

Hope & Glory

Part of the Machine

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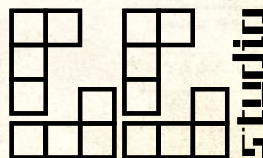
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Welcome to a new world...

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 David 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. "Evgeny 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.

Sample file

2.

“And so it worked?”

In the mirror, Varvara smiled. “Take 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.

Sample file