair-haired and fine-featured. There was an air of family about them. Like they were closely related.

Watanabe moved slowly around the drum, fingers brushing the brass and steel, careful not to stumble on the vine-like tangle of cables and tubes on the floor.

Halfway through her tour, her fingers brushed a plate, bolted to the side of the machine. The brass had tarnished, and she had to use her torch to shed some light on the words. Squinting at the angular lettering, her lips moving, Lieutenant Watanabe started translating the text.

17.

They went through the courtyard and into what had once been the audience hall. Standards hung from the rafters, showing a stylized shape of an Angel. The prisoners advanced between two wings of people, standing and staring, in silence.

It was the silence that scared Dambijaa.

He had faced the rabble for most of his adult life, and before that he had been part of the rabble, and in his experience there was always sound associated with the rabble. Screams, shouts, groans and grunts. Fear, anger, hatred. Voices raised in menace. Even a disciplined army would sometimes break into swearing contests before the charge.

But here, in this cold room lit by torches, silence was absolute.

The elevated dais occupied the bottom of the hall. A big red, white and black Angel standard hung behind the governor's throne. A woman sat on the high-backed chair, her legs crossed, her blue eyes burning. She was wearing a silk overcoat, blue and golden, over a simple white blouse and a pair of black trousers. She did not look like an Angel at all.

"A strange mind lurks inside that head," Judge Haw whispered. "Crystal-clear, and sharp. A flawed crystal, but still like nothing I ever saw."

"You talk in riddles," the warlord said.

"I talk about something I don't understand. Yet."

The guard behind them pushed them forward, hissing a warning.

Dambijaa grimaced, but it was the woman on the throne that spoke.

"It is said that the Eyes of the Heavenly King are all-seeing and all-understanding."

Her voice was clear and strangely accented, her syllables somewhat angular and sharp. Judge Haw shrugged. "A lot of things get said, and not everything is truth."

The guards made them stop at ten paces from the throne, and pushed on their shoulders, knees pressing behind their legs to make them kneel down.

Dambijaa tried to wrestle free, and the woman on the throne spoke.

"No!"

The guards turned and stared at her.

"Let them stand," she said. "We do not force anyone to kneel in front of us. They shall do it on their own accord."

The guards bowed and retreated.

The woman stood, and walked down the three steps of her dais.

She was a foreigner, straight blond hair brushing her shoulders, and a very pale skin. She was tall, and broad-shouldered, with the thin waist and the narrow hips of an athlete. She smiled faintly as she studied them.

"It is a honor and a surprise to finally meet the great lord Dambijaa," she said. "And I guess you were as curious as I was for this moment. Even if you would have imagined it differently, I suppose."

The warlord straightened his back. "I don't see your wings, my lady Angel. Nor your halo."

She chuckled. "And I heard you have no navel, because you are the son of a witch and a demon."

She came closer and grabbed his jacket, tearing it open. Buttons fell clicking on the ground. "But I see it is just a legend."

"Untie me," Dambijaa growled, "and I will show you the stuff of legends."

She pouted. "Doesn't it sound dirty!"

Nobody laughed, nobody moved. A chill ran down Dambijaa's spine.

"And these are the emissaries of the so-called Fourth Son," she went on, slowly circling the prisoners, her eyes on Judge Haw, and on the Lady Yeh. "It was because of you," she said, "and not of this big stupid ox, that I changed my plans and I arranged for this meeting."

"And you had to burn down a city to do it?" Judge Haw said. "A simple note delivered by a messenger would have been enough."

But the blond woman was not listening. She stared in fascination at the hands of the Lady Yeh.

"Are those surgically implanted?" she asked.

The Lady Yeh arched an eyebrow. The question was halfway between impertinence and insult. But this was a foreign creature, she said to herself. She raised her tied wrists in front of her face, looking at her own hands like it was the first time she saw them. "I was raised to be the Hand of the Heavenly King. From the age of five." She waved her fingers, the blades at the end shining and sharp.

"Once your people broke the feet of their daughters, now they put knives at the end of their fingers. The world is much changed."

Finally the woman stood in front of Three-Fingers Shen, that bowed and kept his eyes on the ground. "And then their servant," she said.

"My lady," Shen whispered.

"What is your name?"

"They call me Three-Fingers Shen, with my lady's permission."

She smiled a benevolent smile. "Are you a believer in the Heavenly Peace, Three-Fingers Shen?"

Shen bowed even deeper than before. "I was born into the Heavenly Peace, my lady, how could I not believe in it?"

"A philosopher and a handyman. What an unusual combination. How did you loose your two fingers, Shen?"

