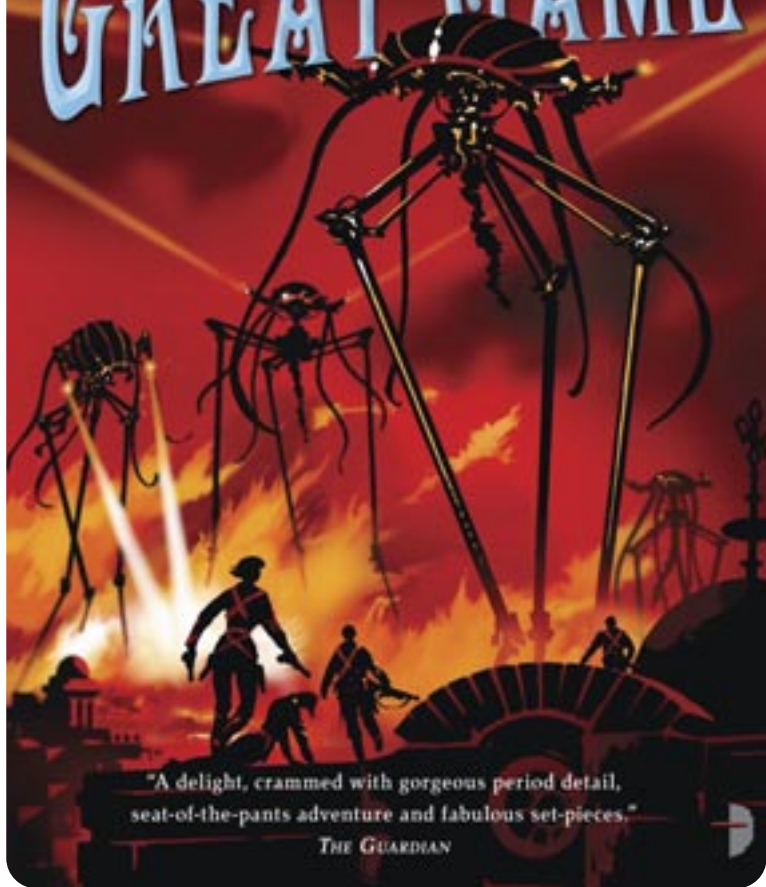


LAVIE TIDHAR
The
GREAT GAME



"A delight, crammed with gorgeous period detail,
seat-of-the-pants adventure and fabulous set-pieces."

THE GUARDIAN

Cover: David Frankland

Praise for Mr. LAVIE TIDHAR

“Lavie Tidhar’s *The Bookman* is simply the best book I’ve read in a long time, and I read a lot of books.”

James P Blaylock

“*The Bookman* is a delight, crammed with gorgeous period detail, seat-of-the-pants adventure and fabulous set-pieces.”

The Guardian

“An intelligent, clever book, that creates a wonderfully complex secondary world. As well-constructed as a Swiss cuckoo clock and as readable as any genre fiction being written today.”

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Only the Best Scifi & Fantasy

“An emerging master.”

Locus

an excerpt from
THE GREAT GAME
The Bookman Histories
by Lavie Tidhar

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And if you love them, tell your friends too...

ONE

The boy didn't know he was about to die, which must have been a blessing. He was an ordinary boy whose job it was to take messages, without being privy to the contents of said messages. The boy walked along the canal. The sun was setting and in its dying light the observer could see a solitary, narrow boat, laden with bananas and pineapples and durian, passing on the water on the way home from market.

Two monks in saffron robes walked ahead of the boy, conversing in low voices. A sleepy crocodile floated by the bank of the canal, ignored by the few passers-by. It was a quiet part of town, away from the farang quarters, and the boy was on his way home, home being a small room on one of the canals, shared with his parents and brothers and sisters, alongside many such rooms all crowded together. The observer could smell the durian from a distance as the boat went past, and he could smell chilli and garlic frying from a stall hidden from view, in one of the adjacent sois, the narrow, twisting alleyways of this grand city. Its residents called it Krung Thep, the City of Angels. The farangs still called it by its old name, which was Bangkok.

The observer followed behind the boy. He was unremarkable. He would have been unremarkable in nearly every human country, on any continent. He was small of build, with skin just dark enough, just pale enough, to pass for Siamese, or European, or Arab, or, depending on the place and the angle of the sun, an African. His face was hidden behind a wide-brimmed hat but, had he turned and tilted his head, it, too, would have been unremarkable – they had taken great care to ensure that that would be so.

The observer followed the boy because the boy was a link in a long and complicated chain that he was following. He didn't feel one way or the other about the boy's imminent death. Death meant little to the observer. The concept was too alien. The boy, not knowing he was being followed, was whistling. He was not Siamese or Chinese, but rather Hmong, of a family that had come to Krung Thep from the highlands of Laos, one of the king's territories to the north-east. The observer didn't care a great deal about that.

He caught up with the boy as the boy was turning away from the canal, down a narrow soi. People passed them both but the observer ignored them, his attention trained on the boy. He caught up with him in the shadow of a doorway and put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

The boy began to formulate a question, began to turn around, but never got a chance to complete either action. The observer slid what could have been a very narrow, very sharp blade – but wasn't, not quite – into the soft area at the back of the boy's head.

The blade went through skin and fat and bone, piercing the brain stem and the hippocampus and reaching deep into the brain. The boy emitted a sigh, a minute exhalation of air,

perhaps in surprise, perhaps in pain. His legs buckled underneath him. The observer, now participant, gently caught him so that he didn't fall but, rather, was gently lowered to the ground.

The whole thing only took a moment. When it was done the observer withdrew the thing that was not quite a blade, but functioned as one, which was as much a part of him as his skeleton or the cells that made up his skin. His skeleton was not entirely human and his brain not at all, and he was currently experiencing some new sensations, one of which was bewilderment and another being anger, neither of which had troubled him before.

He stopped before the fallen boy and put his hands together, palms touching, the hands away from the chest and raised high, in a wai. He bowed to the body of the boy. The voices inside him were whispering.

Having paid his respects the observer straightened. He stepped away from the darkened doorway and into the street outside. The sun had set and it was growing darker and torches and small fires were being lit across the city. He could smell fish roasting, wood catching fire, fish sauce, and the coming rain. The boy had been a link in a chain and now it pointed the observer in a new direction. He walked away, not hurrying, an unassuming man whose face was hidden behind a wide-brimmed hat, and as he turned the corner he heard, behind him, the start of screams.

It was cold and his bones ached; the air smelled of rain. Smith straightened, wiped his brow with the back of one hand, leaving a trail of dirt on his skin. He stared down at the ground, the wide, raised row he

had so painstakingly worked to make. He had turned the ground and mixed in fertiliser from the Oppenheims' chicken coop, which he had personally shovelled into bags and carried over, and he had formed these things that looked like elongated burial mounds and planted seeds and watered them and watched them. God, he hated gardening.

