



Hope & Glory



PART OF THE
MACHINE



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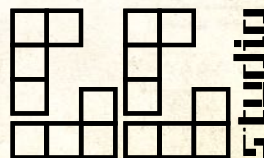
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Welcome to a new world...

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.

Part of the Machine
by Davide Mana

1.

Outside.

The night sky was studded with stars, streaked with pastel-colored dust clouds. Varvara walked slowly down the path between the ice statues. A collection of grotesques, of dwarvish saints with screaming mouths, of lascivious Madonnas neglecting their impish children to leer at the passer-bys. Orcs and beast-men crouched side by side with squat dragons and howling wolves. Water dripped from the wingtips of an angry angel. A small girl with a belligerent expression sat between the front paws of a bear. A man of stern visage, maybe Peter the Great, sat high on a rearing horse, wielding a sword that looked like spun glass. The light from the bonfire lit the ice and was refracted in rainbows that projected as pale bands across Varvara's long coat and Persian lamb collar. The light painted war stripes across her pale cheeks, as she advanced in the trampled snow, holding a large leather-bound book in her arms.

The others were there already. Vassili and Tania. Tekla, her face concealed behind a veil after the fashion of the people in the southern desert. Ekaterina turned to her as she joined their circle. She was almost completely devoid of color, like an albino, and wore black as the latest court fashion dictated. Her perfect white lips curled in a smile as she nodded to Varvara. She held a small, thick volume between her white-

nailed, beringed hands. Many, Varvara noticed, had already consigned their offerings to the Flame, but the ghostlike woman said "I waited for you," showing her book.

Varvara smiled, concealing her embarrassment behind a curtain of well-rehearsed hypocrisy. "How nice of you, cousin," she whispered. Ekaterina tilted her head on one side, a long strand of snow-white hair escaping her black wolf fur cap, spilling like milk on her padded shoulder and on the front of her black hussar-style jacket. "Shall we?" she asked courtly.

They advanced towards the Flame, and the others made way for them. The heat slapped Varvara in the face. The bonfire was crackling and roaring, specks the color of amber escaping to the heavens. She contemplated the Flame for a moment, the piled books burning and crumpling as the heat consumed them.

The mountain of books in front of her collapsed, erupting a cloud of fiery ashes. It takes so much time to completely burn a book, she thought.

By her side, Ekaterina lifted her small volume high, bowing her head, and then dropped it in the flames. "Yevgeny Baratynsky," she said, her voice ringing in the night. "The Collected Poems."

Murmurs came from all of those around. Someone clapped discreetly. Varvara felt their eyes on her as, with a deep intake of breath, she held her book in both hands, arms outstretched in front of her. "Charles Lyell," she proclaimed, her voice loud and clear. "Principles of Geology: being an attempt to explain the former changes of the Earth's surface, by reference to causes now in operation."

The heat scalded her hands as she dropped the big book in the Flame, and watched its pages curl and the leather of its cover crack and blacken. Someone gasped. Many applauded.

"How wonderful," Ekaterina whispered, in ecstasy, putting her hand on Varvara's arm.

Varvara turned on her heels. The Tower was absolute blackness bookended by strips of night sky. For the first time, the awareness of where she was penetrated her conscience, and she swayed slightly. Then she hid her hands inside her long sleeves, and proceeded more steadily, the sense of vertigo gone.

Behind her, her cousins stood around the Flame, celebrating the Feeding of Knowledge. It was a pity nobody could see it, she thought, like a beacon in the distance. But only snow and ice stretched forever

in every direction, surrounding the Imperial Palace of Tsaritsyn like a besieging army, and the flame burning on this platform, one hundred yards up the side of Saint Andrew Tower.

The statues watched her go.

The armored steel door slid back and let her in again.

When it closed, it shut out the icy breeze, but not the darkness.

2.

“And so it worked?”

In the mirror, Varvara smiled. “Like a wonder. Iliya and Konstantin did such an excellent job. Please give my best to both of them.”

“Of course.” The reflection of Mariya’s grinning face was a heart shape framed in brown curls beside Varvara’s pale oval. She was brushing Varvara’s hair, one hundred strokes from the crown of her head down to the small of her back. The girl would lift a strand of Varvara’s fair tresses in her long-fingered hand, and run the silver brush slowly down its length, carefully. It was part of the nightly ritual.

Surrounded by pale blue gaslights, the mirror was the only source of illumination in the darkness of Varvara’s boudoir. It cast stark shadows against the walls.

“And why should they have found out, after all?” Varvara asked. She traded a savvy look with her maid. “They were so impressed by the bulk and the title of the thing, they just stared with open mouths while it burned.”

Mariya laughed, and Varvara joined her.

“You should not show such disregard for traditions,” Mariya admonished her, still laughing.

“Traditions! The burning of books to remember the first long winters after the nisproverzheniye.” Varvara snorted in a very unladylike fashion. “It is far better to burn blank paper than ancient wisdom, no matter what the Old Father said.”

Mariya beamed, cherishing her mistress’ outburst of seditious speech. “You should join the Anarchist Commune,” she said, her hand moving slowly down Varvara’s hair.

Varvara arched an eyebrow. “Oh, milaya devushka! And become one of your playmates?”

Mariya gave her a naughty look in the mirror. Her mistress gestured for her to put down the brush, and stood, with a sigh. “The anarchists don’t please me,” she said. “They’re so dark and it’s so easy to forgive them.”

Mariya just giggled and moved to the adjoining room. She poured herself a large cup of wine from a decanter.

“What have you been up to, of late?” Varvara asked, following her. “We’ve been to the rabochiye caves, yesterday night,” the maid said conspiratorially.

“Mixing with the trogs?”

Varvara was studying critically her maid, her uniform, her stance. She stood in front of the mosaic that dominated the whole wall, portraying a reunion of Byzantine saints. The black silhouette of the girl contrasted starkly with the colors and the gold of the mosaic, much as her spicy expression contrasted with their long, sad saintly faces.

“Konstantin acquired some of their overalls, somewhere, and we joined the down shift. There is a service passage...”

“Indeed!”

Mariya stoppered the decanter and put it back in its place in the wine cabinet. “Yes, and we spent two hours...”

“Pretending to be of the worker class.” Varvara ran her fingers through the maid’s hair. “How romantic.”

“I brought you a souvenir...”

With an impish grin, Mariya slipped two fingers in her neckline, and fished out an egg-shaped pill the size of the tip of her thumb. It was the color of ash. Her eyes in Varvara’s, she crumbled it in the cup.

Varvara stared in silence, as Mariya arched her eyebrows, brought the cup to her lips and drank a long gulp of wine.

“Care to join me?” the maid asked, offering her the remainder of the wine. Varvara took the cup and looked down into its ruby depths.

“And to think you were such a sweet girl,” she said with a smirk. Mariya chuckled. “You taught me a lot, mistress,” she whispered. “Drink up!”

Holding the glass cup in both hands, Varvara brought it up to her lips and drank down the wine, in a single gulp, the bitter aftertaste sparkling on her tongue. A few drops escaped from the corner of her mouth, red marks on her white lace nightgown.

“Like blood,” Mariya said dreamily, her fingers brushing the stains.

With a sigh, Varvara handed the cup back. With her thumb, she wiped the wine drops off her chin.. “What now?”

The other girl licked her lips. “We won’t have to wait for long,” she smiled wickedly.

3.

Varvara woke up at the sound of somebody hitting on her door with a hammer. The steel ringed like a bell as she called for Mariya to go and open. She was feeling awfully, her temples throbbing with the same tempo of the metal-on-metal beating.

As the pounding became faster, she cursed under her breath, pulled on a dressing gown and went to the door herself. Her legs felt like lead, her back ached, her eyes burned. Did the rabochiye feel like this every day? And where was silly, delicious Mariya? Where the palace servants?

There was a big man in front of her door. Bushy red beard, a severe bear-fur greatcoat. He had a black metal hand, the one that he had been using to knock. There was a golden two-headed eagle on his belt-buckle.

“Varvara Vorovina Boleslavskaia?”

Like that. No princess, no your grace, no nothing.

She stared him in the face. There was a badge on his lapel. There were two men in Palace Guard livery at his back. Both carried stunbatons.

She moved away, and let the man in.

“You wait here,” he said to the guards.

“How can I assist the Guard?” she asked.

He was looking around, not so much with curiosity as if making an inventory of her apartments.

“Do you know this woman?”

He handed her a portrait of Mariya. Taken years before. The girl looked straight ahead, serious, her features stiff, formal. None of the softness that had underscored her beauty of late.