"An accident, with a knife, my lady, many years ago. I was young, and careless."

She nodded, and walked back to her throne.

"What am I supposed to do with you?" she asked as she passed by Dambijaa.

She stopped with her foot on the first step of the throne days and stared the warlord in the eye. "Really, what do you imagine is going to happen now?"

Dambijaa growled an obscenity.

"Yes, exactly." She turned to her guards. "Take him out and shoot him."

It took four of them to subdue the thrashing warlord.

The blond woman sat on her throne, a bored expression on her face.

A shot rang out. She nodded.

She snapped her fingers. "The man, confine him in one of the cells below. The woman, send her to my apartments."

18.

Two guards stood by the Lady Yeh as she waited, standing in the antechamber of the blond woman's apartment. They kept a respectful distance from her, and also kept their guns at the ready. The Lady Yeh stood perfectly still, because she had no reason to move. She counted her breasts. She did not waste any thought or energy at what was to come, because she did not know what it could be, and so any preparation would be useless. Worse, it would be a hindrance.

So the Lady Yeh waited, and finally the mistress of the house came forth, appearing through an archway, pulling a drape to the side. She stared at the Lady Yeh, and with a flick of her hand dismissed the guards. The two men hesitated for half a heartbeat, and then bowed, and retreated. The door slid closed behind them.

The woman had changed in a red silk qinpao. She let the drape fall and walked up to the Lady Yeh. She caressed the ropes tying her hands.

"This is an indignity," she said. "I am sorry."

The Lady Yeh arched an eyebrow. "I am, after all, your prisoner."

A blade appeared in the blond woman's hand. "I will free you. Do you give me your word that you will not try anything stupid?"

"That depends on your definition of stupidity," the Lady Yeh replied.

The other woman laughed. "True. Then let me rephrase: do you give me your word that you will not try to harm me?"

The Lady Yeh just looked back at her.

"It would be useless anyway," the blond woman added.

The Lady Yeh offered her wrists, and the blade cut through the rope.

"Such a waste," the Lady Yeh said.

"What?"

"The rope. Have you ever seen the hands of a rope-maker? The calluses, the paper-like skin? It is hard work, making ropes. One should not cut them so casually."

The blond woman laughed, a short joyless sound. Then she gestured for the Lady Yeh to precede her in the adjacent room.

"I will have tea delivered," she said.

She sat herself on one of the high chairs, and motioned the Lady Yeh to do the same. "You talk about hands," the blond woman said. "Yours fascinate me. You fascinate me."

The Lady Yeh folded her long legs and sat down, her back stiff, her head held high. She placed her hands on the black surface of the table, her fingers splayed, her blades glinting in the light of the gas lamp.

A short old woman entered from a side door, her back bent, her eyes low. She placed a tray on the table, exactly in the center of it, and without raising her head she retreated, backing into the side door, and disappearing.

"They think that looking upon an Angel of the Lord without permission will burn their eyes," the blond woman said, as she poured the tea.

"How do you handle your everyday activities? How do you comb your hair? Change your dresses?"

As a reply, the Lady Yeh picked up the cup, balancing it daintily on the edge of the blades of her right hand. With a smooth bending of her wrist, she brought the cup to her lips.

"Fascinating."

"But you are not an Angel of the Lord, of course," the Lady Yeh said, putting the cup down.

The blond woman drank some tea, too. "I am an agent of change," she said.

The Lady Yeh just stared at her.

"You were designed to be what you are," the self-styled Angel said. Then she smirked. "I know, this is not a polite question, but humor me. We are not in polite company, after all."

The Lady Yeh sighed. "I was designed, as you say. I was chosen as an infant to serve the Heavenly Peace, and I underwent training."

A glance at her blades. "And modifications."

"Those, too, but those are a trifling thing compared to the training." As if to underscore her words, again she picked up her cup, and drank of the tea.

"We are very similar," the Angel said.

The Lady Yeh arched her eyebrow, and stared at her above the rim of her cup.

"I was designed to be what I am," the Angel said. "Just like you, through training, selection, and education. As you were made as you are to serve the Heavenly Peace, I was made by the Reichshammerbund, designed and bred as I am to serve the Volk. To make sure the Volk would survive the Ragnarok."

"You use words I am not familiar with," the Lady Yeh said. Her tea consumed, she placed the empty cup in front of herself.

"I am the last of a line of conquerors," the Angel said. "A warrior people, a mighty empire."

"Many mighty empires were laid low by the Long Winter."

There was a hard set to the Angel's clenched jaw. "Yes."

"Which means they were not so mighty, after all."

"I expected sophisms from your master, not from you."