A chicken darted past, leaving sharp little arrowheads in the moist earth of his garden. He threw a stone at it and it crowed, jumping into the air with wings half-stretched, offended. God, he hated chickens too.

Staring at the garden, he saw his vegetables weren't doing all that well. The tomatoes looked forlorn, hanging from their vines, the plants held up by wooden sticks that seemed to jut out at random angles. The cabbages looked like guillotined heads. The apple tree by the house was surrounded by fallen apples, rotting, and the smell filled the air. Smith glared at the tree then decided to call it a day. Not bothering to change, he left the house, opening and closing the small gate in the fence that enclosed the garden and the house, and followed the dirt path into the village. Other houses in the village had names. Smith's gate merely said, in small, unpolished letters: No. 6.

A fine, cold day. A good day for staying indoors, lighting a fire, sorting his library alphabetically, or by condition, or rarity. Since his retirement he had enjoyed collecting books, ordering by mail from specialist dealers in the capital, or even from the continent. It was a small, orderly joy, as different as could be from

his former life. His lonely farm house, with its small garden and solitary apple tree, sat on its own. A farmer's life, he thought. What had Hobbes said about human life? That it was solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. Hobbes should have been a farmer, Smith thought.

Or retired.

Instead Hobbes had been overly friendly with the French, had written *Leviathan*, in which he argued for the return of human monarchy, had been arrested, and was only spared by his one-time pupil, the old Lizard King Charles II, who had arranged for him to go into exile. Died at ninety-one years of age, if Smith remembered his facts. So life may have been brutish and poor but, for Hobbes, not exactly *that* short.

He came to the village. A small sign announced that this was, indeed, the village of St Mary Mead and, in smaller letters underneath: *Retirement Community*. Smith sighed. Every time he examined that sign he felt the old, familiar anger return. And every time he hoped, against hope, that somehow the sign would be changed, would declare him free.

He walked along the high street. The village, like all villages, had a church, and a post office, and a pub. There was no constabulary. The residents of St Mary Mead could take care of their own. Smith smelled the air. Rain. But something else, too...

A vague sense of unease gripped him. He could smell – not with his *physical* sense but with something deeper, a left-over from his trade days, perhaps – could smell *change* in the air. He stopped beside M.'s, the

shop that sold embroidered tea doilies and lace curtains and, on Saturdays and Sundays, cream teas, and watched. Behind him the curtain twitched, and he knew that she, too, was watching. She had been famous as a watcher, in her glory days.

But there was nothing much to see. The village, as always, was quiet. The few shops were open, but their proprietors were used to the absence of customers. Outside Verloc's bookshop the ageing Mr Verloc – *but two years younger than him!* – was putting out the bargain bins, filled as always with penny dreadfuls and gothic romance and the like – poor fare for a man of Smith's more refined tastes.

He shook his head and continued his walk. He paused by the bookshop and nodded hello to Verloc, who nodded back. They had run into each other back in eighty-three, on the Danube, and Verloc still had a small, discreet scar below his left eye to prove it.

"Might rain," Verloc said.

"Would be good for the crops," Smith said and Verloc, who knew the state of Smith's garden, snorted in response. "You'd have more luck planting a book and hoping it would bear fruit," he said. Then, remembering his business, he said gruffly, "You want to buy one?"

Smith shook his head. Verloc snorted again. He touched the small scar under his eye and a look of surprise, momentarily, filled his whole face, as if he had forgotten, or not even known, that it was there. Then it was gone and Verloc nodded stiffly and went back inside the shop and shut the door.

Smith chewed on that as he walked. Did Verloc seem jumpier than usual? Was there something in his manner to indicate that he, too, felt the change in the air? Perhaps he was daydreaming, he thought. His active days were long gone, over and done with. He came to the post office. Colonel Creighton was working the counter. "Good morning, Mr Smith," he said. Smith nodded. "Colonel," he said. "Anything for me today?"

"A package," Colonel Creighton said. "From London. Another book, perhaps?"

"I do hope so," Smith said, politely. He waited as the old colonel rummaged around for his package. "There you are," he said. Then, "Looks like rain, what?"

"Rain," Smith said.

The colonel nodded. "How are the cabbages coming along?" he said.

"Green," Smith said, which seemed to pacify the colonel.

"Dreadful bloody weather," he said, as though offering a grave secret. "Miss the old country, don't you know. Not the same, home. Not the same at all."

Smith nodded again, feeling a great tiredness overcome him. The colonel was an old India hand, recalled at last back to pasture. The empire rolled on, but the colonel was no longer a part of its colonial effort, and the knowledge dulled him, the way an unused blade dulls with age. Smith said, "Might go to the pub," and the colonel nodded in his turn and said, "Capital idea, what?"

It was not yet noon.

As he approached the pub, however, the unopened package held under his arm, his sense of unease at last began to take on a more definite shape. There were tracks on the road of a kind seldom seen in the village. One of the new steam-powered baruch-landaus, their wheels leaving a distinct impression in the ground. Visitors, he thought, and he felt excitement hurry his pace, and his hands itched for a weapon that was no longer there. Opposite the pub he saw the old bee keeper, standing motionless under the village clock. Smith looked at him and the old bee keeper, almost imperceptibly, gave him a nod.

Interesting.

He went into the pub. Quiet. A fire burning in the fireplace. A solitary drinker sitting by the fire, a pint by his side. Smith looked straight ahead. He went to the counter. The Hungarian baroness was there. She welcomed him with a smile. He smiled back. "What can I get you, Mr Smith?" she said.

"A pint of cider, please, Magdolna," he said, preferring as always the use of one of her many middle names.

"Cold outside?" she said, drawing his pint. Smith shrugged. "Same old," he said. "Same old."

The baroness slid the pint across the counter to him. "Shall I put it on the account?" she said.

Smith shook his head. "Somehow," he said, "I think it best if I paid my tab in full, today."

The baroness glanced quickly at the direction of the solitary drinker by the fireplace and just as quickly looked away. She pursed her lips, then said, softly,

“Very well.”

Smith paid. The transaction seemed to finalise something between them, an understanding that remained unspoken. He had run into the baroness in eighty-nine in Budapest and again a year later in the *Quartier Latin*, in Paris. She was half his age, but had been retired early and, unseen behind the bar, she walked with a limp.

Their business done, Smith took hold of the pint and, slowly, turned to face the common room. It seemed to him that it took forever for his feet to obey him. He took a step forwards, at last, and the second one came more easily, and then the next, until at last he found himself standing before the solitary drinker, who had not yet looked up.

“Sit down,” the man said.

Smith sat.

The man was half-turned in his chair, and was warming long, pale hands on the fire. He was tall and pallid, with black thinning hair and a long straight nose that had been broken at least once. He resembled a spidery sort of thing. He wore a dark suit, not too cheap, not too expensive, an off-the-rack affair several years old. His shoes were black and polished. He said, “Looks like it might rain.”

