



Lady Emma Champerdowne, formerly Lieutenant Champerdowne of the 1st Devons Armored Infantry, lay sprawled on the bunk of her airship, *Lilith*. Her long legs, clad in riding boots, trailed onto the floor. Auburn hair cascaded down the back of her Imperial Red tunic with the green facings of the Devons.

Breton Thaws looked at *Lilith*'s commander from the cabin's hatchway. Behind him, two big rotors turned over the ether containers that bore the ex-corvette through the sunny skies

of Northern India with her cargo of Royal Mail. He sighed, then wedged his broad shoulders through the narrow door, ducking his bald head. Carefully, he deposited a silver coffee service beside the young woman. He was fond of his captain and hated to see her indulge her self-destructive bent. Last night in Rawalpindi had been particularly bad.

The smell of the coffee drew open a sea-green eye. With a groan, Emma rolled up to sitting. She held her pale elegant face in both hands, then slowly moved her jaw where a small bruise was beginning to show.

“Hello, Thaws,” she said. Her voice sounded harsh to her own ears.

“Good Morning, Captain,” he replied, pouring for her. “I brought you coffee, toast and jam.” He spooned in sugar and cream for her, the implements almost vanishing in his hands.

Emma’s jaw clenched at the mention of food but she took the coffee with a grateful nod.

“How’s the jaw?” he asked.

She drained a good bit of the cup in one long swallow and held it out for more.

“Thaws,” she said, giving him a mournful look. “Did I really belt that Seaforth officer?”

“Yes, Ma’am, and a right good shot it was too. Fortunately all in the room agreed that he was winding up on you and you merely got him first. Otherwise the Provost would likely have taken a more active role in the affair.”

“Well,” she grumbled. “It’s his own fault. That calumny about the Devon’s breaking square when the Russian Mercenaries came to the Pasha’s rescue could not go unanswered.”

Thaws poured more coffee for her then began to spread jam on the toast. “I believe his animosity was more for you than the Devons, Ma’am. I looked him up in Burke’s Peerage and Gentry. It turns out he is cousin to Lady Barbara Hazlett.”

“Oh dear,” Emma said.

“Also related to Reginald Fleming. I must say Ma’am it was rather indiscreet of you to become romantically involved with both sides of an engaged couple.”

“Please, Thaws. Didn’t I pay dearly enough? Forced out of my beloved Devons to avoid scandal and court martial? Besides, I didn’t know the little minx was engaged at the time and looking to preserve her virginity while still having some fun.”

“If you would pay some attention to the announcements in the Times—”

“I have no time for such tittle-tattle,” she said, nibbling on the toast and wincing at her jaw.

“I believe it was tittles that got you into this mess,” he said, rolling his pale-blue eyes.

“Thaws,” she growled.

“I’ll be on the bridge if you need me,” he said, rising. “We should raise Peshawar in about two hours if the winds leave us alone. You will find all is in order.”

“Yes,” she said, suddenly contrite. “Good of you to get us off when you did. I... I hope no one from the crew...”

“I brought you aboard discretely, Ma’am. No one saw. And if anyone did they would be too smart to recall it. Accidents on airships are almost always fatal.” Thaws gave a broad grin, then saluted properly and left her to breakfast.

Lilith came into Peswhar with the afternoon warmth. Spring had returned to the uplands of Khyber. Caravans were moving. The city was alive with trade, merchants, pilgrims and other

wanderers. Europeans were common, but Emma, still chastened by her last experience, planned to avoid them. Yet what did that leave her to do?

“Thaws,” she said. “I feel as if my luck must change. I am bound for the Egyptian for a jug of wine and some rounds of cards. Tomorrow will be soon enough to look for cargo. There’s always the mail in any event.”

He looked at her but knew better than to argue when that mood and look were on her. “I’ll come for you if you’re not back by moonrise.”

“Thaws, you’re worse than a mother hen.”

The huge Englishman waited until Emma, pistol on her belt and white helmet on her head, started down the ramp between the catamarans before grabbing the youngest crew member, Afzal.

“Follow, Ma’am,” he ordered. “Hire a boy and keep him with you to send to me if there is need.”

“She will not be pleased at being followed.”