"He is not my master, and in that case you should have offered your tea to him anyway."

The Lady Yeh made as to stand. The Angel moved quickly, and there was a gun in her hand.

"Didn't I offer you my wrists?" the Lady Yeh asked.

"Sit down, I am not finished."

Again the Lady Yeh sat.

"There were more like me, on my ship."

"The flying ship that fell from the sky."

"Yes. We were," she gestured, vaguely, "asleep, when it happened. I am the only one left."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you are like me. Because you are strong, and disciplined, and a creature of action before thought. Because you have seen how I made an army out of the rabble, and you know I cannot be stopped. Because nothing can beat faith, and that is what I have here."

"We are not the same."

"But we are. I know the pain of the training, the pressure as the potential grows and needs to be put to the test. You know you are superior to

those that you serve. You are faster, deadlier. You are clear-minded and focused on your duty. Just like I am.”

The Lady Yeh smiled, but a flutter of her lips. “But I do have a mighty empire behind me, and you are alone.”

“You don’t see what I am offering. I like the concept, you see, the plan, the execution. I want soldiers like you. I want to learn about your modifications, your implants, your training.”

The Angel stood, still holding her gun. “What I am offering is a choice. Be my general, or be my test subject.”

The Lady Yeh stood, slowly, and bowed.

“If you do not mind, I would like to be taken to my cell.”

19.

Sitting in his boxlike prison, the Judge Haw massaged his temples, and tried to make sense of everything he had seen through the Lady Yeh's eyes, and heard through her ears.

A race of conquerors that was no more, he thought. A lone survivor trying to build from scratch a new purpose for herself. Alone, almost certainly mad, responding to a training and a set of imperatives that had no sense anymore.

He relaxed his shoulders, and leaned his head against the wall, trying to find some rest, some respite from the piercing pain through his temples. He recalled the taste of the tea, and found some solace in it.

20.

They were brought back in the great hall once more, three days later. Three days during which the Judge Haw tried to muster his energies, and communicated but occasionally with the Lady Yeh, walking through her thoughts as a lesser man would walk through a garden.

They were pushed into the center of the polished floor. There was laughter, and the crowd opened for two men to push forth Three-Fingers Shen, that stumbled comically and then placed himself at the back of his master and his mistress.

The Angel walked in and sat on her throne. She was again wearing her black and white uniform, and a silk overcoat.

"The time has come for us to decide what to do with these heretics," she said.

The Judge Haw grimaced, and she eyed him with curiosity.

"Yes?" she asked.

"My lady will pardon an old man," the Judge said, "but talk of heresy is never the prelude to pleasantries."

She laughed. "Indeed it is not."

She turned to the Lady Yeh. "Have you thought about the offer I made?"

The Lady Yeh bowed slightly. "With all due respect, you did not make any offer."

"So be it, then."

She stood, and was about to speak, when the Judge Haw interrupted her. "But maybe you will give some consideration to our offer."

The Angel stared at him, incredulous. "You? Make me an offer?"

The blond woman passed a hand through her hair, pulling back the short bangs on her forehead. She looked relaxed, in control, maybe a little bemused, but Judge Haw could see the muscles rippling beneath the fair skin, the sitting stance that betrayed a tension, like a coiled spring, a hint of callused skin along the side of her hands. Her eyes shifted from the Lady Haw to Shen, to him. A shiver ran down the Judge's back. He had once seen a man, in Shanghai, juggling knives whose blades, having been dipped in tar, had been set on fire. This was like he felt. Like he was juggling with something more dangerous than he could imagine. The Angel's eyes flicked to the side. Spotting an opening, he pushed a little. The perfectly geometric mind was still there, its flaw glistening like a ghost inside a quartz crystal. Cold, predatory. But he knew that too much order and symmetry can be strength, or weakness.

"What do you speak of, old man?" she said.

He shrugged. "We wanted to meet you, my lady Angel. The Fourth Son wanted us to meet you, actually. And make you an offer, a sign of the Fourth Son's infinite mercifulness."

Her blue eyes darted this way and that. "This is nonsense. You were on your way to Sinkiang. You are my prisoners."

"What if we chose to be captured, so that we could come face to face with you?"

"Let yourself be trapped? I'd deem that a very stupid plan, old man."

"And yet it worked," said the Judge, and the ropes fell from his wrists.

"And it has been noted that Ya'an is quite to the south and west from the road to Sinkiang."

"You were diverted by Dambijjaa."

Judge Haw massaged his sore wrists as he moved a few paces. "Dambijjaa, who had sent a number of reports to the Court, and requests for assistance."

"Reports and requests my men intercepted."

"But what if one got away?"