“Of course,” Varvara said, coldly. “Mariya Gerusova, my maid and companion. Is she in some kind of trouble?”

The silly girl. Her Anarchist leanings and her wild character catching up with her.

The man handed her another picture. Varvara needed a moment to figure out what it represented.

“The worst sort of trouble,” the man said, his metal hand snapping open and shut, with the sound of a snare.

Varvara’s head swam, and she felt a hand ripping her stomach. It was Mariya, staring emptily at forever, her head surrounded by a pool of liquid darkness, a gash running across her throat.

Varvara closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Where...?”

“Sixth level, south service corridor.”

The servants’ quarters.

“She was found this morning. A little past four.”

Varvara studied his face. “I never met you,” she said. “I thought I knew everyone at court.”

His metal hand opened and closed. “It is my job to be unknown.”

But he pushed his good hand in his coat, and presented her with an official warrant. Special Investigator von-Sternberg.

“Why a special investigator?” she asked.

“Had Gerusova been in your service long?”

“Five years. Why is the Ochrana investigating the death of a lady’s maid?”

She knew a dozen good reasons, from her politics to her promiscuity.

“Murder, not just death. And she was the personal servant to the Czar’s second cousin.”

Varvara huffed, dropping the two daguerreotypes. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Were the two of you intimate?”

She turned at him. “Are you asking if I took my maid to bed?” she asked back.

“No. I speak of the sort of intimacy that leads to personal confidences.”

Varvara blushed, surprising herself, and he went on. “Did she reveal details about her life? Friends, lovers, family?” he paused, his eyes darting around the room. And then, “It’s usually one of them,” he added. “Someone close.”

Varvara turned her back on Sternberg and took two deep breaths. The glass cup from last night was still on top of the wine cabinet. Her heart accelerated. She weighed her options, in a blink. “There is... there was a man. I only know his name, Iliya. Another servant, I guess.”

He nodded, jotting down the name on his pad.

“Their relationship?”

Varvara shrugged. “A paramour,” she said. “A servant’s romance.”

Sternberg nodded again. “When did you last see Mariya Gerusova?”

“Last night, before I retired.”

“Time?”

“Midnight, more or less,” she lied.

“Did the girl say anything?” The metal hand clacked shut. “Did she smoke opium before she left?”

Varvara couldn’t remember. Probably yes. But after the elixir had taken hold of them, most of the night had passed in a blur.

“Are you asking me if I shared my opium with my maid?”

“Did you?”

“What if I did?”

His metal hand kept snapping open and closed.

“Did you share anything else?”

Varvara had learned early how to look and sound outraged. Being second cousin to Czar Vladimir did have its perks. “I won’t have any more of this. Get out of my sight before I summon my father’s Cossacks and have you kicked out!”

His eyes blazed, steel-blue and cold.

“I am acting on his Majesty’s orders,” he said.

Then he stopped, and caressed his copper-colored beard with his good hand. She wondered what was going on behind those eyes.

He bowed, clicking his heels together. “I will leave you now,” he said. “I might need to... interview you again, later.”

“Keep me informed about the developments of your investigation,” she said dryly. “Have a good day, Investigator.”

“You too, Varvara Vorovina Boleslavskaia.”

4.

The great staircase connected the Tens upstairs, the noble quarters, with the plaza that occupied level nine. It spiraled along the wall of the Tower of Saint Nicholas, wide enough for four horses to climb it abreast, the steps shallow and wide. Gates opened along the staircase, leading to common rooms, small gardens, utility spaces. The Tower was a vertical city, and the staircase was its main thoroughfare. It was also a wonderful, useless affectation. It was faster and more comfortable to zip up and down inside an elevator, of course. And yet the staircase provided the space for the sort of social encounters that helped keep the court alive. Anyone could arrange a secret meeting or a tryst in a private alcove, an exchange of whispers in a conservatory shrouded in shadows. But for political debate, there were the steps between the fourteenth and fifteenth floor. For matters artistic, the place was on the landing of the seventeenth floor, where both the portrait gallery and the Imperial Theater were housed. And issues of honor could be settled on the final step to the ninth floor, where aristocracy stopped and the servants' quarters began. And yet for all the bustle and the activity, the stairs granted a certain invisibility, a certain discreet loneliness that was what Varvara needed right now.

She stepped down the last step, and looked around. The plaza was a fashionably disreputable place to be. She recognized a dozen faces, and

she was sure they recognized her. She looked around, trying to get her bearings. She had been here only once, with Mariya, two years before, when the girl had started seeing her anarchic friends.

She thought she recognized a passage, and walked hastily in that direction, pulling her cloak closer.

Varvara was sure poor Iliya was already being interviewed by Investigator von-Sternberg or one of his minions. Not that she cared. But the stupid prole and his friend Konstantin still had her original Lyell. She had realized about one hour after von-Sternberg had left her apartments. She had settled in a couch, having dialed an infusion to calm her nerves, when the empty space on her shelf reminded her suddenly that Mariya's friends still had the original from which the burned copy had been made.

And should the Ochrana find it, there would be more questions, and the sort of scandal that would not make her popular, but only get her cast out of the Palace.

Varvara skirted the great statue of Czar Nicholas the first, the Little Father, architect of the modern Russian Empire. She felt the statue's eyes on her, the dead emperor stern and stiff in his uniform. The old soldier would not approve, she thought, what the court had become in the century since his death.

Commoners were milling around, minding their own business, or their masters'. She sought one of the relay alcoves to the west of the plaza, pulled up her cloak so that it would not hinder her movements, and took one of the slides down into the servants' quarters.

5.

Mariya's friend Konstantin lived in one of the warrens on the third level. This had originally been the old Tsaritsin Imperial residence, that Nicholas had incorporated as the cornerstone of the new Imperial palace. Buttresses and pylons had been added to the old building, to help the tired walls as they sustained the weight of the Tower.

The corridors were dark, the gaslights set to burn as low as possible to save fuel, and set far between.. The forced air system rattled in the background. The air was stale, smelling of cooked food and tobacco and a number of other unsavory aromas. The heat and humidity were insufferable.

Varvara ran a hand along the wet wall, searching for a landmark tablet or any sort of indication. The last time she had been here, Mariya had been her guide, and Varvara had other things going through her head, and her veins, to remember clearly the road they had taken.

Steps sounded behind her. "Are you lost, devochka?"

She turned, looked the man in the face, let her cloak fall open. Her curved dagger glinted in the half-light.

The man lifted his hands, taking a step back. "No, no..." he said.

She stepped forward. "Wait. Konstantin. You know him? He's one of the engineers."

The man nodded, slowly. "Yes."

“Where do I find him?”

The man scratched his beard. “I don’t think I remember...”

From underneath the cloak, she pulled a black-gloved hand, holding a silver piece between thumb and forefinger. “Does this help?”

“Go to the south wing, the checkerboard corridor. Konstantin’s place is the third door on your right. But he won’t be there at this time.”

She tossed him the coin. He fumbled and it dropped to the floor. By the time he picked it up, she was gone.

6.

Konstantin's one-room apartment was in such a state of disarray, that for a moment Varvara thought the place had been broken in and ransacked. There were books piled everywhere, on the table, on the chairs, on the bed, on the floor, leaving only narrow lanes for passage. Trapped between the books, or between of their pages, were sheets of paper, alone or in wads, their corners waving idly as she passed. Glasses of various shape and size rested on top of the piles. She tried to lift one. It was stuck to the underlying book cover. In some of the glasses were forks, spoons, knives, all of them dirty. But also pencils and pens, small balls of crumpled paper, spent matches, crooked and rusty nails. Some of the glasses rested on dirty plates, or inside dirty bowls. As Varvara moved around, her nose itching for the mix of unpleasant smells, her foot hit an empty bottle, sending it rolling until it stopped against the leg of a chair. On the back of the chair was draped a well-worn jacket. There were more clothes lumped underneath.

But no, she remembered, the place had been like this that time too. Konstantin was not a stickler for order and cleanliness. Unusual, in an engineer.

One of the narrow paths led to a large bed inside an alcove. It was unmade, cushions heaped at one end, the sheets tumbled at the other end. A small crate served as nightstand. It held an overflowing ashtray,

a short stub of a candle, more books, a pen-knife, a glass filled with buttons, pins, beads, brass nibs, and other small objects.

Varvara, hands on her hips, took a long look around. She sighed. Finding her book in this mess would be nigh impossible. She picked a volume from the top of one pile, one that was, for size and weight, close to her copy of Lyell's. She flicked the pages, grunted, and put it back. She tried the next, that turned out to be, if possible, more obscene than the first.