Smith said, “Bugger the rain.”

The man smiled a thin smile and finally turned to face him. His eyes were a startling blue, the colour of a pond deeper than one expected. He said, in a voice that had no warmth or affection in it, “Smith.”

Smith said, “Fogg.”

TWO

"I told you I would kill you the next time we met," Smith said.

It was hot in the room. The baroness had retreated to her quarters, but not before she turned the sign on the door. It now said *Closed*.

The two men were alone.

"I had hoped you'd delay the pleasure," the man he had called Fogg said.

Smith sighed, exhaling air, and felt a long-held tension ease throughout his body. He took a sip from his cider. "Where is Mycroft?" he said.

Fogg said, "Mycroft's dead."

Smith went very still. Outside a wet sort of thunder erupted, and with it came the patter of falling rain. His reflection stared at him from the glass. He examined it as though fascinated. "When?" he said at last.

"Two days ago."

"Where?"

"Outside his house. He had just returned from the club."

Smith said, "Who?" and the man before him smiled that thin, humourless smile and said, "If I knew that, I wouldn't be here now."

At the words an odd excitement took over Smith, overwhelming any sadness he may have felt. He said, "Where is your driver?"

Fogg said, "The baroness is looking after him."

Smith nodded, absent-mindedly. After a moment Fogg raised his glass. Smith followed suit, and they touched glasses with a thin clinking sound. "To Mycroft," Fogg said.

Smith said, "Who-?" even though he knew. Fogg said, "I'm acting head."

"So you finally got what you wanted," Smith said. Fogg said, "I didn't want it to happen like that."

Smith said, "That was the only way it was ever going to fall. Heads don't retire—"

"—they roll," Fogg said, completing the sentence. He shrugged, looking suddenly uncomfortable. "Still. One never imagined—"

"Not the fat man," Smith agreed.

"Sure," Fogg said. He sounded sad. "Not the fat man."

They drank in silence.

Then: "Why are you here?"

Fogg: "You know why I'm here."

Smith, staring at him. Trying to read what was hidden in those deceptively innocent eyes. Saying, "I don't."

Fogg snorted. "We need you," he said, simply.

Smith said, "I find that hard to believe."

"Do you think I *want* your help?" Fogg said. "You are a loner, a killer, you have problems taking orders and you just don't *fit* into an organisational structure!"
The last one seemed to be the worst, for him. "And you're *old*."

"So why are you here?"

He watched Fogg, closely. Saw him squirm.

"Mycroft left instructions," Fogg finally said.

"That makes a little more sense," Smith said.

"Unfortunately, the decision is out of my hands," Fogg said. "The fat man wanted you on the case."

"Did he know he was going to die?"

A strange, evasive look on Fogg's face; Smith filed it away for future reference. "I can't fill you in on the details," Fogg said. "You're not classified."

That one made Smith smile. He downed the rest of his drink and stood up. Fogg, in some alarm, watched him get up. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"I'm going to spare you the trouble," Smith said. "Sorry you had a wasted trip."

"You *what*?" Fogg said.

Smith said, "I'm retired."

He turned to go. Fogg, behind him, gave a gurgled cry. "You can't just walk away!" he said.

"Watch me," Smith said.

He was almost at the door when Fogg said, "Alice."

Smith stopped, his hand on the door, ready to push it open.

He didn't.

He turned slowly and stood there, breathing deeply.

Old memories, like old newspaper print, almost washed away in the rain.

Almost.

He said, "What about her?"

Fogg said, "She's dead too."

Smith stood there, not knowing what to say. The fat man he could understand, could have lived with. But not her. He began to say, "Where?" but Fogg had anticipated him. "Bangkok," he said. "Two weeks ago."

Two weeks. She had been dead and all that time he'd been tending the cabbage patch.

He felt sick with his own uselessness. He opened and closed his hands, mechanically. It was still raining outside, the rain intensifying. He turned and pushed the door open, and a gust of cold wind entered and brought with it the smell of the rain. He blinked, his face wet. Across the road the old bee keeper was still standing, like a silent guardian, watching. Very little escaped him, still.

Smith took a deep breath. The cold air helped. After a moment he closed the door and went behind the bar and drew himself another pint. Then he drew one for the thin man he had once sworn to kill.

He left money on the counter, for the baroness, and carried both drinks with him into the common room and sat back down. He stared at Fogg, who had the decency to look embarrassed.

"Same *modus operandi*?"

"So it would appear."

"Fogg, what in God's name is going on?"

Fogg squinted, as if in pain. Perhaps the mention of

God had hurt him. "I don't know," he said, at last. Resentful for having to make the admission.

"Have there been others?"

Fogg didn't answer. The rain fell outside. In the fireplace, a log split apart, throwing off sparks. Smith said, "How *many* others?"

"You will be briefed," Fogg said. "In London. If you choose to come back with me."

Smith considered. Bangkok. London. Two links on a chain he couldn't, for now, follow. And each one, rather than a name, or a climate – each one represented the end of one thread in his own life, a sudden severing that had left him reeling inside. Alice and the fat man. He had not seen, nor spoken, to either one of them for a long time, yet they were always there, the very knowledge of their existence offering a sort of comfort, a fragile peace. A peace he could no longer pretend to have.

Yet he suddenly dreaded the return to the city. A part of him had been restless, longing to go back, and yet now that it was offered it came at a price that gave him no joy. The fat man, Alice, and a bloodied trail he feared to follow. There was a reason he had been retired, a reason all of them were there, in that village that could not be found on any map, running their little shops and tending their little gardens, pretending, even the bee keeper, that they were regular people at last, living ordinary lives.

None of us are very good at it, he realised. And yet there *had* been comfort in the pretence, that forced withdrawal from the former, shadowy world they had

inhabited. He needed to think. He needed the refuge of his library, even if for one last time.

“I need a day,” he said, at last. Fogg didn’t argue. Not a death, Smith thought. Deaths. One two weeks before, the trail already growing cold, one here, and recent, but still, his would be a cold trail to follow, and a day would make little difference.

Fogg stood up, draining the last of his pint. “I shall expect you at the club, first thing tomorrow,” he said. And with that he was gone.

THREE

He had almost forgotten the book. The package from London. He had been expecting a slim volume of poetry, ordered from Payne's, the newly rebuilt shop on Cecil Court. It had been destroyed some years previous in an explosion. He had not been a part of that particular case, which had been attributed to the shadowy Bookman. He took the package, unopened, with him as he walked back to his place. Behind him he could hear Fogg's baruch-landau starting with an ungodly noise, smoke belching high into the air as it wheeled away, back towards the city.

On a sudden, overwhelming need he turned back. He went down the high street and they were all watching him, the retired and the obsolete, former friends, former foes, united together only in this, this dreaded, dreary world called retirement. He ignored them, even the old bee keeper, as he came to the church, the book still held under his arm.