“Then don’t be seen at it,” he growled. Afzal scurried off. Thaws found the second mate, Tanweer’s eyes on him. The older man nodded. “I will keep rifles, pistol and knives handy.”

“Always,” Thaws said.

Emma walked into Peshawar. She was known there and the crowds of children that pestered Europeans ignored her and she them. Some merchants cried out her name, or tried to sell her something. Those that knew her better and recognized the grim set to her face, left her alone.

She made her way to the Egyptian, a casino run by a greasy local no more Egyptian than she, but also too smart to cheat his regulars in any significant way. Emma found two other airship crewmen there and a few caravaners she knew. A card game soon broke out and the wine began to flow, thin nasty stuff that it was.

It seemed that Emma’s luck had indeed changed as the cards came easily to her. She decided to take a break when nature’s call overcame her winning streak. Emma made her way to the bathrooms at the back of the two-story building, knowing which ones were the least noisome.

Afterward, she came out, buttoning her tunic and too self-involved to see the sack until two burley men put it over her head. The outside door opened and four more men took hold of her. Her gun was pulled from her belt and Emma felt ropes on her.

I’m for it now, she thought as the smell of ether made her senses swim.

The men ran down the street, carrying her to another even more dubious-looking bar. People scattered from their path and pretended not to see them. Save for Afzal and a bright-eyed boy in rags. Afzal trailed the men to the lair, then sent the boy running.

Emma came to with a start, realizing she was in a deep chair, blindfolded, and that her hands were tied only loosely in her own lap. She straightened up slowly.

“She awakens,” a man said in Peshawar.

“Excellent. You and your men go outside,” the other voice was female and sounded Chinese.

“You will regret taking liberties with me,” Emma snarled with a confidence she did not feel.

“Now, now, Captain Champerdowne,” said a cultured Oxford voice. “No need for that.”

The blindfold came off her face and Emma stared in surprise. Facing her across the dimly lit room was an Englishman, impeccably dressed, as if for the Halls of Parliament. Sir Paul Hargreaves looked at her with what seemed mild amusement. Next to him, holding the blindfold, stood a breathtaking Eurasian woman, looking more Chinese than otherwise. She wore red Chinese clothes on her slim body, but her gray eyes and a slightly Slavic cast to her face gave her away. Her silky black hair was piled in an elaborate style.

“Good to see you again, Emma,” he said.

“And you, Sir Paul,” she replied.

“May I introduce to you,” Hargreaves said, “Madame Lihau Song. In the service of the Tsar—”

“Ah,” Lihau said, fluttering her fan, “by arrangement of the Jade Throne, I am merely seconded to the Tsar. I serve the Dowager Empress, first and foremost.”

“Of course,” Hargreaves said. “Forgive me.”

“Her majesty’s representative and a notorious seductress of the Tsar,” Emma said, twisting free of the ropes on her hands, “one feels this is an unusual combination.”

“Caused by an unusual and dire conflation of events,” Sir Hargreaves said.

“You are perhaps familiar with the Emir of Herat, Ayub Khan,” Lihau asked, her voice languid yet arresting. Emma found it hard to take her eyes off her. She noticed Hargreaves seemed to have the same problem.

“One of yours, I believe,” Emma said. “A bit of a madman, I hear.”

“Let us say,” Lihau said, rising and crossing to Emma to pour a glass of wine from an elegant decanter, “that he is not amenable to the fine control needed in these delicate days.”

Emma took the wine, which was excellent and European. She noticed the scent of the other woman was a mix of jasmine and sandalwood.

“The Emir of Herat,” Lihau continued, “is friendly to the Tsar, but he is rather headstrong in interpreting the Tsar’s interests. His enthusiasm for the Romanovs and his hatred for the House of Hanover sometimes exceeds the bounds of good sense.”

“As you interpret it for him,” Emma said.

Lihau again fluttered her fan, enough for Emma to see her sensuous lips open into a smile. “I am merely a humble servant.”

“Whose powers of seduction,” Hargreaves said, “evidently exceed the lure of the many pounds sterling we dangled before Ayob Khan.”

“Perhaps you should have sent the delightful Miss Emma,” Lihau said. “She would surely have compelled the Emir’s interest.”

“But would he have compelled mine?” Emma said, sipping further, but for once she dared not indulge, the waters around her were deep and the footing slippery. “Besides, my country has elected to forgo my service.”

