



Hope & Glory



WHEN IN ROME



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When in Rome

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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.

When in Rome
by Davide Mana

1.

The outskirts of Rome in August, cold beneath the gray sky, the smell of incoming snow in the air. The natives were shuffling in line, each one carrying some treasure they wished to trade. They wore rough furs and assorted rags. They were dirty and uncouth and wild-haired - descendants of those that had decided to remain when the ashes and the snow came. Or maybe those that had been left behind. Here and there, some quirky piece of ancient clothing or houseware appeared. A crumpled stovepipe hat pulled down low on the dirty hair of an old woman, a flower-patterned duvet worn like a cloak by a gentleman, and a necklace of bent spoons gracing the neck of one of the younger females.

At the trading post, Hu and Luongo were haggling fiercely.

The Romans loved that - gave them an excuse to linger at the table, in the heat of the gas burners the Company men usually set up nearby.

An old man was trying to exchange a gilded, baroque table clock, for two blankets.

“Umberto!”

The Italian patted Hu on the shoulder and walked to Trevanian.

“Boss?”

“Is that thing working?”

Luongo nodded. "Perfect conditions, grampy sez he got it in a big house to the south. The place is snowed in, he sez."

"You believe him?"

The Italian shrugged. "Might lead to something good."

Trevarian glanced at the old man. He was staring at them, protectively cradling his clock. Looking closely, he was probably no more than forty, but appeared worn and haggard like an octuagenarian.

"Fine, throw in a box of cigars. Make it clear we are looking for special stuff."

"Yeah, boss," Luongo grinned. "Books, paintings..."

"Exactly."

Luongo gave Trevarian a nod and went back to the table, stopping by the crates of trading goods to get a box of Company Finest n. 5.

2.

Rome had been called The Eternal City, and for a brief moment, soon after the first signs of the Catastrophe, it really had seemed the ancient town would barely be touched. It was the southernmost of the European capital cities, and Italy was protected by a high range of mountains, a wall against the cold and the snow. The Mediterranean would work as a thermal conditioning system, the scientists in the Regia Accademia delle Scienze said as Turin, the Savoy capital was freezing over. The climate would turn barren Sicily into a garden, providing the Italian states with plenty of food to survive the long winter that was seizing the rest of the Northern Hemisphere. Italy would be a garden, surrounded by ice, the Royal Academicals said.

The cold wind at his back, the Savoy King had struck at Rome, vanquishing the Papal forces and moving his court there, ready to rule over a garden nation. But it turned out the Royal Academicals had been overly optimistic.

The Savoy crowd and the Republicans had been at each other's throat from early on, fighting in the north. Republican leader Mazzini was not willing to come to pacts with the Piedmontese, and the Austrians were backing him, themselves in search of a southern, untouched paradise in which to move their population.

The British had done something similar, the Spanish and Portuguese were looking for an escape route, too. And so had the French. Why not turn Italy into the India, the Brazil, the Algeria of the Austro-Hungarian Empire? But the weather worsened after the Black Rain, and the war ground to a halt, the opposing lines digging into the ashes and the sterilized soil to keep their positions. But the King was far away, in the Eternal City, and he did not feel the hardships of trench warfare.

Then the Thirty Years Winter came, pushing ice down the Alpine valleys and the Appennines. No crops grew in ice-bound Sicily, nor in Apulia, buried under fifteen feet of snow. Those that could, ran. They moved south along the peninsula, carrying their things in bundles. From Reggio della Calabria, from Brindisi, they sailed. A nation of scatterlings, braving the storms and the ice floes. To North Africa, to Egypt, to Palestine.

Up north, the wind blasted the Piedmontese and the Republicans in their trenches along the Ticino river. With the ice, strange beasts and peoples came. Some were refugees from beyond the mountains, feet wrapped in rags and hunger in their eyes. Some were not.

Cities fell: Bologna, Florence, Naples. And early one morning a flying ship airlifted Pope Pius and his court from Castle Gandolfo, where they had been holding on to what was left of the Papal State, and the starving citizens of Rome finally understood it was all over. Then what had happened in most capitals of the world happened in the Eternal City. The people rioted, crowding the snowbound streets in search of someone on which to discharge their desperation. The systems failed, the forces of law collapsing under the press of the rioting masses. Then the fires started, staining red the clouds with their light, and blackening the marble buildings of the Popes with their smoke. Heads fell as the flames rose. Too late the Royal family tried to flee. Then the howling wind overcame the howl of the crowd, and there was finally silence.

The Eternal City had fallen, and was no more.

3.

The ice was striped in different hues of gray, blue, black and purple. Seasonal cycles, the Summer sun melting the snow, Winter freezing the water trickling down the staircase in layer upon layer of ice.

The banister was a sculpture of icicles, some crystal-clear, some foggy, the ice giving way to metal and marble only at the very foot of the stair.

Captain Trevanian cranked the battery, the light of his lamp brightening. He pointed the amber cone of light on the walls of the corridor, causing the frost over the paintings to sparkle. Proud bishops in purple stared at him severely through the thin veil of frozen humidity. Indecently exposed matrons leered salaciously as they reclined on extravagant ottomans, their bare skin pink and florid despite the cold, their tresses piled up in unlikely hairdos. He turned, his beacon reflected and refracted by old, wrinkled mirrors. On a side table, another gilded baroque clock rested under a cracked glass bell, its hands frozen in the past. The passage had a kind of underwater quality, the checkered floor covered in debris and snowdrifts, a chandelier leaning on its side where it had fallen, glass teardrops scattered all around, each of them catching the lamplight and multiplying it in a blizzard of rainbows.

Halfway along the corridor, maybe ten yards from the foot of the staircase, a single skeleton sat on the floor, the rags of some uniform hanging from its bleached bones, scraps of cold-burned skin plastered on its skull. It waited there, shoulders propped against the wall, with the relaxed, resigned attitude of someone that had been left too long to wait.