Fogg had looked offended at Smith's evocation of God. Faith was no longer all that popular, a long way

since the day of the Lizard King James I, when his authorised – if somewhat modified – version of the Bible was available in every home. That man Darwin was popular now, with his theory of evolution – he had even claimed, so Smith had heard, that it was proof the royal family and their get, *Les Lézards* themselves, were of an extraterrestrial origin, and couldn't have co-evolved on the Earth. It was not impossible... Rumours had always circulated, but that, just like the Bookman investigation, had been Mycroft's domain, mostly: he, Smith, was in charge of field work, dirty work, while the fat man sat in his club and ran the empire over lunches and cigars.

Too many unanswered questions... His life had been like that, though. He seldom got the answers. His, simply, was to be given a task, and perform it. How it fit into a larger picture, just which piece of the puzzle it turned out to be, was not his concern. Above him was the fat man and above the fat man was the Queen, and above the Queen, he long ago, and privately, had decided, there must be one more.

God.

Unfashionable, yes. Not a god of churches, not a god of burning bushes like in the old stories, or a science god like in the new books Verne and Wells and their ilk had been writing. A god he couldn't articulate, that demanded little, that offered only forgiveness. Something above. Perhaps it was less god than a reason for being. For Smith believed, despite all the evidence, that there had to be a reason.

He went into the church. It had stopped raining

when he left the pub, and the sun, catching him unawares, had come out. A momentary brightness filled the church garden, and a bird called out from the branches of a tree. The grass was wet with rain, and it was quiet. He stepped into the church and stood there, inhaling its dry air of ageing books and candles. Thinking of the fat man. Thinking of Alice.

He was chilled when he got home. His boots were covered in mud and his face was wet. He went inside and shut the door. The house was small but he had large windows in the continental style and so he didn't bother with the gaslight. You didn't get much sunlight in England but at least he caught the most of it. The last of last night's coal was glowing dimly in the fireplace, and he prodded it with the poker, half-heartedly, and left it to die.

He sat in the armchair by the window. The room was full of books. What was it the fat man had liked to say? "Guns and swords will kill you, but nothing is more dangerous than a book."

The fat man had been obsessed with the Bookman, that shadowy assassin who had plagued the empire for so long. But he was no longer around, had become inactive, possibly killed.

Possibly retired, Smith thought. Those had been glorious days, in the service of the empire, going across the world, across continents and countries – *on Her Majesty's secret service*, they used to call it: deniable, disposable, and often dead.

Shadow men and shadow women doing shadow

work. But the Bookman had always stood out amongst them, the consummate professional, the shadow of shadows. Mycroft had told him, once, that he suspected the Bookman to be of the same mysterious origins as Les Lézards. Smith didn't care. To him it was the work that mattered, and he prided himself on doing his job well.

Rows of books lined the room. They made it seem less austere, a warmer place. There were bookcases, a rug the colour of dried blood on the floor, an armchair with more holes in it than a compromised agent, a low table where he put his tea and his books to read and where the package from London now sat, waiting to be opened.

He reached for it.

It came in the same plain brown wrapping paper all the books arrived in and he tore it carefully, expecting to find Orphan's *Poems*, that slim, contraband collection of poetry, by an almost-unknown poet, that Smith had been trying to locate for some time. Instead, he discovered he was holding a worn copy of the Manual.

For a moment he just stared at it. It was exactly as he remembered it: the plain blue covers, the stamp on the front that said, simply, *Top Secret – Destroy if Found*. The same smell, that was the very smell of the place, the very essence of the trade, for Smith: of boiled cabbage and industrial soap, the smell of long echoey corridors with no windows, of hushed voices and the hum of unseen machinery; the secret heart of an empire, that had been the fat man's domain.

He opened it at random.

A gentleman never kills by stealth or surreptitiously.

The words spoken, so long ago, at that training centre in Ham Common. The instructor turning to them, smiling. He was missing two fingers on his left hand, Smith remembered. Looking at them, evaluating their response.

Saying, at last, "But we are not gentlemen."

It was still there, in the book. The manual of their trade, written as a joke or as a warning, he never knew which, but always circulating, from hand to hand, passed along from operative to operative, never openly discussed.

This is what we do. This is what we are.

And added, by hand, as an addendum: *To do our job, even we have to forget that we exist.*

He knew that handwriting. He turned the book over in his hands. Opened it again, on the title page, which said only, and that in small, black letters, *Manual*.

The rest of the page, rather than being blank as he remembered, was inscribed by hand. It didn't take long to read it.

Smith—

If you receive this then I am dead, and our worst fears have been confirmed. You may remember my concerns over the Oxford Affair in eighty-eight. I believe our venture into space has played into the hands of unseen forces and now the thing I feared the most has come to be.

If that is so — if I am dead, and you receive this in the post — then we are not alone.

Trust no one.

Beware the B-men.

Trace back the links, follow the chain. Begin with Alice.

Be careful. They will be coming for you.

M.

Smith stared at the note. He closed the Manual softly, put it on the table beside him. Stared out at the wan sunlight. It came as no surprise to know the fat man had not trusted Fogg. Smith had warned, repeatedly, of his suspicion of the man; it had seemed beyond doubt to him that the man was a mole, an agent of the Bookman. But the fat man never did anything, preferring, perhaps, to keep Fogg close by, to watch him.

And now Fogg was acting head.

Well, what was it to Smith? He was retired. The actions of the Bureau were no longer his concern. He was too old, too jaded to think the shadow world they all inhabited was the be-all and end-all of politics. They were engaged in a game – often deadly, often dreary, but a game – while the real decisions were made above their heads, by the people they spied on. There had been moles in the organisation before, just as the Bureau, in its turn, had agents working inside the agencies of both opponents and friendlies. He himself had turned several agents, in his day...

It was a game, only now Alice and the fat man were both dead.

FOUR

It was a soft sound, like leaves falling on the roof, only they weren't leaves at all. Smith opened his eyes and stared at the darkness. The sound came again, furtive, soft: the sound of rats sneaking, a vaguely disturbing sound that gnawed at the edges of consciousness.

In the darkness of the room, he smiled.

He'd sat up in his armchair through the afternoon, thinking. He'd first met Alice in Venice, in sixty-five it must have been. The year of the Zanzibar Incident, though he had not been involved in that particular affair.

The Bureau had sent him to the Venetian Republic, the lizards negotiating a secret treaty with Daniele Fonseca, the republican leader, against the Hapsburgs. It was baby-sitting duty for Smith, watching the British envoy from the shadows as the treaty was negotiated. And it *was* Venice, in the spring, and he met her one night when Hapsburgian agents attacked his envoy and Smith, outnumbered, had scrambled to save the man.