Of course, she thought, if she was unable to find it, it was highly unlikely the Ochrana would. Or not? She remembered von-Sternberg icy glaze. The Ochrana had the time and the resources to go through this whole cumulation of rubbish, and have every single item listed and cross-referenced.

She toyed with the idea of setting the place on fire, and dismissed it: the last thing she wanted was being caught in the pits during a fire.

And yet.

Varvara studied the single gas lamp providing a weak illumination to the room. It was the old-fashioned model still used in the lower levels. She just turned the flame down until it flicked out and died. Then she opened the gas at its maximum. In the dark, she felt her way to the door, and closed it behind her.

7.

Mariya's apartment was on the eight level. Varvara stopped on her way back to light and clear air. As expected, the place had been searched, and the Guard seal was placed on the door.

Varvara let two chattering chambermaids pass, holding their curious stare until they blushed and averted their eyes, and then broke the seal and went in.

Varvara turned on her heels, taking in the whole of the room. A large bed, a dresser, a chest of drawers and a wardrobe, each one resting in a niche in a wall, so that the center of the room was occupied by a low table, and two couches. The place was clean and clear, in perfect order, a vague reminiscence of some kind of perfume in the air. She went into the small bathroom. Here perfume was stronger, and there was an oily residue in the sink.

Varvara wondered if the Ochrana had used one of their sniffers. The place was so ordered and pristine, that it seemed likely.

She checked the drawers and the dresser. Nothing looked out of place. She marveled at the variety of cosmetics. In the wardrobe, she found two of her old dresses, that she had ordered Mariya to have burned. They had been altered and fitted. They had lost their elegance, and acquired a certain vulgar charm. There was also a third gown, a garish Indian silk number, that Mariya had evidently 'borrowed'. Varvara

caught herself smiling at the thought. She noticed another gown, bright scarlet, that was clearly above Mariya's means, and a black jacket of a distinct military cut. A witness to Mariya's passion for play-acting and mixing in inappropriate circles.

On the floor of the wardrobe, she found a polished wood box, a small burnished brass key resting in the lock. The lid opened when she tried to pick it up. The box contained a handful of coins, a case with an opium pipe, and a small bag of jewels. She found a pair of earrings she had thought lost forever. She placed the stuff back in the box and instinctively turned the key in the lock. It would not turn.

Varvara pulled it out. It was evident, now that she was handling it, that it did not fit the lock. It was a stubby sort of key, heavy, made of dark metal. Weighing it in her hand, Varvara looked around the room.

"Found something that we missed?"

She turned sharply. von-Sternberg was standing on the threshold, his mechanical hand doing that snare-snap thing.

Varvara put her hands on her hips in unladylike fashion, slipping the key in her pocket under cover of the cloak. "I'm here for my dress," she said.

She leaned into the closet and pulled out the stolen gowns. It rustled against the other clothes hanging in there. The jet and silver sequins glittered in the gaslight.

"You ignored the seal," he said.

"What seal?"

He walked up to her. Without averting his gaze, he put his mechanical hand on the closet door. "Anything else you need to recover?"

She shook her head. He shut the door.

"Come," he said. "I'll see you back to your apartments."

"I can take care of myself," Varvara said, piqued.

"That I see, Varvara Vorovina Boleslavskaia."

He bowed slightly, and gestured for her to precede him. She draped the gown on her left arm, and walked out.

The few corridor lights were shifting to darker amber, to signal the beginning of the night cycle. "The elevator is this way," von-Sternberg said.

They followed the corridor for about fifty paces, and stopped in front of the sliding doors of one of the service elevators. "The lower levels are dangerous," he said.

"It's not my first time," she chuckled.

“You should listen to him, little sister.”

They turned.

There were five men, crowding the corridor behind them. They wore dirty overalls and breather masks. They carried tools: hammers, crowbars. One had a length of chain.

von-Sternberg stepped in front of her. “This elevator is occupied,” he said.

The man at the front of the group shrugged. “We are off shift,” he said. “We just want to get home.”

The investigator pointed along a side passage. “There is another elevator, fifty yards from here.”

“We want to use this one,” the other replied. His companions nodded and grinned their agreements, coming closer, crowding them.

A cold spike of panic ran through Varvara’s spine. The men were shuffling closer, their smell of grease and sweat choking her. Their faces hidden by the masks gave them the look of goblins. They were hunched, bulky, squat. Like proles. Workers from the sublevels. From the caves. She took a step back, her shoulders brushing against the elevator door. With a chime, the doors opened.

Growling, the workers attacked them.

von-Sternberg pushed her back inside the cabin, and parried a crowbar aimed at his head. He maneuvered so that he would completely block the door, but one worker was faster than his massive frame suggested. He ducked under the investigator’s arm, and lunged for Varvara. She lifted her arm to fend-off the attack, and felt a sharp pain in the forearm. Then von-Sternberg was on her attacker, grabbing him from behind with his iron hand. The mask was ripped away and for a moment she stared into a pair of green eyes, and a face that had none of the roughness associated with the proles. The man shouldered out of von-Sternberg’s grasp and stepped out of the elevator just as the doors slid closed with another chiming sound.

With a grimace, von-Sternberg lifted his artificial arm. His hand was contracting uncontrollably, so he turned it off. Varvara saw there was a dagger stuck where metal joined flesh. The investigator pulled it out, and turned it between the fingers of his good hand.

“Not a worker’s tool,” he said.

It had a stubby blade, and a curved handle in the shape of an eagle’s head. It reminded her of something, but she suddenly felt dizzy.

“You are bleeding,” von-Sternberg said.

She looked down at her arm. The gown resting on it was shredded and a large glistening stain was spreading over the cloth. Varvara cursed. Then blackness swallowed her up.

8.

The new maid aunt Theodora had provided was named Nina. She was thin and pretty, with dark brown hair and freckles. She was also as shy as a mouse and as boring as a chess match.

Now she came in as pale as a ghost. "An official gentleman asks to see you, mistress," she whispered.

"An official gentleman? Nice."

The poor girl just stared and trembled.

"Well, show him in, you silly girl!"

"But..."

"Go on. It's not the first time I see a man in my bedroom!"

The girl turned five shades of purple and ran out, only to come back in a minute, still blushing, and introduced Investigator von-Sternberg.

"You can leave us," Varvara hoped the girl would have the spirit to go on and eavesdrop at the door.

"I received your note," von-Sternberg said. He held a card between thumb and forefinger of his metal hand.

"I can see it shook you to the core," she said, glancing at him.

"Your request is not acceptable."

She sat up, her back straight. "Not acceptable? Having my apartment guarded day and night is not acceptable."

"You were stabbed."

"I'm recovering." She lifted her bandaged arm. "And the rest of me works just fine, and I need to exercise it. I need my privacy, and my leisure."

"They might try again."

Varvara huffed. "It was just a bunch of workers. Half drunk on fatigue. Probably coming down from sixteen hours of chemically enhanced hard work. Volatile, you know?"

"They were there for you."

She had come at the same conclusion, of course, but she would rather not have Cousin Vladimir's secret police sniffing around her place anyway. "Have you been able to apprehend them, investigator?"

von-Sternberg's shoulder lifted slowly and then dropped. "My men are working..."

Varvara smirked. "A no would be enough, thank you. Is this why you show so much concern about my health? Because you need to show you are doing something?"

He straightened his back. "We will get them."

"Oh, I am absolutely sure. Are you using sniffers on them?"

"I am not at liberty to discuss details."

"And yet it was my life, you say, they were seeking to end."

"Every evidence suggests it."

"Why? You think this is related to poor Mariya's killing?"

"It appears obvious."

"Why?"

"You should tell me."

She laughed out loud, and went for the silver bell on her bed-stand. Its jingling summoned the new girl.

"Investigator von-Sternberg is leaving," Varvara said, theatrically stifling a yawn.

The servant curtsied, and turned to the guest, waiting for him to move.

"My man remains out of your door," he said, "until further developments."

Varvara waved him out. "Discuss the details with my maid. See what her tastes are on the matter. If we have to suffer this invasion, she might as well find a way to have fun."

The girl blushed, and led von-Sternberg out.

The maid was back in five minutes, carrying a tray. "Your medications, mistress," she whispered.

Varvara swallowed two pills with a glass of water. "Want to try some?" she winked at the girl, shaking the bottle.

The poor creature babbled something, picked up the tray and ran away. Varvara sighed. It would take years to turn pretty Nina into a serviceable companion.

9.