Trevarian did not recognize the uniform. Stepping cautiously on the iced floor, a cloud of steam escaping from his pale lips, he moved closer. The long bones of both legs were cracked. The adventurer lifted his light higher, and squinted in the dusk.

Something crashed somewhere upstairs, causing a rain of icicles. The ceiling creaked. Trevarian cursed under his breath, and hooked his light to his backpack harness. His gloved hands free, he turned to climb back up the frozen waterfall that had once been a staircase. The sitting skeleton did not seem to mind, being left alone again.

4.

“Whatever happened,” Trevanian asked, squinting in the glare of the sun.

“Sorry, Boss,” Hu pointed at a heap of wood and metal wires. “The piano died on us.”

Under the painted dome, the upper hall looked like a boxed stretch of tundra. Snow had drifted in through the smashed French windows, enough of it to half-bury the wreckage – but not quite. Skeletal sculpted chairs, rags of some draperies at the windows, a large painting obscured by a thick layer of frost.

Two men appeared from a side door, carefully carrying a painting.

“We found a nice Venetian sunset,” Luongo said, coming after them. He carried a box full of books. “And a fine selection of history books.” He put down the box, pulled off a glove and picked one of the volumes. “And an old Bible. Very old.”

Trevanian took the volume and turned a few pages. The binding cracked, the paper rigid and frail. “Gutenberg?”

Luongo nodded.

“Where are the others?”

The Italian was putting his glove back. “Singh took two men down the service staircase.”

Trevanian grimaced. The two lower floors were buried in ice.

“There’s lots of stuff down there, right?” Luongo said.

“Yes, but I don’t like this place.”

Luongo shrugged. “The bums that live in the Quirinale ruins say this is a good scavenging ground.”

“If it’s so good, why aren’t they here scavenging?”

“It’s not like we come here regularly. They did bring us some stuff from this area, if not this house in particular. They just have no reason to hoard books or paintings, or old mechanical things they can’t understand anymore.”

Luongo picked up the box and followed the footsteps of the men, to go load his bounty on the back of the crawler.

“We’re lucky they didn’t use the books as fuel,” he said over his shoulder.

Trevanian stood alone in the center of the frozen room. He looked up, at the procession of fat cherubs and smiling naked women, frolicking among flowers, beneath a blue sky. A chunk of the fresco crumbled into dust as he watched, the colored debris staining the snow. The other captains in the Company called it Freeloading, and considered it a nice way to make a collateral gain in spite of the regulations, but to him this was a melancholy, depressing way to make a profit. Just a step over looting the dead along the highway. He could not look on the wrecks of the old European nations, and not feel a pang of nostalgia for something he had never known. The nostalgia was mixed with the curiosity for those people, their lives, their world before the skies turned black and flames and ice engulfed the Old Continent.

He could imagine them sitting here, sipping tea and listening to someone playing the piano. A girl, he imagined, a young woman of maybe sixteen, wearing a pale pink dress, her hair an extravagant pile like those he had seen in the paintings below. Black hair, pale skin.

“Too much imagination,” Swami Jairam had used to say, “is not a good trait in a warrior.”

But Trevanian never wanted to be a warrior, and right now he did not feel like a merchant-prince. He kicked the remains of the crashed piano. A string snapped, with a resounding noise.

He felt like a grave robber.

A gunshot rang out in the distance.

Then two more, very close.

No time for imagination.

5.

Trevanian took two men down the service staircase. They all carried short repeater guns. They half-ran, half-slid down the steps.

A narrow door led them inside the great kitchen of the villa, copper pans hanging from the ceiling like stalactites, caked in icicles. Keeping the guns at the ready, they cranked the batteries of their lights, casting grotesque shadows on the walls. Footprints were easy to follow on the frosted floor.

They passed the ransacked remains of a large pantry, the door smashed, jagged spikes of glass embedded in the ice where vases had been smashed on the tiles.

"Something comes!" one of the men hissed.

They waited, guns pointed.

Weak lights danced at the far end of the corridor, and soon Singh was coming towards them, grim and disheveled, his thick sheepskin jacket torn at a shoulder. Behind him, one of the men was helping the other along.

"Savages," the Sikh said, moving to the side to let the injured man pass and continue on his way. "Six of them."

"We better move on," Trevanian said.

Singh nodded, and rummaged in his breast pocket. "There's something else."

He handed over a single brass casing, as long as his thumb. "It was still warm when I found it," he said.

Trevanian handled the metal cylinder awkwardly, the brass slipping between his gloved fingers. He pulled off a glove with his teeth, and took the casing between thumb and forefinger.

"This is none of ours," he said, squinting at the metal.

"Russian."

"Are you sure?"

Singh cocked his head. His family had been defending the Northwestern Frontier for five generations. If someone knew a Russian bullet casing, it was him.

"So we have company," Trevanian said. "More reason to get away from here."

They started up the staircase, two men bringing up the rear, an eye out for any savage Roman or other interlopers willing to try his luck against them.

6.

There were ten men, wearing black uniforms, waiting for them outside. They were keeping Hu and the others at gunpoint.

Trevanian stopped, Singh at his side hissing through his teeth.

Luongo was talking with a tall woman in a man's black uniform, long blond hair cascading down her back. Ostentatious, considering the wind. When Trevanian and his party froze on their tracks, the Italian turned, and pointed at them. The woman said something, small vapor clouds escaping her lips, and Luongo followed.

"New friends of yours?" Trevanian asked when the Italian was close enough.

"A Captain Leonova, of the Buran. Imperial Air Service."

Trevanian cursed.