She had stepped out of the shadow, a young girl, glowing – so it seemed to him, then, romantic fool that he was – in the light of the moon. Her long white legs were bare and she wore a blue dress and a blue flower behind one ear. She smiled at him, flashing perfect white teeth, and killed the first of the would-be assassins with a knife throw that went deep into the man's chest, a flower of blood blooming on his shirt as he fell.

Together, they eliminated the others, the envoy oblivious the whole while to the covert assassination attempt, then disposed of the bodies together, dragging them into one of the canals and setting them adrift, Alice's blue flower pinned to the leader's chest. It had been the most romantic night of Smith's life.

Later, when the envoy was safely asleep in his bed, Smith and Alice shared a drink on the balcony of the small, dank hotel, and watched the moonlight play on the water of the canal...

Now he listened for the smallest sounds, that soft patter on the roof, the drop of a body, then another. The fat man had warned him but somehow, Smith always knew the day would come, was always waiting for it, and now he was ready.

He slid a knife from its scabbard, tied around his ankle. He had spent some of the afternoon, and a part of the evening, sharpening this knife, his favourite, and cleaning and oiling various other devices. Cleaning one's weapons was a comforting act, an ingrained habit that felt almost domestic. It made him think of Alice, who preferred guns to knives, and disliked poisons.

The things the mind conjures... He'd often argued with her about it, to no avail.

Smith disliked guns. They were loud, and showy, the weapon of bullies and show-offs. A gun had swagger behind it, but little thought. Smith preferred the intimacy of killing, the touch of flesh on flesh, the hissed intake of breath that was a mark's last. He liked neatness, in all things.

Then everything happened very quickly and almost at once.

The windows broke inwards – a loud explosive sound – shards of glass flying through the air, showering the floor and furniture.

Something heavy slammed into the front door, and the back one, sending both crashing to the ground, as dark figures came streaming through, and Smith found himself grinning. A single candle had been left burning on the bedside table and now it died with a gust of cold wind, and the house was dark.

Five pouring in from the front. Five more from the back. And there'd be others outside by now, forming a ring around the house. They wanted him badly. He was almost flattered. And they wanted him alive – which was an advantage.

He killed the first one with a knife thrust, holding the body gently as it dropped down to the floor. Black-clad, armed – he took the man's gun out of its holster, admiring its lightness, and fired once, twice, three times and watched two of them fall, one rolling away. When they fired back, destroying the bedroom, he was no longer there.

He worried about his library but there was nothing he could do. He came on two more of them there and killed the first one by breaking his neck, twisting it with a gentle nostalgia, then dropped the corpse to the floor, and the second one turned, and with the same motion Smith flipped the knife and sent it flying.

He went to retrieve it, pulling it out of the man's chest. The man wasn't quite dead yet. His lips were moving. "*Zu sein,*" the man said, the softest breath of air. *To be.* Smith strained to hear more but there was nothing left in the man, no words or air.

Smith straightened. He couldn't take them all. He was against the wall when he heard a barked question – "*In der Bibliothek?*"

Two more bullets, a man dropped at the open door. Shouts behind now, no more pretence at secrecy or stealth. Smith said, "*Warten sie!*"

Wait.

"Mr Smith."

The voice came from beyond the door, a voice in shadows.

"Ja."

"You come with us, now, Mr Smith. No more play."

The voice spoke good English, but accented. It was young, like the others. A fully trained extraction team, but too young, and they did things differently these days.

"Don't shoot," Smith said.

The voice chuckled. "You are late for an appointment," it said, "arranged a long time ago."

Smith smiled. "Take them," he said, loudly.

There was the sudden sound of gunfire outside. *Heavy* gunfire. Smith ran, jumped – dived out of the broken window. The whistle of something flying through the air, entering the room he had just vacated. He rolled and covered his head and there was a booming thunder and he felt fragments of wood and stone hit his back and his legs and the night became bright, momentarily.

When it was over he raised his head, looked–

The old lady from M.'s, the lace and china shop, was standing with her hair on edge, a manic grin spread across her face. She was holding the controls of a giant, mounted Gatling gun, a small steam engine belching beside it. "Take one for the Kaiser!" she screamed, and a torrent of bullets exploded out of the machine like angry bees, tracer bullets lighting up the night sky, as M. screamed soundlessly and fired, mowing the black-clothed attackers as though they were unruly grass.

Spies, Smith thought, trying to make himself as small as possible. They'll take any excuse to let their hair down.

The firing stopped and then someone was beside him, grabbing him. He turned and saw Verloc from the bookshop, grinning at him – the first time, perhaps, he had ever seen him look happy.

"Come on!" Verloc said. He pulled Smith, who stood up and followed him. The two men ran across the cabbage patch, over what was left of the fence (which wasn't much) and into the field beyond.

Smith could hear M. screaming again, then a second

round of shooting. His poor house. No. 6 would never be the same again, after this. He should have taken care of this business on his own.

Well, too late now.

Turning, he saw Colonel Creighton, the baroness by his side, going through the garden and into the house, the colonel armed with a curved khukuri knife, the baroness, less ostentatiously, with a couple of small-calibre, elegant hand guns, one in each hand. He raised his head and saw, floating above the house, a long, graceful black shape: an airship.

"Don't let it get away," Smith said. Beside him, Verloc grinned. "Shall we?" he said.

"Let's," Smith said.

Verloc went first, and Smith followed. Back towards the house. M. covered them, but there weren't many of the attackers moving around, any more. "I need at least one of them alive," Smith said.

"Let's see what we can find," Verloc called, over his shoulder. They reached the wall of the house and Verloc, with a litheness that belied his age, took hold of the drain pipe and began to climb. Smith, less enthusiastically, followed.

It was not a tall house and they reached the roof easily enough. The airship had been moored to it but the remaining figures on the roof were busy climbing up it and clearly they had changed their minds about their chances and were keen on getting away. Smith knew M. would shoot the balloon but he feared they had used hydrogen, and he didn't want yet *another* explosion.

"Halt!" he said. Verloc had twin guns pointed at the escaping men – some sort of light-alloy devices he didn't have a moment before – he must have picked them up off the fallen soldiers. Smith himself had one of the guns.

"Schnell! Schnell!" Verloc fired. He couldn't help himself, Smith thought. It couldn't have been easy, all those years, without even a burglar to attempt Verloc's bookshop.

One, two, three men fell, screaming, clutching wounded legs. Verloc liked going for the knees. These soldiers, at least, were unlikely to walk again.

Then he saw him.

The man was young and moved with a grace that Smith found himself, suddenly and unexpectedly, incredibly jealous of. He had come from the other side of the wall, out of shadow. Smith had almost missed him. Then the man lifted his hand and something silver flashed, for just a moment, and, beside Smith, Verloc grunted in pain and dropped, quietly, to the floor.

"Verloc!"

"Don't worry... about me," Verloc said. His hand was on his belly, a blade protruding from between his fingers. Blood was seeping through, falling onto the wall.