“That has changed,” Hargreaves said.

“Why?” Emma snapped. “I haven’t.”

“The Emir is holding two emissaries of Her Majesty’s government,” Hargreaves said. “Bad enough that he is treating them poorly and worse that he threatens them with death unless

we remove our troops from the Khyber pass, but what is intolerable is one of the Emissaries is directly related to Her Royal Highness herself, Lord John Breakstone. The British Empire cannot stand by while Hanoverian blood is shed.”

“And the Romanoffs,” Lihau added, “must then intervene to support their overzealous factor. They have invested too much in this one man and over my advice. Should he be attacked and Herat conquered, then their entire position in the Great Game is in peril.

“Such a confrontation,” she continued, “is quite undesirable from the point of both our empires. Nor does the Jade Throne wish to see more war in this region.”

“Miss Song and I agree, and we so seldom do,” Hargreaves said, “on this point. Further it seems that our superiors cannot seem to find any way out of the box. So we, on our own initiative and to give our superiors a plausible deniability, are seeking another way out.

“We need an agent—someone who will be accepted as having enough reason to betray her country, especially as Miss Song will be going along to guarantee your bona fides as an agent of the Tsar’s.”

“Which,” Emma said, rocking back on her chair, “if I fail, will be the inscription on my headstone.”

“Of course,” Hargreaves acknowledged. “Even if you succeed, your part in the matter can never be expressly known, but you will once again be in the service of the Crown, even if it is not with the Devons.”

“There will also be abundant financial rewards,” Lihau added. “You have many gambling debts, I understand. The *Lilith* is rather mortgaged too.”

“How abundant?” Emma said.

“Well,” Hargreaves said. “If it is merely money—”

“We will pay,” Lihau interrupted with a cool gaze at Hargreaves, “all your debts, the note on the ship, and an additional 10,000 pounds, all in advance.”

Hargreaves swallowed. “Really, Miss Song—”

“Your side has already lost the services of the lovely Emma once,” Lihau said sweetly. “We will not risk such again by a lack of generosity. We agreed on the split of expenses.”

“But the sum,” Hargreaves protested weakly.

“Is a mere fraction of what war will cost either of us,” Lihau said, snapping her fan closed.

Emma looked from one to the other. She thought of the money, thought of the Devons and thought of her family, still stinging from the scandal of her actions.

“For Queen and Country,” she murmured to herself.

“What?” Hargreaves said.

“In addition,” Emma said, ignoring his question, “there will be a thousand pounds for my man, Thaws, and I wish all records regarding my departure from the Devons to be classified so top secret that no human being shall ever see them.”

“Done,” Lihau said before Hargreaves could speak. He looked at the smaller Asian woman, sighed and nodded.

There was a frantic knock at the door. Hargreaves stood and Lihau’s hand slid into one of her sleeves, her eyes narrowing.

Hargreaves stood as an Afghan leaned in, his eyes wide with panic. “Effendi, please. There is an English giant downstairs in the bar. He has seized everyone and threatens to tear men apart as if they are chickens unless we produce the tall woman. He says he will pull out the internal organs of men and eat them before their dying eyes if he is not immediately obeyed.”

“Ah,” Emma said in satisfaction. “That will be my man, Thaws.”

“Really! Eating men’s hearts and livers,” Hargreaves said. “Hardly English.”

“Please go settle him down,” Lihau said, withdrawing her hand from whatever weapon was in her sleeve. “I shall finish with Miss Emma here.”

Hargreaves left with the Afghan.

Lihau turned back to Emma. “When can *Lilith* leave for Herat?”

“We will need some proper armaments,” Emma mused, “food and other supplies.”

“All easily done,” Lihau said, drifting up to Emma.

Emma found Lihau’s proximity somewhat distracting. “Then we could rise for Herat the day after that, barring foul weather.”

Lihau smiled a dazzling smile. “Then we shall.”

Two days later, Thaws, Emma and Lihau stood on the open bridge of *Lilith*. Her ten man Lascar crew scrambled about, doing the last minute preparations for lifting off the twin-rotored catamaran. *Lilith* rested on her armored bottom, which protected the ether bags from shot and shell. The former corvette didn’t carry much cargo, but she carried the mail and high-value cargo faster than any civilian airship would. The redundancies and compartmentation in her ether bags had saved her from Pashtun hill snipers and winter mountain storms.