She stood. "What if? Would the so-called Fourth Son heed the request of a bandit turned boot licker? And send you?"

"Who else could the Heavenly King send, but us?"

With a dramatic gesture, the Lady Yeh spread out her arms, the steel-bladed fingers extended. Her ample sleeves looked like purple wings as she stood at the back of the Judge. The blades shone sinister in the light of the torches.

"We are the Eye and the Hand of the Heavenly Peace," the Judge said in a level voice. "We go where the Heavenly Peace needs us. For was it not said, 'My hand has the power to kill in heaven and earth: behead the evil ones, spare the just and alleviate the pain of the people'?"

He could hear a wave of fear spread through the people. He was sure the blond woman could feel it too.

"And here we are with the merciful offer of the Fourth Son," he went on, taking a step forward. "Stop this madness. Accept the Great Peace and you will not be harmed. Nor," he smiled, "made a subject of tests to discover the secrets of your race."

"You are mad!"

"And you are scared, my lady Angel."

He pointed a finger. "This creature is not an Angel of the Father," he said. "She is a foreign devil, plotting against the Fourth Son."

"They know the truth, old man! They saw me descend from the sky!"

"Aye!" The judge turned to the people. "And they know what's the name of an Angel falling from the sky, bathed in flames. A master of deception, that can turn good people against each others."

He could feel doubt, like tinkling notes from very small chimes, rising in the crowd.

21.

"Leave us!" she ordered.

"Don't!" Judge Haw replied. The crowd swayed, but they stayed. He smiled to himself.

"Stay then!" she said.

Judge Haw took a deep breath. Breaking this creature would be nothing, he knew, if the people she had seduced would still believe in her sanctity. It would be useless, or worse, would create a martyr.

Riding her fear, he entered her mind.

"Your name," he said, watching his knuckles grow pale, "is Freya. Freya Bergshneider."

He took a step forward, finding it hard to grapple with the objects he had unearthed. "You were born in a city called Koln, in the German Empire, in..." He hesitated, frowning. "In 1847?"

She walked up to him, her eyes two sapphire shards.

The Lady Yeh slid in front of the Judge, her hands crossed at the wrists, her blades ready. The blond woman stopped on her tracks.

"By all that is sacred!" Shen exclaimed, loud, looking around. He was a good actor, the Judge thought. "Does she really have more than one hundred years, Master?"

"She is a servant of a thing called The Hammer of the Empire," Judge Haw replied. "It granted her a mockery of eternal life."

"Kill them!" the woman screamed.

Two guards came forward. The Lady Yeh met them halfway. She grabbed the barrel of one of the rifles and danced, her feet barely touching the stone floor, and turned, and when the trigger was pulled, the second guard fell with a big hole in his chest. The Lady Yeh disarmed the guard then, and dropped the gun. She had sliced the first guard's throat before his useless weapon had hit the ground.

The Lady Yeh shook her hands, drawing patterns in blood on the white floor. "Anyone else?" she asked with a smile.

A man lifted his musket and fired. The Lady Yeh twirled on her slender ankles, her fingers a steely blur. The bullet ricocheted harmlessly on a column, and punched a smoking hole in one of the standards.

Before the man could reload, she was upon him. She grabbed him by the throat and pulled him closer, and then turned, so that a second bullet, fired by another guard, slammed in his gut. Then the Lady Yeh dropped the dying man on the floor, and did away with the other gunman.

She looked around. "It has been said, 'The cautious seldom err.'" Her dark eyes passed from face to face, and she wet her lips with the tip of her pink tongue. "Be cautious, my friends. Let your Angel face the wrath of the Lord Father on her own strength."

The blond woman lunged, aiming a punch at Judge Haw's throat.

22.

Judge Haw stepped aside.

The fist swished through the empty air. The Angel Freya glared at him. She moved like a flickering flame, another punch, followed by a stab in the gut with her open hand. He avoided the punch, and deflected her hand with his forearm. And now there was a blade in her hand, but he had seen it coming, and he tapped her wrist, and her hand went limp. "I am not a fighter," he said.

The people in the hall could see he was an old man, gray of hair and bespectacled. And yet the Angel they had followed for months was unable to touch him.

Freya growled, massaging her hand. Then she rushed him again, and came so close he could smell her breath on his face. With both hands crossed he parried her knee to his crotch, pushing it down. Her elbow passed a hairbreadth from his face as he leaned back. She pushed against him, slamming into him, forcing him back. With the heel of her left hand, she tried to crush his nose, but he turned his head. His eyeglasses flew off, his cheekbone bruised. He managed to shove her back, and danced away from beneath her following attack. She punched a column, a handful of crushed limestone falling like snow on the floor.