The Treaty of Samarkand stated that Raj and Company expeditions could land in Continental Europe only with the knowledge, and explicit permission, of the other signers: the Russian Empire, the Zulu Nation and the African Confederation.

True, the Ostrich was supposedly chartered to Luongo, who, as a citizen of the Italian Principality, fell in a gray zone, as far as the Treaty was concerned.

But Russian enforcers with guns were no good news by any means.

"What goes down?" Trevanian asked.

Luongo pushed his hands inside his ample sleeves. "She does not question the chartering," he said. "I think the lady wishes to speak with you."

Trevanian nodded, and walked briskly to the Russian woman.

The soldiers, he noticed, were shock trooper material, massive and squat. Instead of the typical armor, they wore thick coats, and brandished short, fat barreled rifles. Hard to say, in the distance, if they were Neanderthal or prolets.

"I am Commander Tamara Leonova," the woman announced, her voice arrogant, her accent thick. "Of the Imperial Skyship Buran."

She was very tall, pale as a ghost, with sharp features and long straight hair, so fair it looked white as the snow. A great black wolf fur on her shoulders, she wore a black uniform with silver trimmings, and a fur shako. Her eyes were hid by round tinted glasses.

"You are far away from home, Captain."

She arched an eyebrow. "No more than you, sir."

Trevanian bowed. "I am..."

"Captain Arthur Christopher Trevanian," she said, her tone impatient.

"Of the Company Trader Ostrich, formally out of Hong Kong."

He gave her his most charming smile. "At your service."

"I hope so, Captain," she said. "I am, indeed, in need of help."

A spark of hope. "So this is no courtesy visit?"

She huffed, a cloud of vapor condensing in front of her face. "I have no time to waste, Captain. By the treaty of Samarkand..."

"No need to invoke treaties." It was his turn for interrupting.

"Considering how we both have ignored them so far."

Again she arched an eyebrow.

"My ship is not far from here," he said. "We could discuss whatever matter is at hand in more urbane surroundings."

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8.

The coolies had placed a table by the anchor, upwind of the trading post, behind a wall of crates to grant them privacy. They had hot tea, cookies, brandy, cigarettes. Trevanian had no reason to invite his guest o board, and the Russian usually made a show of their affinity for cold weather. Why not humor them?

The Russian sat on her wicker chair, crossing her legs. Trevanian poured her tea himself, while she lit a cigarette. Up close she was typical Imperial Aristocracy, straight out of a propaganda pamphlet. Corrupt, decadent and cruel, a menace to everything the Anglo-Indian Raj stood for. Her naturally pale skin was made more so by powder, her veins penciled in blue at the wrists, neck and temples to accentuate the effect. Her lips were also painted a deep blue. He wondered if she was chemically charged, and concluded she probably was. She uncrossed her legs. She wore shiny boots, and was encased in a stiff jacket encrusted with medals.

She accepted the tea and when Trevanian offered his hip flask, she liberally spiked it with brandy. Then she sipped it daintily, still wearing gloves.

“So,” he asked, “How can the Honourable East India Company help the mighty Russian Empire?”

“We have,” she said, “my ship, I mean. A situation.”

“Indeed.”

She put down her teacup and inhaled a big lungful of smoke, staring up at the hull of the Ostrich. Trevanian could understand her embarrassment. All things said and done, the Russians were violating the Samarkand Treaty, just like the Company was. Continental Europe was off limits for both of them. Not on pain of death, like Lost America, but should the news circulate, heads would fall, both in the Czar’s Court and in the Company’s Council room.

But of course, Trevanian ran a privateer, and a little bending of the rules was to be expected. She, on the other hand, ran an Imperial Navy Skyship.

“What kind of situation?” he finally asked.

Emotions he was unable to define chased each other like ghosts over her pale features.

“You must understand,” she said, “that I am a servant of the Czar. I command a frigate in his sky fleet, I have my orders.”

“Of course.”

A lot of stories, all of them extremely unpleasant, circulated about the way in which discipline was maintained in the Russian forces.

“My ship is currently detailed as personal transportation for Prince Marko Zavadovski.”

She waited for his reaction.

“I fear I am not familiar with the Prince,” Trevanian said. He could see she did not like her assigned duty, but he was not going to make it any more pleasant.

Leonova made a face, as if to say she was not surprised. “Prince Marko Zavadovski is the Imperial Master of the Hunt in Tsaritsyn. He is also second cousin to Great Duchess Alexia, and a personal friend of Czar Vladimir. A very close friend.”

Trevanian sipped his tea-spiked brandy and nodded. He thought he saw where all this was going.

“And the Prince decided to visit Continental Europe,” he said.

She put down her cup, and stubbed her cigarette in it. “Exactly. He is a hunter.”

Trevanian waved his hand dismissively. “I doubt he’d be able to find here in Italy any quarry different from what roams the waste out of Tsaritsyn.”

“The animals here are supposed to be wilder,” Leonova said. “And smarter.”

Trevanian squinted. "What do you mean?"

"This is not important now."

"How long has his party been missing?"

The woman looked at him, her blue lips turning into a thin line. "Two days. He was alone with his gun carrier."

Trevanian shook his head. "Two days? Alone? In the wilds of Lost Rome?"

She nodded again. "I need help finding him."

Him, Trevanian noted. The gun-carrier be damned. "You don't need help finding him," he said. "You need a safe conduit for Dehli, for you and your ship. I could arrange that."

Leonova stood. "I have no time for your flippancy, Captain Trevanian!"

"It's no flippancy, Captain. Alone out there for two days and a night, your charge is dead by now. Dead in a bad way. If the Prince is half as influential as you said, your situation is dire. I would again suggest you bring your ship to friendlier shores. The Company is always looking for good ships and good captains."

And one straight from the Tsar's court would be doubly valued.

She stared at him, her lips pressed together,

"You don't understand," she said.