Thaws looked at a two-pounder rapid-fire gun in the lower central turret at his feet, as if it was Christmas morning. They’d had to pawn *Lilith*’s weaponry to settle Emma’s last gambling binge. Now *Lilith* was again as well armed as if she still served in Her Majesty’s Areoforce.

Lihau had the small cabin *Lilith* boasted for its rare passengers. Emma offered her the captain’s larger cabin but the Eurasian demurred.

“It is quite nice,” she said. “I like all the little cubbyholes and the fine woods. Quite comfortable, thank you.” Today Lihau was dressed in airship clothes: leathers and silks, with an overcoat handy to be added when the ship rose.

Emma wore her usual red coat and green facings, blue pants and high-topped boots. A white colonial helmet kept the sun off her. On her hip rested a holstered Webley.44 caliber. The pistol was a lot even for a tall woman, but Emma’s father had insisted she learn how to use a proper pistol. *“Fancy banging away at a fuzzy-wuzzy with a pop gun, only to give him a surprised look when he plunges a spear through you. No, Emma, if you want to play with the boys you must be able to use their toys. The full caliber Webley knocks them down and kills them.”*

Tanweer came up the railed gangway to the bridge. “Lady Emma,” he said. “The ship is all stowed.”

“Very well,” Emma said, then made her rounds for her own preflight. She hadn’t quite recovered her self-respect from the fact that Thaws had to take them off without her inspection when they scooted out of Rawalpindi.

I must watch the drinking, she thought. No good losing my mind and my complexion. But the estrangement from her family and her people occasionally overwhelmed her in this brilliant, smelly and utterly foreign land.

Yet the world she had come from had no place for her either. Emma disdained conventions, seeking a level of personal freedom unobtainable in England, even in a wealthy noble family. She saw no reason why she should not be able to bed anyone she wanted, of either

gender. While the love that dared not speak its name, might now whisper it, that was the block on which her career stumbled.

It's not like they weren't mostly men, she thought darkly, and never of the Regiment. Still one affair too many had cost her the traditional place of the Champerdowne's in the Devons. Her brother, William, older, unadventurous, and standing to inherit all, had despaired of her then. But full marks to him, he'd stood by his "wild sister" until he could get her set up safely in a small shipping business on the frontier.

I should write him, she thought. He was kind to me and I was not to him. It's not his fault he was born first and so conventional that no whiff of scandal ever floated near him.

"If I get back alive," she promised herself. "I will make more effort."

"At what, Ma'am?" Thaws asked.

Emma realized that she has spoken the last aloud. "Nothing, Thaws. All looks in order. Let us be off for Queen and Country."

"And likely to be shot at and disowned by both," he replied. Of the crew, only Thaws knew of their mission. For the rest of the scurvy crew, though, their only loyalties were to Allah, money and finally her, best not to tempt them to think too much.

They lifted off into a clear sky, thankfully it was not the season for storms. *Lilith* headed northwest. The airship wandered in her peaceful realm over the dun-colored land with its occasional thin ribbon of water for hours, occasionally tacking against contrary winds.

Toward evening a line of marching men caught her attention and she walked onto the wing of the bridge to get a better look, leaving the controls to Thaws and Tanweer. Stepping out into the ever-present wind she saw a long line of British infantry in open order surrounding a squadron of marching steambots. The machines, each over thirty feet tall, looked like colossal versions of the men, painted red across the chest and blue on the tubular steel legs. The heads, where the operators sat, were covered by white domes resembling helmets, to throw off the Afghan sun. In their massive arms each carried a two-pounder similar to the one in *Lilith's* turret. It was as if a patrol of giants had joined the men. They were making slow process toward the trails to the Khyber Pass.

"If we are not successful in our mission," Lihau's voice sounded behind her, "the generals will have full reign to play with their colorful toys."

Emma turned. Lihau stood in a sheltered alcove. "Don't you support your nation's aims?" Emma asked, tucking her errant hair back under her helmet.

Lihau gave her a scornful look as Emma joined her out of the wind. "These lands have been fought over since the dawn of time. Always the Great Game goes on but to what end? There are no winners, Emma, only new players to sit at the table and bleed."