Aunt Theodora herself paid a visit on the following day, to check on her favorite niece's health and exchange rumors. She settled herself on a stuffed chair she had Nina place by Varvara's bedside. Then she dismissed the girl.

The two women traded pleasantries. Varvara offered her aunt a small glass of laudanum, and the older woman accepted with a wink of complicity.

"Leon's daughter, Tamara," the old woman said, opening the first salvo of gossip, "apparently got involved with a man from the Company."

Varvara arched an eyebrow. "Involved?"

Third cousin Tamara Leonova had always been a boring little soldier girl. The idea of her having an affair, and with a foreigner of the British persuasion, and in all likelihood a commoner of mixed blood, was unprecedented.

Theodora chuckled. "Not that way, alas. Something or other involving wild beasts, way West."

"Now you make it sound absolutely obscene, Tante Theo!"

Theodora laughed. "Don't I? But no, it was all blood and thunder..."

Varvara laughed in turn.

"But she spoke quite highly of her sky pirate friend."

"A sky pirate no less? Tamara is making up for lost time."

“Oh, she’s absolutely smitten, believe me!” She lit a small cigar. “Anyway, can you imagine the sort of things her new friend could provide?” She pointed at the brown bottle on the nightstand. “They have real poppies out there, you know, in the Company dominions.”

Varvara sighed, relaxing on her pillow. “Ours are real, too, you know?” Her haunt snorted. “Hothouse flowers. Hydroponics vegetables. Processed meats. That’s not real to me!”

“Would you rather eat freshly-killed mammoth steaks and boiled roots? Like the mujiks?”

Theodora was unfazed. “You wouldn’t know, poor thing, but there was a time when we still got fresh supplies from the outside. We did not live holed up in here all the time!”

“I was outside less than one week ago, for the Ritual of the Flame.”

“Were you, dear? But that’s just a walk on a balcony. I meant going outside proper.”

“That’s for soldiers and sky captains,” Varvara shrugged.

“Well, I was out there, you know!”

Varvara laughed. “Oh, I can really imagine you, a bold wilderness explorer!”

“Disrespectful little minx! There were hunting parties, back then, outside. Casimir was very fond of them.”

“So fond of them he was killed while hunting the most dangerous game, out in the snow.”

The old aunt crossed herself, in a rather perfunctory way. “You are cynical today, my dear.”

“And you wax nostalgic.” Varvara picked the cigar from her aunt’s lips and took a short puff. “And if you are really interested, they still have hunting parties, in the lower levels, or so I’m told. I got invited once, but it sounded too rough even for me.”

“The lower levels are dangerous,” Theodora replied. “Look at what happened two nights ago! A whole wing up in flames. Which just goes to prove what I always said: the unwashed classes, my dear, cannot be trusted with technology!”

“Wasn’t it in the engineers’ wing?” Varvara asked nonchalantly.

“Exactly! Just think, those people are in charge of maintenance of the Tower! Two dead, and the whole palace could have blown up to high heaven!”

“There are blowout preventers in the gas system,” Varvara said. “Even you should have learned that, way back in your school days.”

Theodora shook her head, grimacing. "Imagine being caught there! The dark corridors, the flames, the smoke!" She blew out a large cloud of white smoke, as if to underscore her words, and stubbed out her cigar. "You could have been trampled to death, suffocated by smoke, killed in the press or burned alive."

"I was five levels higher," Varvara said.

"And a great deal of good it did to you! It's such a disreputable thing," she added, "for a member of the *znat'*, to be stabbed in a workers' brawl in the servants' quarters! I wonder what you were up to. Not that I have to stretch my imagination..."

Theodora had finally got where she had wanted to be from the start, ready to collect a new batch of saucy gossip. She extracted a silver cigar case from the folds of her gown, and lit it expertly. "I want the details!" she puffed.

"I assure you I was completely dressed, Tante Theo," Varvara chuckled. "And you were in the company of a dashing young hussar!"

"Not exactly. You ever heard of a man from cousin Vladimir's secret police? A Special Investigator von-Sternberg?"

Theodora puffed silently on her cigar for a moment. "No, never heard of him." She eyed her suspiciously. "What are your dealings with the Ochrana?"

Varvara shrugged.

"I was there to recover a gown I had lent to poor Mariya," she said. "And the Special Investigator was kind enough to see me to the elevator."

"Silly of you. Risking the servants' quarters. Oh, I know, I know," Theodora stopped Varvara's protests with a wave of her hand, her cigar between first and second finger. "There's a lot of stories about the sort of shenanigans you and your friends usually get up to in the lower quarters. But it was silly going there alone. And what for? A dress!"

She shook her head, tapping ashes on the carpet. "And the simple idea of lending one of your gowns to a servant!"

"I could not have her around naked all the time, could I?"

They both laughed. "If your poor mother were still alive..." Theodora said in mock disapproval.

"She'd be too busy having fun of her own to worry about my pastimes," Varvara grinned. "And talking of gowns," she said suddenly, following the inspiration of the moment, "I was planning to have a new ball gown made, to replace the one that was damaged in the accident..."

“Oh, what a wonderful idea, dear! I am sure I can suggest you the best milliner on level nine...”

“I never doubted you had the right person for me, chère Tante . But I was wondering... There’s a gown I saw,” she shrugged, “I don’t know, probably on New Years’ ball. The model’s been haunting me for months now, but I can’t remember who wore it.”

Theodora leaned closer. “Do tell!”

“Red as sin, strapless,” Varvara said. “With a full skirt and a bustière of silk satin, decorated with small rosettes and silver thread.”

Theodora’s eyes unfocused for a moment. “I think I remember it,” she said finally. “But the name of the wearer escapes me.”

“And I was counting on your wonderful memory!”

“Oh, but it will come to me, no doubt! And probably at the most embarrassing moment!”

Two days later, three hours into the night cycle, Varvara slipped in Nina’s uniform and, her pale hair hidden by a bonnet and a bundle of sheets under her arm, rode a lift down to the eighth level. Young Nina was fast asleep on the couch, probably enjoying the most vivid dreams of her life, and the guard by the door was by now so used to see the shy servant come and go, her eyes downcast, that Varvara had no trouble leaving her apartment without challenge. In a few minutes she dutifully dropped her bed linen in the laundry, slipping the token inside her cuff, and then hastened to the residential wing.

Mariya’s apartment had been searched again, and not by a sniffer. The drawers were in disarray, a corner of the carpet was turned up as if somebody had stumbled in it. The wardrobe door hung open, and the red dress was gone.

It took Varvara about half an hour to locate the hidden lock.

The side of the bed’s headboard swung open, revealing a hidden compartment, six inches wide and fifteen inches deep. It contained a bundle of thin copybooks, tied together with a blue ribbon, and two small metal boxes.

Varvara stripped a cover from one of the pillows and slipped the stuff in. Then, she hastened back to her apartment.

She whispered some greeting to the guard, keeping her eyes low as she shuffled through her door. Nina was still out cold on the couch, a beatific smile on her face. Hoping she had not overdosed the poor girl, Varvara retreated to her bedroom.

The first box contained, unsurprisingly, an assortment of substances. A paper bag with five tablets of productivity elixir from the rabochiye caves, two vials of what was probably some military-grade enhancer and, surprisingly, two vials of panatseya.

Varvara was shocked at how shocked she felt. Mariya's penchant for experimenting with her body chemistry was one of the things that had fascinated and amused her, and that she had actually encouraged. And yet, the idea of a commoner using the Barchenko enhancers reserved to the aristocracy, caused her an outrage that surprised her.

It was a matter of privilege, reserved to the members of the aristokratyia, who were usually first dosed with panatseya in their early teens. Aleksandr Barchenko, celebrated as the Great Father, in 1890, had devised the cocktail of wide-spectrum antibiotics, tonics and metabolism enhancers. Originally designed to give the men and women moving out of the cities in fire an edge against the cold and the plagues that swept the land, further reformulations had turned it into the miracle drug that gave the Russian aristokratyia its elan. A member of the servant class injecting panatseya? It was unheard of, the sole idea a subversion of the natural social order.

Suppressing a wave of cold fury at the dead girl, Varvara added the drugs to her personal collection, and moved to the second, smaller box. This too contained vials, each labeled with a neat number code. The content of the glass tubes was obviously blood. There were seven samples, and two unused vials. A mystery.

She undid the blue ribbon. Seven thin copybooks, the pages crowded with small, neat handwriting. Varvara had never guessed that her companion could read and write – but soon that proved the least of surprises/a very minor surprise. If she had expected a maid's sappy diaries, Varvara had to change her mind. M.'s thoughts held very little romanticism..