He passed a hand over his chin. The smell of incoming snow was getting stronger.

"Wait here," he said, turning away.

Luongo innocently passed by the crates, and gave him an interrogative look.

"Close the shop," Trevanian ordered. "And dial Singh to lower the Ostrich."

"Trouble, Boss?"

"There's two people out there somewhere. We need to find them."

He was pretty sure they would only find the frozen, half-eaten remains of the fool and his servant. But he did not dislike Captain Leonova completely, and he liked the idea of a Russian flyer owing him a favor. A good merchant recognizes an opportunity, even when it comes accompanied by armed men.

9.

"I don't like this, sahib," Aram Singh said with a smirk.

"Don't you sahib me," Trevanian replied. He was buttoning up his fur-lined jacket, staring critically at his reflection.

"They have a ship," Singh. "How hard could it be for them to spot the trail of their duke?"

"It's a prince, not a duke, and the gentleman's on foot with a single man as retinue."

The Sikh laughed. "Then he's a fool, and deserves to die."

Trevanian stared at his first officer with pretended disapproval. "How can you be so cynical, my friend?"

"I don't like Russians," the other said. "And I don't like the idea of sending our men out there among the ruins on a wild goose chase."

Trevanian flexed his arms, trying to adjust to the thickness of his clothes.

"The men have been ordered to be cautious, and at the first sign of foul play—"

"Fall down and play dead," Singh grinned.

Trevanian sighed and shook his head. "Aren't you curious?"

"Your people have a saying about curiosity, and cats. About how curiosity slices the cat's throat in silence, and then drops the body in the Ganges, for nobody to find it anymore."

Trevanian chuckled. "You are a load of laughs, my friend."

From his trunk, he took the gun and the boarding saber the Chamber of Commerce of Hong Kong had presented him as a sign of gratitude. It was good Sheffield steel. On second thoughts, he put the saber back. He pulled his goatskin poshteen out of his closet and donned it over his jacket, winding a blue sash around his waist. His utility belt went over the sash, with the gun and the pocket compass. He took the turban and the scarf from the shelf, and walked to the starboard port, where the landing team was waiting.

"You keep the ship on alert, and tell Mr Luongo to make it fast."

Singh's eyes were two dark slits. "What kind of trouble do we expect?"

"I don't know. That's what's worrying me."

"And still you go out there with that people."

"We are here on business, and we must follow every opportunity." He took a deep breath. "We rarely have an opportunity to observe these people closely. They are secretive--"

"And dangerous."

"Yes, and dangerous. And a report about their activities, their outlook and their plans would make us proud with the Board of Directors."

"Proud and well paid," Singh said.

"And I like the idea of having a Russian officer owe me a favor," Trevanian added.

"Especially if she is young and attractive, and dangerous."

"I did not notice she's attractive," Trevanian smirked.

"Too busy being worried?"

"Probably."

The first officer nodded. "Good. Better worried than dead. Worried makes dead less likely."

10.

The fronts of the advancing ice sheets rose over the horizon, broken walls of white, deep blue and black. Water poured at the bottom of the glaciers, and flowed to feed the Tiber, that slithered through the ruins of the Eternal City like a glass-skinned snake.

They had formed two search parties, to complement the two that Leonova had already deployed north and west of the city. Four hands from the Ostrich, led by Hu, would move east, going upriver. The men had been instructed to interrogate the Romans, and offer a reward for information.

Meanwhile, Trevanian himself would join Leonova and her guards and continue south. Alone. A sign of trust, a way to unbalance the woman, to make her feel secure. Maybe cause her to open up.

Singh had taken the Ostrich higher, to work as a relay between the searchers and the Buran.

“Doesn't the Prince have any means of communication with your ship?”

“He carries a flare gun. In case of need, he is supposed to fire the flare.”

They had moved south of the river, pointing towards the arch of hills jutting out of the snowy cover, like a natural amphitheater. Trevanian remembered the blinding mirror of the iced lake there, like a beacon when they had flown over it on their way in, three days before. Albano, Hu had called it. An ancient volcano.

Sharing the couch on the crawler with taciturn Captain Leonova, Trevanian took some time to observe her men. They were squat and massive, with flat faces and unblinking eyes. Not the dread beastman Cossack he had already met in India. Something rougher, more elementary. Less sophisticated, less polished than the Neanderthals. More like unthinking brutes, musclebound men-machines. The proles, he thought, Russia's legendary cave-dwelling workers, whose backbreaking toil fed the aristocracy in its sealed castles. Individuals bred for fatigue and blind loyalty, slaves owned by the Czar.

He shuddered, and pulled up his collar against the cold air.

"You are fascinated by the rabochiye," his companion said. "What do you call them? The proles, right?"

"It's not often that we get to see your lower classes," he replied, defensively.

"Workers are the same everywhere. You have your coolies, yes? Your wallas."

"It's different. I think."

"How so?"

"They are free men."

She smirked. "Freedom doesn't exist."

He stared at her.

"Would you say we are free?" she asked. "I am a servant to my Czar, just as you owe your allegiance to your Board of Directors. Is this freedom?"

Something sparked a fire in Trevanian's chest. "I am a Tai-Pan," he said, his voice level.

"A merchant adventurer," she nodded. "And does that grant you freedom? Or does it just entail more duties, more rules, more obligations?" She shook her head, her eyes hidden behind her tinted lenses. "No, Captain, your freedom is just a construct of the mind. A construct from which the rabochiye are not burdened."

"I still prefer dealing with coolies," Trevanian said.

"A matter of management. Of efficiency."

Trevanian eyed the stolid individual running by the side of the tracked vehicle. His legs pumped like pistons, his eyes roamed the landscape, his breath escaping in thick clouds through his flared nostrils. He did not seem particularly smart, but admittedly, this was not the best circumstance in which to evaluate his intelligence.