"Yet you do it?"

"Why do you think I have a choice?" she said, her gray eyes challenging Emma. "Even in your more modern world, the choices and prescriptions for women are narrow. You, who had freedoms I never dreamt of, fell into disgrace. I went to the only place I could go and be myself. Spying is a nasty world, but it does provide liberties not found elsewhere, especially in my part of the world."

The wind picked up, the sun was racing ahead of them and the night already promised to be cold.

"Must I believe in what I do, to do it?" Lihau said as if to herself. She shivered. Then to Emma's surprise, she moved up to her and slipped inside Emma's jacket. They stood face to face. Lihau's hands moved over Emma's back.

“So tall,” she said. “Such wide shoulders and narrow hips, perhaps you should have been a man?”

“I enjoy being a girl,” Emma said. She felt warmth rising in her own body, felt the other woman’s hard nipples against her own belly, her breath soft on Emma’s own chest.

“As do I,” Lihau said. “We seem a lot alike. Unwilling to be confined by the world’s expectations of us.”

“Perhaps,” Emma said.

“Let us leave it at that for now,” Lihau said. “At... perhaps.” She looked up at Emma, smiled and slipped out of her grasp, vanishing down the companionway.

They came up on Herat in the early morning. Emma placed her prized redcoat, with its green facings, in one of the secret compartments *Lilith* was well-supplied with. It wouldn’t do to appear before the Emir in the colors of the Devons. She pulled out a dark-blue, patrol jacket, devoid of insignia. It was suitable for sneaking about at night too. She joined Lihau and Thaws on the bridge. Around them, the crew scrambled to their action stations, armed with rifles, pistols and ugly swords of local make.

“Break out the Russian flag,” Lihau ordered. Emma nodded to Azfal.

“Thaws,” Emma said. “The two-pounder please. Tanweer and I will bring her in.”

Thaws nodded and slipped out into the cold, early morning air.

Herat stretched before them on the plain, a dun and white colored city of near 50,000. Once part of Persia, it had been wrestled from that hold and given to the Afghans by the British though it had bought them no love. The city had fallen in power and influence from its old days as a key point on the Silk Road. Ayob Khan was determined to redress that.

“There’s the fortress,” Lihau pointed. “The Ark-i-nau overlaps the original fortress. There are five gates, two on the north and one at each of the other faces. A high street traverses the town from the north-west to the south gate, and is the great center of traffic.

“There is what passes for an airport, merely flattened earth with windsocks and tie-downs. The Emir cleared the area only a year ago.”

Lilith, using her tilting rotors, passed over the pathetic, dusty fields that passed for farms. There was water from both springs and canals, but this was still a dry country.

People below stopped what they were doing to gaze upward. Children shouted and followed below them. Airships were not common in this part of the world. Some people made signs against evil, either from superstitious fear, or a simple hatred of all things foreign.

The airfield lay inside the city wall. Only two other airships sat there. One was a tiny courier, little more than a balloon and an engine. An old freighter of Russian make sagged on the field near it.

Lilith went into hover as Emma expertly gauged the wind over the ground, which was not the same as that at their height. She ordered Tanweer to start scavenging the ether gas back from the bags to their metal containers. She also slowed the rotors and *Lilith* sank.

Tanweer looked at the wall of the citadel. “Captain, a hundred feet to the left would interpose that one tower between us and the two over the main gate. Two less cannon on us.”

Emma immediately goosed the rotors and, to the annoyance of the ground crew standing below them, *Lilith* drifted the hundred feet before her keel touched down and the Lascars threw ropes to the ground crew.

Thaws reappeared, rifle in hand. The turret was useless with the airship grounded. “Welcoming committee,” he said and gestured past the ground crew, who were pounding stakes into the hard-packed earth. With her airbags deflated and recovered into their metal skids, there was no danger of *Lilith* taking to the sky, but a high wind could send the lightly-built airship crashing into things on the ground. From the partially obscured gate, a large carriage and an escort of horsemen were coming their way. They wore green and gold. Flags blew stiffly above them. Lances caught the morning light.

Lihau snatched up the telescope. “Ah, the Emir himself comes. He saw the pennant on our flag and knows I am here.” She handed Emma the scope.