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12.

How much had she ignored about her companion!

Seen through Mariya's jaundiced eyes, their relationship had been a travesty, a game the servant had played on her mistress. It was pretty obvious, from the entries in the third and fourth of the seven notebooks, that Varvara herself was often mentioned with the code-name 'V'. A hare-brained wanton and a weakling, ready to fall for any new temptation.

V is a heartless shlyukha. Only opium and scandals. Just like T. She think she's toying with me. This will be so much fun.

That's how Mariya presented her. New scandals, outrageous games, unspeakable pleasures. The maid had been happy to offer her mistress ample opportunities to compromise herself. She had been used for Mariya's amusement. And yet Varvara had enjoyed being used, she had grown fond of the one that used her. She had thought she was in control.

First time with an Obez'yana. Deliciously primitive. Bruised all over. V would adore it. Maybe involve her next time.

How well had she known her! Varvara caught herself as her hand ran to the nightstand and her small brown bottle. And she had thought herself so stupendously wicked! In an outburst of fury, she screamed and threw the laudanum bottle against the wall, shattering it. A dark stain oozed down the mosaic, like a single tear on the face of white-bearded saint Jerome.

Nina ran to her, eyes wild. "Mistress...?"

"Get away from my sight, you stupid girl!"

Nina curtsied stiffly, looking like she'd rather run away.

"Get away!" Varvara repeated.

Once alone, she stood, and started pacing on the Persian rug, anger roaring in her ears, thoughts in a whirlwind.

What had been the girl's purpose?

Blackmail?

Varvara could not exclude that, and yet the diaries seemed to offer her the picture of a slightly deranged, profoundly nihilistic individual, who had sought any means to insult and short-circuit the system.

Lack of originality, everywhere, all over the world, from time immemorial, has always been considered the foremost quality and the recommendation of the active, efficient and practical individual.

G: the worst enemy of life, freedom and common decencies is total anarchy; their second worst enemy is total efficiency.

Am very efficient in my despising of common decencies, freedom and life. If my body is temple of my soul, then am going to leave no stone of it standing.

'G' as a detailed description of V. and M.'s tipsy visit to the third level showed, was Konstantin. As the diaries progressed, Konstantin stopped being a mentor and a romantic rebel. Soon he turned into yet another puppet in Mariya's hands. The couple had often visited the workers caves under the Palace, where Mariya had enjoyed pretending to be a prole, a rabochiye, much to her companion's surprise and consternation.

Chast'mashiny. Three days in the caves and am becoming part of the machine. It suits me. No identity. G & others worried. Going native? Like it here. Like the sense of community. Like mindless abandon in fatigue, euphoria of the productivity boosters. No waste of time or action. Men and

women are equal. All that counts is manning the dials, keep the machine going. No idle talk, no lies, no gossip. Everything is as is: work/work, food/food, sleep/sleep, play/play. A whole new world without fictions. G says rabochiye will be a new species in three generations. Want to be a new species too. Also, G say Chelovek Naverkhu uses Barchenko's gifts to control people. His, ours, the proles. Only the apes are free, because they do not depend on CN keeping them supplied. That can understand.

Chelovek Naverkhu, 'the Man Upstairs' was a common nickname for Czar Vladimir, or more in general, a metaphor of power. There were a lot of notes, increasingly technical, about Barchenko's work and its impact on Russian society. Many thought Barchenko's experiments, and the Crown's control of the medical supplies, had provided the Man Upstairs with the means to maintain power. Varvara herself had experimented with withdrawal, but only once. You did not want the supply lines to be cut. But to speak up such thoughts was of course conducive to unpleasantness.

And yet Mariya had not just been slumming, in her quest for strange and new, forbidden experiences. She had also gatecrashed aristokratya parties, with the help of the mysterious 'T'.

Passing myself off for one of them. There is no law against it, because they don't think it's possible. The fools only see skin, clothes, paint. 'T' Would not stop laughing, afterwards.

Dosed on panatseya and wearing one of her mistress' gowns, Mariya had been able to join even an official celebration in the Sky Hall, the glass-domed great marble hall on the very top of the Tower, where Czar Vladimir held court.

The Sky Hall made me dizzy, it was so big'ncrowded. So large. So luminous. I danced, and drank champagne, but couldn't take my eyes off the sky. When the clouds parted and I saw the lights up there, I thought I'd swoon. Z quite charming. And generous. T jealous.

Again with the complicity of 'T', Mariya had even tried to sneak on board one of the ships of the line, but here her lower-class origins had finally caught up with her.

Uniform fooled them, but outside is too much. Too open, unprotected. Exposed. Expected exhilaration, instead blanked, paralyzed. T helped me back inside. Hate showing weakness in front of them. There will be questions. Lay low for a few days.

Should have taken something stronger, Varvara thought cruelly. But it was at that point that the girl's diaries took a different turn. And again it was because of 'T'.

Been thinking about what T hinted. Must know for sure.

Sure about what?

Varvara sat back on the couch, and picked up the sixth notebook.

Q is willing to pay for samples of the Barchenko stuff. V says this is good, Chinese medications would level the field, free the people from the control of the Man Upstairs. Our time in the caves now has a political purpose. Must see Q on my own. See if can trade for help.

And so Mariya and her Anarchist friends had ended up working for the Chinese. It was nobody's secret that Reverend Duke Haw Bai, the Taiping ambassador, was always willing to buy information. Nobody admitted of ever selling anything to the apparently ageless man from Nanking, and Varvara had often wondered idly what form of payment he would offer. Haw Bai was a regular fixture at Vladimir's parties, and the subject of much gossiping. It was said he was a Reader, a mentalist of some sort, if not a sniffer, and that he was somehow artificially enhanced. There was talk of mysterious meetings in his suite on the fifteenth floor but again, nobody that participated had any willingness to talk. Not even aunt Theodora knew anything on the subject.

The fact that somehow Mariya had succeeded in gaining access to that piqued Varvara's interest and irritated her.

She lit a cigarette and went on reading.

13.

“Special Investigator von-Sternberg is here to see you, mistress.”

Nina was still looking at her like she expected her mistress to turn and bite her. Varvara turned distractedly. “What?”

Nina curtsied again, by now used at finding her mistress dazed and confused in the afternoon. “Special Investigator von-Sternberg...”

“Yes, yes. Show him in. No, wait, give me two minutes. Then let him in, and serve tea.”

“Yes, mistress.”

Moving like a sleepwalker, Varvara collected the notebooks and dropped them in a drawer, then sat stiffly on the couch, waiting for the visitor to come in.

The door opened. “Special Investigator von-Sternberg, mistress.”

Varvara smiled. von-Sternberg was in his usual informal attire. He carried a case, slung over a shoulder. He nodded to the retreating maid, and then squinted at Varvara.

“You are still unwell,” he said.

She shook her head. “No, my condition is actually improving, and soon I will be fine again. How can I help you? Please sit down...”

He stroked his bearded chin, but remained standing by the door. “We have found Ilyia Volkov. You identified him as the victim’s lover.”

Varvara nodded. “Didn’t know his full name, yes.”

“He denies his involvement. Claims Mariya Gerusova was actually the lover of a Konstantin Utkin, an engineer with notorious anarchic leanings.”

Nina chose that moment to come in with a tray. “Tea, mistress.”

Varvara gestured vaguely for her to go on. “I’m not an invalid,” she whispered, loud enough for everyone to hear.

von-Sternberg waited. “Is the name familiar to you?” he asked when Nina was gone.

“Possibly. Mariya had a lot of admirers. She was rather...”

“Promiscuous?”

“I would have said sociable.”

And she used codes for names and for labeling blood samples.

“I ask because of Utkin’s apartment. It was recently destroyed. In a fire.”

Varvara poured herself a cup of tea. “That terrible accident a few days ago?” she asked. How admirably firm was her hand, she noticed. “That was disquieting. The whole of Tsaritsin could have blown up.”

“No accident. The fire was arranged.”

“You obviously think this was connected with Mariya’s killing.”

And of course it was. Was Sternberg here to arrest her?

Varvara was surprised noticing that she did not really care.

“It stands to reason. Considering the timing. It happened on the same day I met you downstairs. You were searching your servant’s apartment.”

“Was this Utkin’s place on the same level as Mariya’s?”

“No.”

“So we did not really run any risk, right?”

von-Sternberg’s smile sent a chill down her spine. “No, we didn’t.”

“And Utkin...?”