//.

They were considering a place to stop when a thin stream of pale vapor cut through the sky. The proles pointed at it like a single man, their arms coming up at the same time, short thick fingers trailing the flying rocket. Then the pink flame of the flare bloomed silently, and hung against the slate-colored clouds.

“There!” Leonova glanced at Trevanian. “As you see, Prince Marko is still alive.”

The Company man pressed his lips tight. “Then we better hasten. His luck won’t last forever.”

She gave him a smirk, and turned to her men, giving them orders. With a deep rumble, the tracked crawler started again between the snowdrifts. Soon, the ground rose, and the wreckage of once proud villas peeked through the ice.

Trevanian scanned the ruins, a sense of uneasiness crawling up his gut.

“What was your man hunting again?”

“Samaya opasnaya dobycha,” she replied.

“I don’t speak Russian,” he said.

She shrugged. “Languages proficiency is suited for servants, not for the aristokratiya.”

Trevanian pulled the scarf closer to his neck.

It was the second time the woman avoided his question.

12.

The Romans attacked as the crawler was trying to negotiate a patch of fresh snow. They came running and shouting their hearts out, their rags flapping in the cold wind.

The prole shock troopers fell into a loose defensive formation, their guns leveled at the incoming ragtag band of raiders. The first line of crazed savages fell to Russian bullets, but more men rushed in. They brandished scraps of rusty metal forged into primitive swords and lances. Again the troopers fired, and this time the assailants came closer. A few of them, carried by their momentum, slammed into the standing soldiers, falling into a tangle of arms and legs.

And more yet were coming.

Leonova stood, a long-barreled gun in her right and a heavy saber in the right. She mercilessly picked out the Roman savages. By her side, Trevanian pulled his revolver and tried to do his part.

A man with a patchy black beard and feverish eyes jumped on the crawler's fender and lifted a conical blade high over his head. Trevanian shot him in the face.

"They set us up!" he shouted.

"Nonsense," she replied.

As an echo to those words, a bulky brute in animal skins stepped in front of the crawler and pointed a flare gun at them.

Trevanian grabbed the Russian woman by an arm and jumped off the vehicle just as the flaming projectile hit the couch, erupting in a roaring fire.

Ignoring Leonova's protests, he pushed her down and covered her with his body.

The crawler exploded.

Then the Romans came, screaming in a frenzy of bloodlust. They steamrolled the remaining soldiers and made a beeline for Trevanian and Leonova.

The Company man and the Russian scrambled to their feet, fired blindly into the incoming mass of kill-mad savages, and ran.

"There!" Leonova pointed.

The corner of a building had survived the ravages of time and weather, and stood like a spur, jutting out of a pile of fresh snow.

They staggered in that direction.

Trevanian turned in time to see a wild-haired man, his teeth bared, his eyes bloodshot, as he came towards him.

He lifted the gun, the hammer extracting only a hollow click out of the chamber.

The Roman tackled him and he fell, rolling on his back. The savage tried to bite at his face.

With a colorful oath, the Company man kicked off the thin frame of the wild man, and tried to stand. The Roman crumpled on the floor, moaning. Leonova was by his side, brandishing her saber with chilling efficiency. Three more men came at them, shouting.

And the ground fell away beneath them, swallowing them.

13.

Trevarian slammed against the smooth surface of the underlying ice wall and slid down, picking up speed. The fall took a few heartbeats, and then he was in a vast chamber beneath the glacier, in a heap of smelly bodies.

He heard Leonova curse in her language, and the sickening sound of a sharp blade biting into flesh. One of their assailants tried to claw at his face, and he pushed him back, his heel smashing the poor bastard's mouth.

In the uncannily blue half-light of the glacier chamber, Trevarian stood and faced the remaining Roman. The man looked like a scared animal, first at him and then at Leonova. The woman was shaking blood from her saber. The Roman started in her direction. She just flipped the point of her blade up, impaling the man through the chest. Mouth agape, the man slid to his knees, chin on his sternum – quite dead.

“Stupid beast,” Leonova hissed.

She placed her foot on the man's shoulder, and pushed him clear of the blade.

They stared at each other.

“Nice rescue mission,” Trevarian said.

His gun was dangling from his shoulder on its strap. He picked it up and proceeded to reload it. "Who's going to come and rescue us, now?" Leonova sheathed her saber.

"I did not mark you for a defeatist," she said.

To their right, the ice chamber opened into a corridor-like gallery, at the bottom of which a stream ran. "Your men or mine will see the smoke from the crawler," she said. "And they will come."

"My first mate has orders," Trevanian said.

She gave him a look, and scoffed "Should anything happen, disengage and report back home."

He nodded. "I guess you gave similar directives."

Leonova gave him a dispassionate look. "Our ships come before our safety, don't they?"

Trevanian gestured her towards the gallery. "After you, Captain."

She arched an eyebrow. Then she walked into the dark tunnel, feet splashing in the stream.

14.

Leonova raised her closed fist.

“What now?” he whispered.

She nodded in the direction of the ice-encrusted corridor on their left. She pointed two fingers at her eyes, and then at the passage.

Trevanian nodded and pulled out his gun, taking a first tentative step in that direction. His boots squeaked on the floor marble of the floor.

A shape bolted at him from the corridor. A man in stinking, dirty rags, screaming madness and wielding a long shard of glass like a knife.

The impact sent Trevanian sprawling on his back, the savage trying to stab him in the chest. Trevanian fired his gun, slamming the man back into the corridor. The bang echoed through the passages in the ice, deafening and mocking.

“This seems to be a promising direction to pursue,” Leonova said.

She stepped over the dead Roman and entered the new passage.

15.

“Neimovernyy,” Leonova whispered.