“Emma, be wise and mostly silent. You are not the sort of woman the Emir will understand. Remember the role of women in his world. I am the Queen of his Bed, which he understands and accepts. A Queen of the Air will be something bizarre to him, possibly an abomination. Thaws, you should not speak at all if possible.”

“I’ve nothing to say to the barbarian,” Thaws growled.

“Good then,” Lihau said. “Let us greet our host.”

“Tanweer,” Emma said, “Keep the crew aboard, weapons to hand, ready to lift at any time.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Tanweer said, as usual asking no questions.

Followed by Emma and Thaws, Lihau made her way aft to the main ramp between the rear catamarans, where the crew were already lowering the ramp. They carried no cargo this time so no porters swarmed up the ramp. Thaws handed his Martini-Henry to Tanweer. He and Emma carried Webley revolvers and knives. All Afghans wore weapons and Emma hoped they would be allowed to keep theirs.

To her surprise, Lihau drew a weapon from a bag that she handed to the Lascar. She belted on a Lemat pistol. The bulky weapon looked incongruous on the slender Eurasian woman. Emma noted that some craftsman had converted it from cap and ball to cartridge. Still it seemed an odd choice.

A white and gold carriage, preceded and followed by eight lancers and drawn by four matched geldings, pulled up to the back of the ship. Servants scrambled to place cushions and rugs for the Emir, who emerged from the ornate carriage.

The Emir Ayob Khan walked past his guards. A tall man with burning eyes, he wore rich Afghan robes. “Ah Lihau, it delights my eyes to see you again. Do you bring more British for me?” he said, reaching his arm possessively around her and giving Emma a cool stare.

“No, my prince,” Lihau said, fluttering her fan in front of him. “Emma is an agent of mine, long abused by the English and useful to me. I feared I might be detained by the English as the tensions rise and preparations are made for the invasion. Emma and her ship were my way out.”

Emma bowed to the Emir.

The Emir’s eyes drifted to Thaws, who stared impassively back. “And this giant?”

“Serves only her, who serves only me,” Lihau said. “Come, my Prince, tell me of the latest developments. Has there been a response to your demands?”

“No,” the Emir said with a shrug, “nor will there be. Oh, they shall make me some offer of money and lands but they cannot accede to my demands.”

“Then might those be too much?” Lihau said.

The Emir’s eyes flashed unpleasantly, but he reattached his smile quickly. “No, Lihau, we have discussed these things. I cannot accede to their demands unless I wish to become a

puppet governor under their regime. No, we shall enjoy the sight of these white devils dying for their sins. Come, we shall visit them now.”

They followed him back to his carriage. Thaws was directed to ride on the back with the other servants and truly, he did not seem to mind. Emma joined Lihau in the carriage. The wheels jolted into forward motion and they moved back toward the palace.

Between the airfield and palace was another flattened area, in front of a postern opening in the wall itself. They stopped there and dismounted from the carriage. Thaws joined them.

The Emir led them to the center of the field. In it lay a broad pit, surrounded by ropes, stanchions and tiered seats, shaded by opulent fabrics. The ornate setting did nothing to cover the smell of corruption coming up from the pit.

Two guards paced around the pit, their faces covered against the smell. The Emir walked up to the opening, itself easily twenty-feet across. He stood next to the metal and chain ladder coiled at his feet. The guards saluted and fell back as the Emir looked down, triumph in every line of his body. Lihau walked up to his side, her face schooled to impassivity. Emma, a pace behind them with Thaws, tried for the same, but was not sure if she succeeded.

Emma looked down into the pit. The Emir had clearly used it for previous prisoners. White bone gleamed and there were some vile, rotting piles that had once been men. Two live men sat on the most elevated rocks, clear of the muck, staring up at them with hopeless eyes. Emma recognized Lord John Breakstone, who she'd seen once in the Devon's Mess. A distant relation of the crown, he was near forty, bearded and wore the filthy rags that had been his diplomatic uniform. Near him sat a younger man. Captain Phillips was thirty and wore the red uniform of his Hussars. Both men were gaunt, but Phillips, who'd not been a prisoner as long as Breakstone, looked at the Emir with undisguised loathing.