The investigator crossed his arms. “He is missing. We had one of our psychometrysts: A sniffer, as they are called. In Utkin’s apartment. After the event.”

“How fascinating.”

“Not as much as you may think. We found this.”

From his case he extracted a large book. “This is yours.”

He offered it to her.

Varvara stood. “It could be, yes.”

It was the Lyell book. Paper is so hard to burn, she thought. “Yes, it’s mine.”

von-Sternberg pushed it towards her. The pages were blackened at the margins, the cover scarred. “Take it, then.”

“It must have been...”

Varvara took the volume and hugged it, holding it against her chest. It smelt of dust and smoke.

“Was it stolen from you? By Gerusova?”

Varvara nodded.

“You did not report it stolen.”

“No, I didn’t.”

A shrug. “And yet, it’s hard to miss.”

They stood like that for a moment.

Varvara felt like the pieces of a complicated puzzle were suddenly clicking together. Her head spun as she contemplated the image the puzzle offered her. It was so cruelly simple. So obvious. Varvara’s eyes burned. She felt a single tear run down her cheek.

von-Sternberg coughed, softly. “I think I should leave you now..”

14.

What a laugh! Q's analyses leave no doubt. Blood does not lie, and T was right, after all. Heartless shlyukha's matches my sample. Who would have imagined it. Darling little sister. Explains why we enjoy so much the same vices.

Little sister.

The man in the corridor, the one that had tried to stab her in the lift, had called her 'Little sister.' Varvara sat on the couch, hugging her burned and scarred book, and stared in the distance. Nina picked up the tray and left the room in silence.

15.

Such was the chaos on the fifteenth floor that the Guards didn't stop Varvara until she was in the vast circular hall of the Chinese legation. The great chandelier was aflame, all burners burning, like a wonderful sphere of crystal and light. The great red and gold Taiping dragon banner hung from a wall, staring at her through green jade eyes. People in uniform milled around her. On the great blue and green carpet, a single sheet of paper rested, crumpled and dirty, like an autumn leaf. Sitting on a bench by the double door that led into the Chinese ambassador's personal quarters, a girl in a periwinkle silk dress sat, her face in her hands, crying. A man wearing the Ochrana armband stood by her, tapping his foot impatiently. Through another door, she could see a body stretched on the ground, covered with a white sheet.

"Varvara Vorovina Boleslavskaia."

She turned. She had opted for a straight black gown, almost classical in its simplicity, and high-heeled shoes. Their eyes were almost level. "We should stop meeting like this," she said. "People will gossip." von-Sternberg took her by the arm and led her through a door, into a small room that had all the appearance of having been bombed. He righted a turned-up chair and motioned for her to sit down, then leaned on the edge of the desk, crossing his arms. "What are you doing here?"

"I was here to see the Reverend Duke Haw Bai."

"He's not here."

She looked around. There was an uncanny mix of normalcy and devastation. Vases had been smashed, but the books stood neatly aligned on their shelves. The chairs had been upturned, but the desk was in perfect order. As she watched, a pen slowly rolled on the desktop and fell on the floor. "I was guessing he might not be available."

"What was your business with Haw?"

Varvara smiled demurely. "That's personal."

"Personal is no more," von-Sternberg replied. "This is no longer murder. This is serious. The Empire itself--"

"I would have thought murder to be serious enough."

He sighed, wearily. "This is espionage."

"Mariya was working for the Taiping," Varvara said.

"If not her, her friend Utkin was."

"The both of them," she said.

von-Sternberg pulled his beard. "What is your role in all this?"

Varvara shook her head. "I don't know. I was used."

"How did you meet Haw?"

She looked up. "What?"

He was waiting, his hand shutting rhythmically, with a metallic clang.

"Maybe I saw him at court," she said, slowly. "I never made his acquaintance."

"Then why are you here?"

"I thought he could help me."

von-Sternberg snorted. "He can barely help himself."

"What happened?"

He shrugged. "We were getting close to him. He abandoned the palace."

"You mean he is," Varvara said, incredulous, "gone out?"

"Haw and some members of his entourage. They took a sled."

She shuddered. The idea of being out there, in the cold, with nothing around but snow and icy wind...

"What sort of help were you looking for?"

"It's personal."

"I repeat, personal is dead, Varvara Vorovina Boleslavskaja. This is a matter of the State."

"Read Mariya's diaries," she said, feeling suddenly very tired. "Send your people to my apartment. They'll find a stack of notebooks. Mariya was very precise in taking notes."

“Where do these diaries come from?”

She shrugged. “Does it really matter?”

He gestured to someone in the hall. A man with the red armband came over. He was young, lean, with a scar on his cheek.

“Escort the lady to her apartment,” von-Sternberg said. “Take Yolkin with you. There are notebooks there. Send Yolkin back with them. You stay there, make sure the lady does not leave her place.”

The man in the red armband clicked his heels.

Varvara stood. “Am I under arrest?”

“It’s for your protection.”

“Of course.”

She gestured for the man to lead the way, but he bowed, and let her go through the door first.

16.

They navigated the crowd that was gathering outside of the Taiping legation, and soon were in a large, well lit corridor.

“This way,” the scarred one said, taking the lead. Yolkin was young, almost a child. He glanced at Varvara while they walked to the lifts. Was he blushing? His scarred colleague summoned a cabin.

“Varvara dorogoy!”

She turned. Her aunt Theodora was hastening towards them, one hand grasping a fold of her ample, old fashioned skirt. The old woman flooded her in perfume as they air-kissed three times.

“Have you any idea of what is happening, dear?” Theodora breathed.

“Some kind of disturbance,” Varvara said. “I have no idea...”

“The Chinese?” Theodora asked, stepping closer still, her voice falling to a conspiratorial whisper. “Some weird Oriental mystery, maybe?”

The elevator chimed, and the doors opened.

“If you’ll excuse us, Tante Theo...”

Yolkin stepped in, followed by Varvara. Theodora made to follow them.

“I am afraid you can’t, madam,” the scarred one said.

Theodora’s eyes widened. “What do you mean, young man?”

She turned to Varvara. “What is going on, dear?”

Varvara took a deep breath. “It’s just...”

Theodora pulled a needler out of the fold of her skirt and shot the Ochrana man in the neck. Then she turned and killed Yolkin with a shot in the head. She stepped in and dialed 'down'. Covering Varvara with her needler, she picked the electric gun in the dead man's shoulder holster.

Varvara moved to avoid the pool of blood spreading on the carpet.

"So it was you," she whispered.

"Don't act so surprised, darling."

"But I am. Surprised."

And yet, somebody must have introduced Konstantin and Mariya to Haw Bai. How could two commoners from the lower levels have gained the confidence of an ambassador?

"You set her up from the start," Varvara said. "Well before she met me. You worked on her, molded her, played on her fantasies and her weaknesses..."

"She wasn't that weak, believe me."

"You... Haw Bai, really, needed someone to bring him the Anarchists. And you used Mariya, as a tool."

"You were always so brilliant," Theodora teased. "If only you had not dulled your wits through self-indulgence, you'd make an excellent investigator..."

"Only things did not go as you planned, did they?"

She retreated further, until the cold wall of the cabin pressed against her back.

"Who would have thought that sweet Mariya would have kept a diary," Theodora shook her head, incredulously. She was holding the needler in her fist, pressed against her hip. She pulled the emergency lever. The elevator stopped with a shudder.

"This has nothing to do with Haw, doesn't it?" Varvara said, truth slowly dawning on her. "This has absolutely nothing to do with espionage, with stolen Barchenko formulas, with the Man Upstairs, with revolution and betrayal. She was... what, blackmailing you?"

Theodora laughed. "You can't imagine what the little minx asked of me!"

"Oh, I think I can, Tante Theo."

A sad smile crept on Varvara's face. "Aunt Theodora," she said, softly, half to herself. And then, "She wanted you to acknowledge her, didn't she?" she said.

"Shut up!"

Varvara didn't. It was not like she had much to lose anymore. "She wanted her high-born mother to restore her in her rightful place, among the aristokratyia..."

"She was a brain-dead wanton," Theodora sneered.

"She was your daughter, Mother!"

Theodora's mouth hung open. She lifted the needler, pointing it straight at Varvara's face.

"She took our blood samples. We certainly provided her with ample opportunities, right, Mother?"

The older woman was breathing heavily, her eyes on her daughter's.

"That's why you had her throat slit," Varvara went on, "isn't it? Not for the conspiracies, the betrayal, the spy-work. It was not even jealousy, or suspicion. It was because of the scandal. Of the gossip, engulfing you. Two illegitimate daughters."