Smith was already moving, towards the young man, his vision clear, his mind as cool as water. He saw the flash of a new blade and side-stepped it and unhurriedly entered into the young man's range and head-butted him, hearing the bones of the nose break-

ing. His fingers found the young man's neck and pressed, the thumbs digging. He applied pressure – just enough. They were attempting to fire at him from above, the airship cut loose and rising higher, but M. had him covered, firing low, and Smith grabbed the unconscious man and dragged him to where Verloc lay still. He knelt to check him but Verloc was no longer breathing, and so Smith dragged the young man by the arm to the edge of the roof and fell over it, dragging the younger man down with him.

He hit the ground, rolled, and the younger man followed. Smith dragged him away when there was a long, high whistling tone and he saw, turning on his back, a silver metal object flying in a high arc, as though in slow motion, from M.'s position towards the rising airship–

With the colonel and the baroness running out of the house, as fast as they could–

He heard M. shout, gleefully, wheezing with the effort, "Take one for the–"

The object hit the dark moving spot that was the airship–

Smith closed his eyes shut, tight. But even then he could see the airship, as bright as day, its image burning on his retinas as a bright ball of flame erupted in the sky above, turning the night to day and the airship into a heap of disintegrating wood and cloth and burning parts and people.

FIVE

“A nice cup of tea?”

They had taken over Verloc’s bookshop. Verloc himself was laid out in the main room, amidst the books. Smith had never figured out if Verloc had actually *liked* books. He had once been married, had a family, though Smith didn’t know what had happened to them. Verloc was a bomb-maker by trade. Now he lay amidst the dusty penny dreadfuls and the three-volume novels and the serials from London, and the books from the continent, and it was quiet in the shop.

They had carried the unconscious captive from the airship to Verloc’s back room and propped him in a chair. Verloc had a samovar in the shop and M. had taken to lighting the coals and heating up the water and sniffed disapproval at the state of the milk, but pronounced it at last drinkable.

Smith had known M. for many years but she had never changed. She had the appearance of a harmless old lady, and as she grew older she simply became more herself. She had had a name but no one could

remember what it was. Her work had been legendary. There were few places a little old lady couldn't penetrate.

Now she bustled to and fro, making the tea, using the chipped old white china mugs Verloc had kept in the shop. She gave them a good rinse first. The prisoner meanwhile was coming to in the chair. He did not look happy.

"*Was ist Ihre Mission?*" Smith said. The prisoner looked at him without expression and then said, with a note of disgust, "I speak English."

"As you should," Colonel Creighton said, stiffly. "Now, what were you after, *boy?*"

The prisoner merely nodded in Smith's direction. "Him," he said.

Smith said, "Why?"

The prisoner said, "You know perfectly well why, *Herr Smith.*"

Colonel Creighton looked sideways at Smith. "Do you?" he said.

"No."

"Then you shall have to remain unsatisfied," the prisoner said. The colonel raised his hand to hit him, but Smith stopped him with a gesture. "Was it to do with Bangkok?" he said, softly.

At that the prisoner's face twisted. "*Der Erntemaschine!*" he said. Then he shook his head and a grimace of pain crossed his face. "*Nein,*" he said. "*Nein.*"

"Smith? What is he doing?"

The prisoner was convulsing in the chair. Smith hurried to his side, tilted his head back. Foam was

coming out of the man's mouth. Smith touched two fingers to the man's neck, felt for a pulse. "He's dead," he said, after a moment.

The colonel swore. Smith stared at the corpse. A false tooth, carrying poison, he thought. Standard issue – he should have remembered.

Old. Getting old, and sloppy, and forgetting things. Forgetting things could get you killed.

"What," M. said, materialising with two mugs, handing one to each blithely, "is a damned *Erntemaschine*?"

"Ernte," Smith said, "means harvest."

"So *Erntemaschine*—"

"A machine for harvesting. A..." He hesitated. "A *harvester*," he said, at last.

He knew that, behind him, M. and the colonel were exchanging worried glances.

"That's what they used to call *you*," the colonel said at last, softly. The words seemed to freeze and hang in the air.

But Smith shook his head. "The word for a manual harvester is different, in German," he said. "What did he mean, a machine?"

M. said, gently, "Drink your tea, dear."

Smith sipped at it. "It's good," he said, by way of thanks. Truth was, he could barely taste it. He felt raw, hurt. The room swam. The colonel caught hold of him. "Easy, there, old boy," he murmured.

They used to call him the Harvester.

So now someone else was laying claim to the title. Someone else was harvesting people, the way a farmer

harvested corn, or wheat.

"I'm going to London," he said, at last. "Help me dispose of the bodies?"

It was hard, backbreaking work. The village rallied round, even those who hadn't been to the fight. By dawn there had been nothing left of the airship or its crew, but a new mound of earth, like an ancient tor, stood by the ruined house.

"Too bad about your cabbages," the baroness said. She had been wounded in hand-to-hand combat inside the house, and now wore her arm in a sling. Her eyes shone. "I miss the old days, sometimes," she said. "Then something like this happens and I think maybe retirement's not so bad."

Smith nodded. He had tried to rescue some of the books, but most were beyond help. Torn, burned pages floated like dark butterflies in the air. "We never truly retire, though," he said. "Do we?"

"No," she said. "I guess we don't." Then, coming closer, putting her hand on his shoulder, gently: "I'm sorry about Alice."

He shrugged. "It's the life," he said, "each of us chose."

"Not all of us had the choice," the baroness said.

The worst part had been seeing the bee keeper again. He showed up just as Smith was preparing to leave. Day had come and the sky was clear and bright. Smith wore a suit that had seen better days. He needed to go into the town, to catch the train.

"I am so sorry," Smith said. The old man gazed at him. Once he had been the greatest of them all. Even now he was formidable. He was not that old, but he had suffered much, and had retired shortly after the Bookman affair. Rumours spoke of a lost love, a brotherly conflict, of captivity and strange experiments that had made his mind different, alien to the everyday. They were just that, rumours. No one but the bee keeper knew what the truth was, or what kept him in the village.

The bee keeper merely nodded. "It is the life we choose," he said. "Mycroft always knew what he was doing."

"Will you... pursue an investigation?" Smith asked. The bee keeper shook his head. "There is no art to it," he said, with a slight smile. "I already know."

"Then tell me."

The bee keeper shook his head again. "It will not help," he said. "Yet you are suited to this task, in a way I am not. It requires not a singularly great deductive mind, such as mine, but a tenacious sort of controlled violence. What you are after is not a mystery, but the conclusion of one. A great game we had all been playing, and which is now coming to an end... or to a new beginning."

"I don't understand."

"Look at the stars," the bee keeper said, "for answers." And with that last cryptic, unhelpful comment, he was gone.