“Come, see the humbled servants of the Crown that abused you,” The Emir said, through a fierce smile.

“What do you want, Khan?” Breakstone called up, his voice thin and weary

“Only little things,” the Emir answered, “a world where the wishes of brown-skinned people should have some sway in the world of white powers. Perhaps that we, who have lived in these countries since the dawn of history, should rule them, rather than agents of overseas powers. Perhaps that our customs and laws should be respected in our own places.”

“Murdering officials of the Crown will not get you those things,” Breakstone said, struggling to project his voice. “Rather the opposite. We may die, but our revenge will come in on a wave of bayonets.”

“For every Tommy who takes a step north,” the Khan said, “an Ivan takes a step south. With your airships and your metal men you could have burned my world, but the Russians have airships and war machines of their own.”

“So you will sell your land to them?” Phillips said.

“I give my land to no one, but treat with respect those who treat me with respect.”

Emma glanced sidelong at the Emir. There was an ironic tone to his speech now. Emma sensed he could barely contain his glee at being able to pit one of the great powers against the other, while holding the balance in his hands. Still, his hatred of the English was clearly a determining factor in his choice.

“A fine brace of birds you have here,” Emma said. The men in the pit focused on her for the first time.

“Now, now Emma,” Lihau said. “None of your venom. I do believe she hates her countrymen as much as do you, my dear Emir.”

“Then Lady Champerdowne must carry a great hate then.”

“Lady Champerdowne,” Breakstone said. “Emma Champerdowne of the Devons? I know you. We’ve met.”

“Formerly of the Devons,” Phillips spat. “She was a disgrace, pushed out: a libertine, gambler and a drunkard. She’s been dragging our reputations through the mud of India for months.”

“At least,” Emma snapped back with heat, “I wasn’t fool enough to get myself thrown into a pit.”

“Shall I have him dragged out and beaten for his insolence?” the Emir asked, studying her closely.

“I handle my own enemies, Emir,” Emma said with a bow. “A fool in a hole is of no interest to me.”

“Well said,” the Emir replied. “It will leave him more energy for our sport in the morning. Let’s see how brave he is when tied to bulls.”

“Come, Lihau,” Khan said. “Let us introduce Lady Emma to the more refined delights of the palace. We’ll leave these scum to fester for another night.”

With relief, they headed back to the carriage. Emma stole a glance at Thaws, whose face was red and his jaw knotted. He’d stayed back out of sight of the men in the pit. She felt a moment’s pity for the big man. Lying was no skill of Thaws. He noticed her regard and his jaw unclenched some. He nodded.

They remounted the carriage for a silent ride into the fortress. Emma concealed her relief as best she could at leaving the pit behind. They passed in between the tall gate with its sally ports. The gate lay open, evidently the Emir feared little in his own warren. They left the carriage and followed the Emir’s retinue into a large banquet hall with a table set for twenty. Cushions and divans surrounded it. The Emir’s men and a few Russian officers laired there. All snapped to attention when the Emir entered.

Emma took a moment to get Lihau aside. “What did he mean by delights of the palace? If he is planning a threesome, then he is destined for disappointment.”

“Don’t be a prude or a fool,” Lihau hissed. “If he wants us both and at the same time, he’ll have us. Unless you wish to end up in the pit?”

Emma tried to remember that last time someone had accused her of prudery as Lihau turned to greet the Russians. Emma and Thaws were shown a seat at the table and food and drink placed before them. No alcohol, for all that she desperately wanted a drink, the Emir was Muslim after all.

“Eat,” she said to Thaws. “We’re among “friends” and it could be a long night.”

He nodded and reached for some lamb on the table. The evening passed warily. Fortunately the Emir was focused on Lihau, who was as gay and charming as if at a ball. The Russians became drunk to no one’s evident surprise, having smuggled in their own supplies. Dancing girls also provided a diversion. Emma turned aside most conversation, pleading fatigue of a long flight. Thaws merely glared blackly at anyone who spoke to him and was left alone.

The Khan’s plans evidently did not include a threesome. After the meal, he did retire with Lihau. Emma and Thaws were shown to rooms upstairs. With Lihau vouching for her, there were no guards placed on her door and there seemed no question of the Emir accepting their cover. Though how far he trusted the Russians was an open issue. Emma felt it was a marriage of convenience only, the Emir needed modern armaments. He needed Lihau.