In its unstoppable crawl down the hill, the glacier had climbed over the rooftop of the building. It had scraped away the tiles and the beams, that now laid into frozen heaps in front of the doors of the ground floor. The glacier, deep blue and pink, rolled over the house, like a giant frozen wave, creating a dome-like cavern through which the stream they had followed ran, gurgling. The mass of the ice had somehow pushed and pressed the building, giving it a skewed shape. The baroque facade leaned to the right, and cracks ran through the walls. The windows were black hollow discontinuities in the white and brick of the structure.

A man sat with his back to the ice encasing the remains of the roof, and Trevanian was reminded of the skeleton he had found that morning. The man was dead, a sad expression on his face.

Leonova walked briskly to the body.

He wore a dust-blue uniform, with red stripes down his trousers, and a smattering of medals on his chest.

“This is Grigori,” she said.

“The gun carrier.”

She nodded. She stood, and looked again at the face of the building.

“Your highness!” she shouted. “We have come to rescue you!”

A sinister creak echoed in the chamber, followed by a rumbling sound, and a cloud of dust and icicles rained down the face of the villa.

"We better keep our voices down," Trevanian said.

Then he pointed at the dead man. "What killed him?"

She just shrugged.

He crouched by the body. No visible fractures, no wounds.

He tried to pull the body, but it was stuck to the ice. Trevanian pulled harder, and the body fell forward, revealing a ragged wound in the back, iced blood turning the scraps of the jacket into stiff dark brown blades.

"They were attacked by the savages," Leonova said.

Trevanian shook his head. "No human being did this. A wild animal. Your prince's prey became the hunter."

The door to the ground floor gaped open.

They traded a glance. Once again Trevanian bowed and gestured for her to take the lead.

"After you, madame."

16.

A vast staircase lead to the upper floor, white marble beneath a transparent layer of ice. Vases had sat at the end of the balustrades. The cold had caused the vases to explode, and a scattering of sharp porcelain were embedded in the ice, white and blue, like broken teeth. Trevanian turned a professional eye on the remains of the lost Roman civilization around them. Paintings hung to the walls, cracked and broken like old windows, the ice having turned the canvas into rigid, fragile sheets. Here half the face of some pope or cardinal, there a rosy-cheeked young woman, a fracture zigzagging across her neck. There was a carpet, buried in the ice on the floor. Persian, by the look of it.

"If your man's in here," he said, softly, "why doesn't he show up?" Leonova was staring at the empty frame of an old mirror. "Maybe he's wounded."

"Maybe he's dead."

He stopped at the foot of the staircase. "The savages assaulted him and his man. They got his flare gun, they killed him. The servant ended up down here—"

"How?"

Trevanian shook his head.

"If there's a way out, it goes through this place," Leonova said.

She bent down and pulled a span-long dagger from her boot. "We use this now, not the guns," she said, and placed the weapon in his hand. Then she turned left and right, and deciding on the left, walked through a door.

Cursing under his breath, Trevanian followed her into a parlor. The ceiling sagged like a wet sail, and the room was littered with scraps of wood and the remains of smashed furniture. There was a table, rolled on its side against the wall. Water had dripped along the chimney and down into the fireplace, filling it with a multi-layered block of colored ice.

The carcasses of a variety of animals were piled at the center of the room.

Trevanian hoped they were just animals.

"Let's get out of here," he said.

A low growl responded to him from a darkened hallway.

Leonova shouldered him out of the way and stood, saber in hand, facing the behemoth charging at them from the darkness.

She met the creature's claws with her blade, and then danced away, avoiding a killer hug. The monster stood on its hind legs, its massive head brushing the ceiling. It roared in rage, and the whole house creaked and groaned.

A bear.

Ursus spaeleus. One of the beasts that had come with the ice.

A black bear, a monster one thousand pounds heavy, with claws like daggers and a mouth big enough to bite Leonova's head off. It took a step forward and almost dismissively slapped her away. The woman slipped on the iced floor and crashed into the wall.

The beast fell back on all fours, and again prodded the woman, causing her to roll on the floor. The bear roared, and again the building responded with a shower of plaster flakes and icicles.

Trevanian pulled out his gun.

Leonova was trying to rise. She looked at him. Her fur hat had been knocked off, and her white hair fell like an avalanche on her shoulders. "No!"

He pulled the trigger. A 465 bullet hit the bear in the head, and bounced off its thick skull. The beast looked up, staring at Trevanian in surprise. Then it let out a booming growl, and charged.

The man pulled his trigger again, and again, hitting again the monster in the head as it drew closer.

The third bullet found the animal's eye.

With a strangled yelp, the bear reared, and stretched its forepaws, . Leonova slid in front of it and pushed with both hands her saber at the base of the monstrous... neck.

Another slap sent her reeling.

Then finally the animal's simple brain realized it was dead, and the massive body crashed on the floor. Everything was very still for ten seconds.

Then with a rumble, the sagging ceiling collapsed on the dead animal, in a cloud of debris.

17.

They crawled out of the wreckage, coughing and shaking their heads. They crossed the entrance hall running, and staggered out as the whole building collapsed in slow motion, like a folding house of cards. They retreated against the back of the ice cave, the sleek crystal around them groaning and snapping as its mass readjusted itself to the new equilibrium.

Breathing heavily, they leaned against the ice, trying to catch their breath.

Leonova was bruised and disheveled. Trevanian slipped some new bullets in his gun.

"Now what?" he asked.

Before she could answer, there was a chorus of shouts, and through the slowly dissipating cloud of iced dust, a band of ragged Roman savages was on them.

Trevanian could not say if they were the same that had ambushed them outside, or another band of hunters.

He fired his gun at the closest, the bullet pushing the man back. Then he stood back to back with the Russian, their attackers milling around them.