Smith shook his head. This was Mycroft all over again. Then he decided to leave it, and climbed into

the hansom cab.

“Market Blandings, please, Hume,” he told the driver, who nodded without speaking and hurried the horses into action.

Smith settled back inside the cab. He closed his eyes. The horses moved sedately, the motion soothing. In moments he was asleep.

SIX

Hume dropped him off outside the Blue Lizard on Market Blandings' sleepy high street. The hansom cab rode off and Smith, still tired and aching, decided to go into the pub to refresh himself before catching the train.

Whereas the Emsworth Arms, down the road, was a spacious, quiet place, the Blue Lizard, even this early, was noisy, and it smelled. It was a small, dank place set away from the river, and Smith had difficulty getting to the bar to order an ale and breakfast.

It felt strange to be out of the village. He knew the Bureau kept rural agents around the village – making sure the inmates remained where they should. Confirmation of that came quickly. As he was tucking into his fried eggs a small, slim figure slid into the seat across from him. Smith looked up, and his face twisted into an expression of dislike that made the other man grin.

“Charles,” Smith said.

“Peace,” the other said, and laughed.

"I thought they hanged you," Smith said.

Charles Peace shrugged. "I'm a useful feller, ain't I?" he said, modestly.

"Useful how?" Smith said.

"Keeping my eyes open, don't I," Peace said. "Sniffing about, by your leave, Smith. Ferreting things."

He looked like a ferret, Smith thought. But he was nothing but a rat.

"What do you want?" he said.

Peace tsked. "No way to talk to an old friend," he said mournfully. "You know you shouldn't be out of the village, Smith."

"I'm back on active."

"Really." Peace snorted. He was a violinist, a burglar, and a murderer. Which is a different thing entirely, Smith preferred to think, to a killer.

Murderers didn't have standards, for one.

"Really," Smith said.

"I did not get the memo."

"I don't doubt that."

Charles Peace looked sharply up. "What does that mean, me old mucker?" he said, almost spitting out the words.

Smith ignored him. The Blue Lizard was busy with rail workers, farmers in for the market, and such visitors to the castle low enough on the social pecking order not to have been extended an invitation to stay at the castle grounds. It was dark inside and the air turned blue with cigar and pipe smoke. Across from him, Peace made himself relax. He rolled a cigarette, yellow fingers shaking slightly as they heaped tobacco

into paper. "Having a laugh," Peace said, smiling again. His teeth were revolting. Smith pushed away his breakfast, took a sip of ale. "You have something for me?" he said at last.

But now Peace was disgruntled. "Should report you, I should," he said. "Out and about, when you should be retired an' all."

Smith looked at him closely. Had Fogg not rescinded the watch order on him? He had assumed Peace had a message for him from the Bureau. But if he hadn't, what did he want? Smith knew the instructions that affected him, and the rest of the village. Watchers were told that under no circumstances were they to engage with retired agents. *Report and wait*, was the standing procedure.

So what was Peace playing at?

He waited the man out. Peace finishing rolling, lit up the cigarette. Loose tobacco fell on the table. The man's hands were shaking. Disgraceful. "You do something you shouldn't have?" Peace said at last.

Smith didn't answer. Watched him. Watched the room.

He'd had trouble finding a table. He sat in the corner, his back to the wall, his eyes on the door. It was the way he always sat. Busy place. Was anyone watching *him*, in their turn? Was anything out of place?

"Been a naughty boy," Peace said. He spat out tobacco shreds. Made to get up—

Smith kicked the table from underneath, lifting it over — it hit Peace full in the face, sent him reeling back. Smith dropped behind the table as three shots

rang out. Screams in the pub – he caught movement coming *forward* as everyone else moved back, towards the door or, if they were smart, stayed down. Two figures, guns drawn. He was getting sick of guns.

“We just want to talk, Mr. Smith.”

The voice was cultured, sort of, a London accent, with only a hint of the continental about it. More agents of the Kaiser? Someone else?

Smith said, “What about?”

“About this year’s harvest, Mr. Smith,” the voice said. Smith drew his knife, softly. But he was cornered.

“Who do you work for?”

The voice laughed. “Whoever pays,” it said.

Smith shifted the table, keeping it between himself and the attackers, until he hit Peace’s leg. Peace himself wasn’t moving. He pulled on the leg, bringing the man’s mass towards him. He could hear the two men coming forward. Tensed. “Really, Mr Smith. Do not make it more difficult than it needs to–”

He grabbed Peace under the arms, pushed the table again so it fell down with a crash, and rose. Two guns fired. He felt the impact of the shots, Peace’s body slamming him back as it was hit. He let it carry him, moved with the impact, discarded the body and came over the fallen table, blade at the ready.

The first man had his gun arm extended, about to fire again. Smith’s blade severed the arteries in the man’s wrist and then with a half-turn, dancer’s movement Smith’s blade flashed again, moving across the man’s neck. The man tried to gurgle, couldn’t, and fell to his knees, blood pouring out of the wound.

Another shot, but Smith wasn't where he'd been and the other man, searching for a target, clumsy with the gun, didn't respond fast enough and Smith was behind him, the blade against the man's neck, and Smith said, "Drop it."

The man dropped the gun. Beside them, his partner expired noisily.

"Be still."

The man was very still.

It was quiet in the abandoned pub. Landlord and patrons had made for the door and were all gone, abandoning drinks and cigars and conversation. Smith preferred it that way.

He said, "Who sent you?"

The man began to talk fast. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down and the man twitched every time it scraped against the knife. "We was paid to watch for you, is all," he said. "I don't know who wants you, mister. A man came. He was dressed well, he had money. He said, just bring him to me."

"Alive?"

"He wasn't strict on that score," the man said, and swallowed.

"What did he look like?"

The man shrugged, then regretted it. "He didn't give no name."

Smith increased the pressure of the knife. "Not what I asked," he said.

"Tall, black hair, foreign accent. He had a scar across his cheek."

Smith went still at that. "What sort of accent?" he

said at last.

“Dunno, mister. Some European muck, like my partner’s is – was.” He swallowed again.

“And Peace?”

“Old Peace here was to tag you, is all. We figured we’d kill him when we was done so as to save the pay.”

“Sensible,” Smith muttered. There was noise outside now, and the whistle of constables, and he decided it was time to go.

“Do you want to live?” he said.

The man swallowed a third time. “Very much, mister,” he said.

“Too bad,” Smith said. He raised his hand and slammed it against the man’s neck. The man fell. Smith arranged him comfortably with his back to the bar. He picked up the man’s gun and put it in his hand. Then he went over to the man’s fallen companion, picked up the man’s hand, which was still holding a gun, and fired twice at the unconscious man. Blood bloomed over the man’s chest and Smith nodded, satisfied. Outside the noise intensified and a voice, magnified by a bullhorn, called, “Step outside with your hands raised!”