Judge Haw was breathing heavily.

She jumped and slid towards him, sweeping with her right leg. He placed his hands on her shoulders and vaulted behind her, landing heavily on his feet, his knees protesting with a loud creak.

Steam was rising from the woman's skin in the cool air of the hall.

Her blue eyes sparkled with homicidal glee.

"You have more or less one minute left," he told her.

Talk, he thought. Buy time.

"Your mind is very sharp, and as clear as water," he went on, moving so that one of the columns would cover his side. "I can see every move before you make it."

Once again she attacked him. He parried her right punch but her left connected with his sternum, knocking out his breath, pushing him back. She turned on her heel and kicked at his face. His parry was slow. His forearm made an unpleasant sound and pain shot like a hot iron up his shoulder. Freya grinned, and once again spun on her foot, this time aiming her kick at his head.

The Lady Yeh stopped the leg in mid air with her left arm, and her right drew four red lines across Freya's chest, going through silk overcoat and silk blouse. The blond woman retreated, hissing, while the Lady Yeh took nimbly her rightful position, between the Judge and what was menacing him.

23.

"You should surrender," Judge Haw said.

The blond woman flashed her teeth in a smile that was an animal growl. "It has been observed," the Judge said, "that by three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest."

He nodded at the crowd. "Your people are learning wisdom, and the experience will remain with them for many a year. Surrender. The Heavenly King's justice is merciful."

Freya attacked again. The Lady Yeh parried her moves effortlessly, and pushed her at the center of the hall.

Judge Haw didn't know if it was because of her mounting fury and frustration, or because of the dull pain that was numbing his mind, but reading the blond woman was easier now. He could scry, through her crystal mind, layer upon layer of self-images. Her self-centered ego, her sense of purpose and of duty, her deep scorn for the people around her, here, in this moment.

She kicked at the Lady Yeh, aiming for her head with the heel of her right foot. The Lady Yeh bowed as in a courtesy, her hand pushing the leg away, like a caress, her steel fingers slashing the Achilles tendon, crippling her adversary.

Freya limped back, trying to maintain the distance.

"Looks to me like she bleeds like any other person," Three-Fingers Shen said out loud. The people around him nodded, and mumbled agreements.

But there was something else, and Judge Haw could feel it as it grew. It was the flaw, the crack in that perfect crystal mind. Like a cleavage plane it ran through the thoughts of the blond woman, separating what should be kept together.

"Surrender," he said again, aloud, and he thought he really meant it. The unresolved question of the woman's age intrigued him. He wished the circumstances were different, and the woman could be spared, questioned, studied.

She fainted, trying to take the Lady Yeh by surprise, but Judge Haw saw it coming and he gently lent his foreknowledge to the Lady's muscles. The Lady Yeh counter-fainted and her finger blades cut a strand of blonde hair, that fell on the floor, in the pooled blood from the wounded leg.

"You do not need to die," the Lady Yeh said. "It would give me no pleasure, killing you."

She did not mean it of course, but the Heavenly King was merciful in the eyes of his people, and thus she was playing the tune the people was supposed to listen.

Freya leaped once again at the Lady Yeh, with hands like claws, trying to strangle her. Her beautifully ordered mind had snapped, intelligence replaced by a blunt, unthinking homicidal fury.

She lunged, snarling.

The five fingers of the Lady Yeh's right hand slipped through her breast, scraping against the ribs and the sternum, and closed forever on the Angel's heart.

"What a waste," the Judge whispered.

24.

Three-Fingers Shen had found a wine gourd somewhere. He offered it to Judge Haw where he sat on the dais, in the deserted hall. The Judge nodded a thank you and drank some of the wine. The Lady Yeh had splinted and bandaged his broken arm, and now sat by his side.

The followers of the Angel had walked out of the hall slowly, mumbled conversations between them.

"By this time tomorrow," Three-Fingers Shen said, "they will be back in their villages, praying the Lord Father to forgive their sins, and barely believing their luck."

He sat down and massaged the back of his neck.

"A pity about Lord Dambijaa," he said.

"Was it true?" the Lady Yeh asked.

"What?"

"That this was all part of a great plan? That the Heavenly King sent you not to Sinkiang but to Ya'an, and this was plotted and planned since the beginning?" She leaned closer to him, and placed her steel-bladed hand on his thigh. "Did you really deceive me?"

Judge Haw sighed. "The enlightened ruler is heedful, and the good general full of caution."

He stood, and watched his companions. "And this," he said, "should answer you both."

At last...

Sketches of China 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!

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.

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About the Author

Davide Mana 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**