"Shut up!"

"It was back in the days of your hunting parties, I guess..."

"I said you shut up!" the older woman hissed.

"You make me!" Varvara shouted. Her voice reverberated in the metal cabin. "Who was our father? Was it the same man? Do you actually remember him, mother dear?"

"Of course I remember him!"

Silence hung like a dark cloud between them. Varvara's lips formed a perfect O. She gulped. "Casimir," she whispered.

Lights flickered. The lift lurched in motion again.

Theodora pulled the trigger.

17.

The mechanical hand clicked open and closed, one click per second, like clockwork.

“You will get used to it.”

Varvara turned her eye on von-Sternberg.

“Really?”

He nodded.

“Do come in. Take a seat.” She lifted her new mechanical hand. “I heard somewhere you can’t stop bullets with your hands,” she said.

“Looks like I did it.”

von-Sternberg came closer to her bed. “You were lucky.”

“Lucky,” Varvara repeated.

Instinct. She had raised her arm to protect her face. From what doctor Lobkovitz had explained after the operation, the needle had hit her wrist, shattering the bone and almost completely severing her hand. The impact had slowed it down as it went through, so that when the metal shard hit her face, it did not have the power any longer to go through her brain. Theodora, on the other hand, had not experienced any such problem when she had turned the weapon on herself.

Varvara gave him a lopsided smile. “Do you like my eye-patch?” she asked, bitterness in her voice. “I’m having a whole set made, in different

colors, to match my outfits. There is this milliner, on level nine. My aunt recommended her to me.”

She stopped and her hand contracted. Open. Closed. One second. von-Sternberg shook his head, and sat on the chair by her bed. “It takes time.”

“How long did it take you?”

His hand snapped. Closed. Open. One second. He arched an eyebrow.

“We cannot have absolute control,” he said.

“Strange idea, coming from you.”

“It is true.”

Varvara shook her head. “I owe you an apology,” she said. “And some thanks.”

“Citizen safety is my first concern. And citizens should thank you. You helped eradicating a spy ring.”

She laughed. The sound surprised her. “Sorry.”

Espionage was so much easier to explain than base, everyday animal scandal.

“What about the Taiping man?” she asked.

“He is still missing. The official line is he was lost during a hunting expedition.”

How apt, she thought.

Nina came through the door, carrying a tray. “Mistress, tea.”

The girl was about to leave, when Varvara called her.

“Mistress?”

Varvara turned to von-Sternberg. “I wish to recommend you our Nina, here,” she said.

The Ochrana man turned a quizzical stare at the servant. “Really?”

Nina was pale, her hand on the doorknob. “I...”

“She is very discreet, a good observer, a fast thinker. She is absolutely loyal. She would certainly be an asset in your organization. It’s a pity that she can’t read.” Varvara smiled. “Because you can’t, can you, dear?”

“No more than a few words necessary for my work, mistress.”

Varvara tried to pick a cup with her mechanical hand. The cup slipped from the steel fingers, and clattered on the plate.

“Which is why,” she went on, without looking up, “when you informed your mistress... your true mistress, my late aunt, of poor Mariya’s diaries, you were unable to give her any detail about the contents.”

Nina gasped. “Mistress! I never...”

“What surprises me,” Varvara said, shrugging and picking the cup with her left hand, “is how did you know those were Mariya’s diaries and not, who knows, some old recipes from my old cook.”

The servant shifted her weight from one foot to the other, her face taking a stern expression. “You found them in Mariya’s room. When you went there.”

“She is also very good at feigning sleep,” Varvara said, arching an eyebrow, piqued. “And laudanum is like water for her, which is something you would never suspect from looking at her.”

Nina let go of the door handle.

“I wouldn’t drink that tea, if I were you,” von-Sternberg said.

Varvara’s single eye burned. She lifted the teacup. “Is the gentleman right, Nina?”

“You are so brilliant,” the girl smirked, “you decide for yourself.”

Varvara sighed theatrically. “I am so tired of people calling me brilliant.”

She put down the cup. “Before they try to kill me.”

von-Sternberg stood up. “I think I must go back to work.”

He stepped up to Nina and his iron hand locked around her wrist, with a definitive sound.

“Come see me again,” Varvara said cheerfully.

“I seem to always find you in bed,” he said.

She gave him an outraged look. “Sir, your manners!”

He smiled briefly, gave Varvara a nod. Then he was gone, fuming Nina in tow.

With a sigh, Varvara laid back on her cushion, her head spinning a little. The doctor had said she would experience dizzy spells and balance problems. She caressed her satin eye-patch with the tip of her fingers.

Resting in her lap, her iron hand open and closed, like a grotesque timepiece.

At last...

Number the Brave 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!

Panatseiya and the Russian Chemical Obsession

"The Chemical Father of Modern Russia"

Alexander Vasilyevich Barchenko is considered the most influent scientist in post-Catastrophe Russia.

Starting in 1900, the young genius developed a series of treatments whose purpose was "to enhance the survival possibilities of the Russian population, and nurture a full adaptation to the new conditions".

Already a large percentage of the Russian upper class was developing a dependence on opiates to fight the psychological effects of living inside the sealed palaces of the 'aristokratiya' (the so-called 'Otshe'nik': a mix of claustrophobia, agoraphobia, enochlophobia).

Barchenko simply provided more effective solutions to contingent problems.

Elixirs

Barchenko researched substances that could further improve the conditions of the Russian survivors.

The 'Barchenko Elixirs' come in three standard classes:

Panatsiia

A cocktail of wide-spectrum antibiotics, tonics and metabolism enhancers. It was originally designed to give the men and women moving out of the cities in fire an edge against the cold and the plagues sweeping the land, but further reformulations turned it into the miracle drug that gave the Russian aristokratiya its élan.

One of Russia's best guarded secrets, Panatsiia use is allowed only to the aristocracy (legend has it that any commoner using it would die in horrible pain – but this is not true), and is routinely administered to the members of the upper class starting at age 12.

Panatseiya increases the body immunity, its resilience and resistance to the cold, and it accelerates healing. It also increases perception and (supposedly) extends life expectancy.

The typical traits popularly associated with Russian aristocracy (pale skin and hair, a general thinner body than average, the cold and detached attitude) are often attributed to the use of Panatseiya.

Panatseiya in Game. Rule wise, any Russian character with the Noble Edge gains the benefits of the Panatseiya Edge (see below). Other characters can buy it normally, with the permission of the GM.

Military-Grade Enhancers

In 1910 Barchenko designed a chemical cocktail to enhance the performance of the Russian troops. Two types of enhancers are known. They are both for military only personnel, but they can be found on the black market with a Streetwise (-2) roll. They cost 500 \$ per dose or dispenser.

Background Enhancer. Routinely administered to the troops, it is a lower-grade version of panatseiya (or acts like it), providing limited protection against the cold and increased self-healing.

Rule wise it works as the Panatseiya Edge, but the effects last only for a month.

Combat Booster. Usually injected on demand by small automatic dispensers (responding to an increase in heart-rate), the combat booster drug provides a temporary increase in strength, agility, aggression and reaction times, while lowering the pain threshold. The effect lasts a few minutes, and usually leaves the subject dazed and exhausted afterwards.

Rule wise each dispenser comes with three doses of a drug which raises by one dice step the Strength, Vigor and Agility of the user for six rounds. After that time, they cause a level of Fatigue, which last for an hour. This Fatigue is cumulative, and can lead to Exhaustion and to death.

Productivity Enhancers

The use of productivity enhancers is limited to the worker classes, the 'rabochiye' living in the underground factories and corridors beneath the aristocracy's palaces.

The enhancers provide focus and boost energy during the long hours of repetitive work, and provide a sense of well-being and euphoria.

In gaming terms, they allow to ignore the penalty of one level of Fatigue. Be warned, Fatigue is still there, only "masked" by the drug, and this can easily lead to incapacitation and death. The effect of a Productivity Enhancer lasts for 24 hours. They cost only 30 \$, but frequent use cause dependency (the Barchenko Syndrome Hindrance).

Other Issues

Barchenko enhancers are a powerful tool for the preservation of the status quo.

Production and distribution are an exclusive privilege of the Csar. Palace conspiracy, workers revolts or military coups are automatically prevented by the menace of cutting the supply of enhancers.

Many researchers outside of Russia (most notably professor Joseph Cavor, of the Royal Academy of Sciences) have expressed the opinion that Barchenko's drugs might cause a progressive mutation in the Russian population, as alterations in body chemistry are transmitted by birth.