Smith surveyed the scene. With luck no one would remember the quiet gentleman who had sat in the corner. Then he slipped out through the back door, over the fence of the sad little garden, and was soon at the train station, just in time for the London one to pull in.

SEVEN

The train departed on time. He'd paid for a first-class seat and now sat alone in the small car, a cup of tea by his side.

Smith liked trains. There was something soothing about their rhythmic movement, something vastly luxurious about the space one had, the ability to simply get up and walk and stretch – and that without mentioning the joys of dining cars, and sleeping compartments. He always slept well on trains.

You could always get a cup of tea.

And, of course, trains were wonderful for covert assassination.

The second time he met Alice had been on a train. He had got on at Sofia and the train, on a leisurely night journey, was travelling to the port town of Varna, on the shores of the Black Sea.

Smith had been on board to dispose of a Bulgarian diplomat by the name of Markov. He had taken his time. A train offered a perfect shelter for a quiet mur-

der. It stopped often, each station offering a quiet getaway. The Bureau had agents waiting at stops along the route. They would provide him with the means to disappear, if he chose to use them.

But Smith preferred to work alone.

The diplomat had been of the anti-Caliban faction, and as such a threat to Her Majesty's government. Bulgaria was an important asset for the lizardine court, its Black Sea ports offering strategic opportunities against the Russians on the one hand, the Ottomans on the other. Varna itself, their destination, was a bustling port town crawling with British Navy and Aerofleet personnel. Markov had links to anti-Calibanic groups, some of which used violent means. Verloc, in his day, had been a prominent member of several such groups – though he, of course, worked undercover for the Bureau.

Some of the time, at least.

Markov took ill shortly after dinner. Smith had sat two tables down from him, eating a simple meal of smoked salami, bread and the red wine this country was famed for. He had not expected Markov to take ill, and was concerned. As Markov, about to retch, departed from the car, a new figure appeared in the doorway and Smith's breath caught in his chest.

She wore a blue dress, just as she had in Venice. A white flower behind her ear this time. She was smiling and her smile widened when she saw him. She came and sat opposite him and signalled to the waiter to bring another wine glass and then said, "Why, Mr Smith, fancy meeting you here."

"Alice," he said, softly, the food forgotten. Her glass arrived and the waiter filled it and she raised it up. "Cheers," she said.

Markov had expired later that night, of apparent food poisoning.

He drank his tea. He couldn't really believe she was dead. They had spent that night together and got off at Varna and then hadn't seen each other for six months. The fat man had warned him about her, Alice of the blades and of the poison, who yet liked neither, who often said a "Honesty is a gun"... Alice of the grin that said she knew what she was doing was wrong, but that she liked doing it, nevertheless... He wasn't even sure who she really worked for. You couldn't tell, with any of them. They were shadow pawns in a shadow world, switching sides, owing allegiance to no one. Mycroft knew that, was philosophical about it. "If you were honest people," he once told Smith, "you would be of no use to me."

Now Smith sat and worried about the latest development, as the train chugged along, heading for the capital. He longed to see London again, walk its streets, hear the calling of the whales in the Thames... He began to toss a coin absent-mindedly, heads, tails, heads, tails. The coin bore the profile of Queen Victoria, the lizard queen. Heads, tails...

It had been a message, he decided. He knew the man with the scar on his cheek. He never did things by half. Sending amateurs after him had been a message... a warning?

So the French, too, were interested.

But why him, Smith? Did they suspect him of being behind the killings?

Or did they believe him capable of following the chain?

If so, they will be following him. Watching.

Well, let them.

The world was large and fractured and there were too many factions at play, and always had been. Nothing had changed. The game remained and he, Smith, was back in it, playing.

With a small smile he sat back, his head against the comfortable stuffing of the seat, and closed his eyes. He wasn't as young as he used to be, and it had been a long night. He fell asleep, still smiling wistfully.

He'd first met the man from Meung in Paris, in the seventies. Tension ran high at that time between the Quiet Council, France's ruling body of human and automatons, and the lizardine court.

Smith was in Paris on a defection. A senior French scientist wanted to change sides and Smith had been given *carte blanche* on the operation. "Do whatever you have to do," the fat man had told him, "but get him across the Channel alive."

Only the whole thing had turned out to be a trap, and Smith found himself locked inside an inn outside Paris, and the inn was on fire. When he stared out of the window, through the metal bars, he saw the man from Meung for the first time. The man looked up at the window, and laughed. Then he climbed on his

horse and rode away.

They called him the man from Meung not because he came from Meung-sur-Loire but because, when he was only twenty-five, the young man who was to become the Comte de Rochefort had killed forty-six people there, in one night. They had been a group of conspirators, plotting against the Council, and the young man, who had gone deep undercover with the group, proceeded to assassinate them one by one over the course of the night. It had come to be known as the Second Battle of Meung-sur-Loire.

But Smith did not know it that night, staring out of the window while the smoke billowed through the inn and the fire spread, and roared, and he fled desperately from room to room, seeking an escape...

They had met again in Mombasa in seventy-one. That time, Rochefort was after a British courier and, also that time, it was Smith who had the upper hand. He had not been able to kill the man but had given him the distinct scar he still bore.

Like Smith, Rochefort despised guns. His was a silent method, a personal one. Like Smith, he preferred to kill at close quarters, with a knife or with bare hands and, like Smith, he was very good at it.

Smith woke up feeling refreshed just as the train was pulling into Charing Cross. He had not been disturbed throughout the journey. No further attempts on his life, so far. He almost felt disappointed.

But they'd be watching, he knew. Rochefort was too smart to get on the train alongside Smith. Most likely he hadn't even been at Market Blandings, had

arranged the attack from a distance and was even now waiting in London, in an anonymous hotel somewhere, with his agents on the ground, waiting for Smith to make his move.

It was odd, Rochefort warning him like that. Smith could not say that they liked each other, he and the Frenchman, but over the years a mutual respect had developed, as they fought across continents in the shadow game, the Great Game. The only game there was. What interest did the Quiet Council have in the deaths of Mycroft and Alice? Who else had died? How many people, and where, and why, and by whose hand?

He didn't know, but he was going to find out.

The train came to a halt, and he left his compartment and went down the steps to the platform. People swarming all about the great station, the trains belching steam, the cries of sellers offering candied apples and roasted nuts and sizzling sausages and birds in cages and mechanical toys and portraits done on the spot, and a little pickpocket went past him, going for it when Smith grabbed his hand, giving it a tweak, and the boy squeaked. Smith could have easily broken the delicate bones of the boy's fingers, but didn't.

"Run off with you," he said, a little gruffly, and the urchin, giving him a look of hurt dignity, did exactly that, not looking back.

London.

What did the old bee keeper used to say, in *his* own active days in the field? Ah, yes.

The game is afoot.

Smith smiled as he remembered; he began to walk towards the exit, about to enter again the world he'd left behind.

It felt good to be back.



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