The early moments were like a dance. Shoot. Dodge. Parry with the dagger. Kick the adversary in a knee. Turn around. Stab an aggressor. Shoot again.

The Romans fell, sorry men wearing rags and animal pelts, brandishing makeshift weapons.

They were too wild and desperate to put up any serious fight, but they seemed to go on forever.

Trevanian's gun clicked on empty. He turned it, gripping the hot barrel, and started using it like a hammer, hitting the incoming barbarians, smashing jawbones, cracking skulls.

At his side, Leonova suddenly let out a wild bellow. Her saber had been left stuck in the bear's carcass, and she was fighting barehanded.

Trevanian watched her in gruesome fascination as the woman, tall and thin, poured a storm of punches and kicks on her adversaries. The Romans were ignoring him, all their efforts focused on Leonova. She moved like a dancer. She rolled, jumped and pirouetted through the mass of the incoming brutes. She broke wrists and arms, she snapped necks, she punched through chests. Her adversaries fell groaning, spitting broken teeth, holding fractured limbs.

Finally she grabbed a Roman twice her size. She lifted him high over her head, and then let him fall on her bent knee, noisily breaking his spine.

The survivors retreated, dragging the wounded with them. And finally it was silence again.

18.

Leonova sat on a frosted bench. Her jacket had been ripped in the fight.

On first sight Trevanian thought she was wearing some kind of armlet, encircling her biceps. But just as he looked the thing clicked, rotated like the drum of a gun, and a piston pushed a glass vial, the size of a bullet, into a side compartment. There was a hiss, and the woman was shaken by a violent shudder.

Then with a gasp she sat up, eyes ablaze.

They stared in each other eyes for a moment.

Her pupils sparkled, and her usual haughty smile curled her blue lips.

“Are you shocked?” she asked, defiantly.

Trevanian shook his head. “I didn’t know..”

She laughed, harshly. “What did you expect? Some vulgar contraption, brass tubes and wires, like in some of your penny dreadfuls?”

“I thought that stuff was reserved to the proles, in the workers’ caves,” he lied.

“Your information is imprecise. Those are productivity elixirs. This is panatseya.”

She pulled the strips of her shredded sleeve together, covering the dispenser. Then she lifted her hand, opening and closing the fist slowly, gazing intently.

"You all right?" he asked.

"What? Yes, it's only, as I was saying, the panatseya..."

She seemed to drift for a moment. He came closer, to help her.

"Don't touch me," she said. "Don't or I'll kill you."

Trevanian took a step back, raising his hands. He looked at her. Her face was becoming paler, the blue of her veins more defined. Then she sighed, a deep, almost obscene sound, and she threw back her head, the bones in her neck snapping, a strand of snow-white hair escaping from under her fur hat. She looked at him. "I'm fine," she said.

"If you say so..."

She chuckled. "So shocked!"

She took a few steps, her heels clicking on the scarred marble of the floor. She breathed, fast and deep. "I am a member of the aristokratyia," she said, matter of factly. "Panatseya is part of what I am. It makes me what I am." She turned to him, hands on her hips. "I was weaned on it. I was dosed for the first time when I was twelve, as it is required. It was the most important day of my life. You can't imagine how it feels." He nodded at the broken forms of the Romans, laying on the ground. "But I guess they can."

Leonova grimaced. "So sportsman-like, so British. And yet you did shoot two of them. You don't seem to worry when it comes to using your technology against these poor bastards. But you are shocked if I use mine."

"My gun does not make me something different from what I am."

"Really? Well, panatseya does. It makes me better. Faster, stronger. More aware, more aggressive. It washes away hesitation, it makes the cold nothing more than an afterthought."

"A gun and a fur coat don't make me dependent."

"So you say. Then do without them."

Trevanian lifted his gun, and flicked it open. The brass cases slipped out of the drum and fell on the floor, tinkling. "I'll have to do without this all right."

He snapped the gun closed, and belted it.

"Now what?"

She snorted. "We follow them," she said. "No matter what, they come from the outside."

19.

Prince Marko Zavadovski, master of the hunts at Tsaritsin, and personal friend of the Czar himself, had been crucified in the middle of an old square. Two beams had been set on the pedestal that had once held a monument of some sort. Then the Romans had strapped the Russian aristocrat to the cross, and they had killed him. Slowly. Captain Leonova staggered into the square and then sat down heavily on the dais at the foot of the cross.

Trevanian had no idea what she was saying under her breath, if it was a prayer or a litany of curses. He looked around, warily. They had not encountered any resistance on their way up from beneath the glacier. The sun was setting, and the Romans were nowhere to be seen, dead or alive.

Only this gruesome trophy remained.

The Company man climbed up on the pedestal. He still had Leonova's dagger, and it felt like the decent thing to do to cut the man's ropes, and somehow compose his body. Prince Marko Zavadovski was covered in a thick crust of ice, like an armor. They had not killed him straight away. The prince had been stripped of his coat and jacket. He had been beaten, a shoulder dislodged. Then they had cut him. Trevanian grimaced. He had been around enough to recognize the sort of cuts that grant maximum bleeding while keeping the victim alive.

Then they had probably doused him in water, and left him to the night winds. He had been dead for at least a day now.

Once on top of the marble cube, Trevanian noticed something piled in front of the dead man, bathed in his blood.

He bent down. Animal pelts. No. Scalps.

He counted fifteen scalps. Black, blonde, red-haired. Freshly cut, and stiffened by cold. Three at least were combed in the long braid the Roman women wore.

He looked up at the man hanging there, and felt a sense of nausea.

"He was hunting them," he said.

Leonova looked at him.

"He was hunting human beings," he repeated, indignation lending an edge to his words. "That's why they came at us like that. Revenge."

"The most dangerous game," she said, matter of factly.