"It is easy to imagine a near future in which the Russian social classes have become separate species, incapable of interbreeding, and each with its peculiar physical character."

(Prof. J. Cavor, address at the Royal Academy of Science, April 1932).

Known negative effects of the elixirs include violent and painful withdrawal symptoms and psychological dependence.

The recreational use of Barchenko's elixirs has been described, and has supposedly caused some (unconfirmed) disturbances in the Russian palaces.

New Edges

Panatsriya (Background Edge)

Requirements: Novice

The character, in youth, was routinely administered doses of this special drug, developing amazing immunities. In gaming terms, he receives +2 to all rolls to resist to cold and illness, plus he can do an additional natural healing roll every two days.

New Hindrance

Barchenko Syndrome (Major)

The frequent use of Productivity Enhancers causes a dangerous dependency called Barchenko Syndrome. The effects can be very different, in a casual, unpredictable way.

A character who doesn't get his fix must make a Fatigue check every 24 hours thereafter.

The first failed roll requires to draw a card from the Action Deck to check what "path" the syndrome takes this time. If it is black, it is the Fatigue Path, if it is red, it is the Violence Path.

Fatigue Path. The first failed roll makes the character Fatigued, the second Exhausted.

Violence Path. The first failed roll makes the hero very susceptible and irritable, which manifests in -2 to Charisma. The second failed roll causes an actual outburst of violence. The character is considered to have the Berserk Edge, already activated.

Both Paths lasts for 1d6 days, or they end after getting a fix.

Afterward, the hero must buy off the Hindrance by sacrificing an opportunity to Advance or he eventually falls back into his dependency.

The Imperial Palace of Tsaritsin and Russian Architecture

When the Catastrophe hit, the court of Czar Alexander II - like most European administrations - looked for a suitable place to relocate in order to survive the rapidly degenerating weather conditions.

Tsaritsin, a port city on the west bank of the Volga river, was selected as the new seat of the Russian crown. Work started in earnest to build a new Imperial Palace and extensive redesign of the city took place.

Today, Tsaritsin is a prime example of the Russian "zima krepost'" (Winter Fortress) - a self-contained building that rises, tower-like, above the surrounding frozen landscape, defying the cold winds from the north.

The city/tower of Tsaritsin has a layer structure which follows the social stratification of Russian society.

The upper structure and the tower proper, known as "desyat'ki" (the Tens), houses the apartments of the aristocracy, the administrative offices and, on the top floor, the Imperial court itself and the quarters of the Czar and his family and entourage.

Landing pads and other external structures extend from the main body of the Tens.

The ground levels, or "vnizu" (Downstairs), are reserved to the servants and soldiers, and also house utilities. These "lower quarters" also incorporate the original buildings of Tsaritsin, and are normally buried beneath the snow layer.

The underground levels are the seat of the geothermal heating systems and of the factories. This is where the rabochiye (working class citizens, laborers) live and work, in an artificially-lit warren of corridors and underground chambers. Access to the underground levels is formally prohibited without official authorization.

Notable features and locations

The Sky Dome - at the top (21st) level of the Palace of Tsaritsin, the steel-reinforced glass dome houses the Tzar's personal winter garden and his festival hall, the emperor's personal observatory and throne room. Emperor Vladimir is said to spend most of his time in the dome. The dome is heavily guarded, and can be accessed only by the aristocracy and, upon invitation, by foreign visitors.

Devyat' Plaza. Also known as Casimir's Plaza, this vast space occupies level Nine of the tower, and acts as a connection between the aristocracy's levels and the commoners' levels. The plaza is dominated by the statue of Czar Casimir, also known as The Little Father of the New Russian Empire, and features shops and workshops that cater for the needs of the aristocracy. The Plaza is also the lower terminal point of the Great Staircase that serves the upper levels. Elevators, service stairs and service slides lead from the Plaza to the lower levels.

The Great Staircase. A wide spiral staircase connecting the upper levels and acting as the main thoroughfare for the aristocracy. The staircase is forty feet wide and is usually crowded with people moving from one storey to the other, having conversations or interacting socially. On some levels, the wide steps are used as parlors, and equipped with couches and tables. The Staircase is the place where duels are normally held (the Russian aristocracy having a passion for dueling).

The Machine Chambers (mashina kamery) and the Central Heating system. The underground levels are a gloomy, dark labyrinth of colossal chambers and low corridors, where the rabochiye (also known as troglodytes, proles or, to Raj and Company citizens, morlocks) spend their lives on sixteen-hours cycles of work. The place is dominated by huge machines and warren-like living quarters. The Central Heating System, that uses the water of the Volga and geothermal energy to heat the upper levels rises cathedral-like at the heart of the underground levels. Men are constantly at work, manning the dials that regulate the flow of steam and heat.

Russian Mechanical Prosthetics and Fabulous Weapons

With their sinister design and gunmetal finishing, the Russian prosthetic limbs are one of the trademarks of the Russian military class.

While off-the shelf models are easily available, the Russian aristocracy often favors custom-made limbs. These may include hidden compartments and weapons (spring-activated blades, needle-guns), and normally feature custom-designed ornamentation and jewelry. The basic artificial limb is designed to perfectly emulate and replace a natural limb.

Yet, hand replacements are often tweaked to acquire extra strength of finer manipulator skills.

Prosthetic Limbs in Game

A replaced, basic limb, simply restores the functionality of the old limb (see the costs in the table), and they have the same Toughness of the person using it +2 (useful for called shots).

In addition to the basic limb, you can acquire one or more modifications, depending from the size.

Distinctive Drawback: the nerve/muscle interface of Russian artificial limbs is not perfect, so that the user's stress can cause mechanical "tics" to develop. This is at the origin of the cliché - popular with penny dreadful authors - of the evil Russian mastermind whose hand snaps open and closed during moments of tension. Whenever a character with a prosthesis is handled a deuce as first Action Card, the limb "tics", making noise, and cannot be used in the current round.

Destroying a Prosthetic Limb: Usually a called shot is necessary to intentionally hit a prosthetic limb, but it can also happen in case the character rolls on the Incapacitation table, and the location selected is that of the prosthesis. When it happens, it is really bad news, because these gizmos are powered by mercury batteries, which, if damaged,

release a cloud (Medium Burst Template) of very poisonous and corrosive gas (a Vigor roll is required to avoid suffering 2d8 damage). The cloud dissipates after 1d6 rounds.

LIMB	BASIC COST	COST FOR MODIFICATION	MAX MODIFICATIONS
Wrist and hand	2000	1000	1
Forearm and hand	3000	1500	1
Whole arm and hand	5000	7500	2
Lower leg and foot	5000	2500	2
Whole leg and foot	7000	3500	3

Modifications

Available modifications are:

Armored: The limb is protected by extra metal layers, granting it +2 Toughness.

Bejeweled: The limb is inlaid in gold, jewels and so on. It is clearly artificial, but grants +1 Charisma.

Crude: The limb is very ugly (-2 Charisma), but the cost of this modification is subtracted, not added to the total cost of the limb.

Enhanced Attribute: Choose an attribute (Strength or Agility). The limb raises by one dice step the relevant skill dice.

Weapon: The limb is fitted with an implanted limb (maximum size of a dagger or a handgun for a hand, a short sword for an arm or a leg). The weapon can be found only with a bodily inspection and a Notice (-2) roll. Cost of weapon not included.

Needle Gun

A weapon using an electromagnetic field to accelerate a shard of iron over the speed of sound. The weapon is rare and extremely expensive, and is usually favored by the Russian aristocracy (but its use as a dueling weapon is considered impolite).

Small and highly concealable, a needle gun is a fast, very short range weapon that delivers damage equal to that of a large caliber gun.

A standard needle gun fits the fist, the barrel being half between the first and second finger, and has a magazine of twenty needles. A second version of Needle Gun exists, called Dart Gun, which shoots poisoned darts at short range. An assassin's weapon, is even more rare.

WEAPON	RANGE	DAMAGE	ROF	COST	SHOTS	NOTES
Dart Gun	4/8/16	2d6	1	1000	8	Silenced, Poisoned
Needle Gun	6/12/24	2d8	1	1000	20	AP 1, Silenced

Poisoned: A target Shaken or wounded by this weapon suffers the effect of the darts' poison. Many type of toxins can be delivered with this weapon, usually Lethal, Paralysis or Knockout poisons (see Savage Worlds core rules).

Silenced: A silenced weapon is very difficult to hear. When it shots, place a Large Burst Template centered on the shooter. Any person within it are allowed a Notice roll to hear it, while outside the Template no sound is heard.

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.

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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

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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**