Trevanian closed his eyes, and took a deep breath, the cold air gripping his chest, making his heart skip a beat.

"What are you?" he asked.

The white-haired woman looked at him.

He thought about the propaganda. About the self-righteous pamphlets that circulated in the Raj. Documents written by learned nonentities, accusing the Czar of every sin in the Good Book, and a few extra dozens. He thought about how he used to leer at such ravings. People are people, across every border. This was his experience. This had been his experience so far.

Leonova was standing now, arms crossed. She looked tired, as if the drugs in her system were losing their grip.

"You came here to hunt human beings," he said. He stood. He shoved at her a handful of scalps. "You were taking trophies!"

She stared at him dispassionately. "Isn't it what you do, too?"

"How dare you—!"

She smirked. "You think we don't know? You come here with your airships, trading art and books and technology for trinkets. You have the Romans dig in the ruins, and bring you back the best pieces, in exchange for what? Canned food, blankets, colored beads and toys."

"It's a completely different story."

"Really? Do you care if these men and women live or die? You treat them like the trained monkeys in the King of Siam's personal guard. Worse, because those monkeys are fed and housed, while you let these

people sleep in the cold and fend for themselves. You treat them as tools. Is it so different from what we do?"

She pushed one of the scalps on the ground with the tip of her boot. "So don't give me your sanctimonious scruples. You treat them like animals. You just don't kill and eat them, but that's the only difference between these sub-humans and any other animal in your menageries. Or in ours."

"You are crazy."

"We are strong." She held his gaze. "You are weak. You still think the bright light of your British technology will bring these sad remains back to civilization." She chuckled. "You saw them. You felt their foul breath as they tried to kill you. You had no problem shooting them."

"I did not stalk them with a high-powered gun. I defended myself."

She laughed. "You are full of excuses." She turned back. "The strong do not need excuses. The strong live by their own rules."

Shouts and the sound of rhythmic steps sounded in the plaza.

Soon, a small squad of prole troopers was deploying on the iced pavement. A man in a black officer's uniform ran to Leonova, and bowed. He stared at the dead body on the cross, and then spoke rapidly to the woman.

She snapped an order back.

He rummaged in his coat's pockets, and offered her a cigarette holder, and a light.

The Russian captain put the fire to the tip of the cigarette took a long pull.

Her officer undid his coat, and offered it to her. She draped it around her shoulders, while the man stood impassive, despite the biting cold.

"What should we do, now?" she asked Trevanian, arching an ironic eyebrow.

Trevanian straightened his back. "Are you a huntress, captain?"

Leonova's eyes widened. "No, captain. Alas, I am not a sportswoman. But I am a woman with a problem."

"I thought the strong were above problems."

"Sarcasm is the refuge of the craven, captain Trevanian, and you are no craven."

Trevanian eyed the shock troopers, standing still in the increasingly chill air. He considered the officer in black, standing still in his jacket. Then he turned back to Leonova.

“You have lost your charge,” he said. “The Czar won’t be pleased.” He allowed himself a weary grin. “You will have to learn fast the art of making excuses.”

“What if I were to accept the offer you made me this morning?”

“That offer does not stand anymore.”

Her blue lips contorted in a grimace. “So self-righteous.”

She snapped her fingers. Her man extracted his gun and handed it to her.

“Are you afraid of death, captain?” she asked.

A sun exploded in the sky above them, bathing the plaza in stark white light.

A buzz and a screech announced that the Ostrich’s external loudspeakers were online.

Singh’s voice thundered like the voice of God down from the sky.

“Is everything fine, boss?”

Trevanian lifted a hand above his head, and waved.

“And you, captain?” he asked. “Are you afraid of death?”

Light increased in intensity as the Ostrich hovered closer to the ground.

A ladder was unfurled from the mizzen hatch.

She was staring at him, silent.

“Well, by what little I have learned about your kind,” Trevanian said, “I think you’ll learn to be afraid of it very soon.”

He gripped the ladder, slipped a leg over a rung, and let his men pull him up.

20.

“What did I tell you, boss?”

Trevanian, Singh and Luongo were sitting in the wardroom, having a robust breakfast. The Ostrich was en route to Delhi via Sharm el Sheik, where they were expected to berth in 36 hours.

During the night, Trevanian had dictated a full report to his majordomo, and had the printout read and signed by Singh and Luongo, before locking it inside a brass tube for dispatch to the Board of Directors.

“The fact that you were right does not make me any happier,” Trevanian replied, He had barely touched his eggs.

Luongo chuckled. “Fact is,” he said to the Indian, “our boss kinda fancied the little Russian belle, and the fact that she turned out to be a homicidal hussy with an autocratic bend did not go down too good with him.”

The Italian laughed and lifted his orange juice in a silent toast.

“You realize, of course,” Singh said, “that at the net of everything else, you made yourself an enemy.”

Trevanian shook his head. “I don’t think she’ll live long enough to give me any real trouble.”

“She misplaced one of the Czar’s favorite playthings,” Luongo noted. “Good old Vladimir is not the easygoing sort.” He turned to the captain. “You should have offered her a safe passage to the nearest

Company port. I'm sure the Board of Directors would have appreciated the opportunity of tapping a Russian sky captain's brain, and taking a gander at their technology."

Trevanian was silent for a moment.

"I offered her a way out," he said. "But she wouldn't take it."

Singh squinted at him, frowning.

Luongo shook his head and sighed. "The last thing you want, boss, is a woman with a sense of duty." He grinned. "And a passion for hunting."

Trevanian stood.

"If you will excuse me, I have some sleep to catch."

Singh watched him walk along the corridor and into his cabin.

Then he, too, excused himself and went to his post on the bridge.

At last...

When in Rome 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.

Davide Mana

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January 2017

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**