Still, the longer they were here, the closer to death the emissaries got, and the closer to discovery they must be too. The waiting game played on her nerves as she lay, fully dressed, on her bed, waiting for Lihau's next move.

Hours later, Emma heard light footfalls in the hall coming her way. Lihau appeared at her door and slipped in.

Emma stood. "How did you get away?"

Lihau smiled. "I am the Emir's mistress and advisor. I have free run of the palace. After I satisfied the Khan, I told him I felt like some dessert and would spend the rest of the night with you, welding you further into our plans."

"You insatiable little minx, you," Emma said.

"We must move now," Lihau said, "with less planning than I would wish for. The Emir plans to kill the emissaries in the morning. We have little time. I roused your man, Thaws, he is below awaiting us."

Emma and Lihau joined Thaws downstairs at the entrance to the palace proper. The big man was muffled in large black robes and could not be told from the locals. Emma had her dark patrol jacket and blue pants. Lihau wore a red, silk blouse and black pants, so all of them blended well in the darkness. They headed for the gates. Lihau walked out with Emma on her arm, nodding to the guards, who bowed to her in respect.

"The big man is going to the ship," Lihau said, "to get my kit. Readmit him to the palace when he returns. We are going to walk in the gardens by the canal."

"Yes, Lady," the guard said. His face showed nothing.

Emma moved over to Thaws while Lihau spoke to the guards.

"Get down to *Lilith*," Emma said. "Get all in readiness, full steam on the boilers, ready all ballast and surplus for dumping. We're going to have to lift off under the fortress guns and run like hell if we get that far."

"I don't like leaving you, Ma'am and no mistake," he whispered. "Don't trust that Asian adder."

"I don't, beyond our mutual interest," Emma said. "But there's no help for it. If we're caught, it's more plausible that Lihau and I would be out for a moonlit stroll by ourselves than with you."

He grunted. "It would help if there was a moon." He disappeared into the night, his heavy footfalls faded quickly.

Lihau returned. "The street ahead is empty, but we will walk it as if we own it until we get closer to the pit."

Emma nodded. "I sent Thaws to the ship."

"Good. Follow me. From here only luck can protect us. Once we release them from the pit, there will be no way to conceal our mission. The Emir's temper is ungovernable when provoked. Not even my status as the Tsar's agent will save me."

Emma noticed that there was no evident thought being given to saving her. *Ah well*, she thought, *the fate of forlorn hopes everywhere*.

The two women walked briskly to the end of the street, then started running down the path to the pit. They slowed when they reached the area, mindful of the guards. When they were again breathing normally, they moved up. The smell of the pit grew fouler as they closed in. Two guards walked their patrol, the flickering of free-standing torches showed them clearly. They walked as close as they could to the ring of torches, the night was dark and cold.

Lihau put her lips to Emma's ears. "We must kill these. You have your knife?"

Emma swallowed. She'd killed before, but never up close with a blade. "Yes."

"Produce it. I will envenom the blade."

Emma handed her the knife as Lihau carefully slid open a compartment in her fan and drew out a vial. She ran it along the edge of the blade. "Do not touch the blade and dispose of it after. To break the skin is death."

"What of you?"

"The fan will carry death for me from the same vial. There is a needle in it. Follow me when I move."

Lihau had chosen the stalk well. They moved in unobserved. The guards helped by grumbling to each other about their duty. The wind blew toward them, carrying the guard's voices, the snap and crackle of the fire. Emma and Lihau took up positions behind the stanchion and bleachers the Emir had placed so he could watch his victims suffer. Lihau moved to the front, in the shadow of a planter. She lay there so long that Emma wondered if the Eurasian had lost her nerve.

She hadn't. One guard squatted by the fire. The other walked up to the pit and fumbled with his clothes, readying himself to urinate on the prisoners below.

Lihau turned back to Emma who could see her limed in the firelight. She pointed at Emma, then the squatting guard and then herself and the man by the pit. Emma nodded. Lihau held up her hand five fingers, four fingers, three fingers....

Both women raced forward silently. The squatting man had his back to them. He poked the fire and it crashed and flared. Lihau ran past him. For a second he did not react, as if he had trouble believing his eyes, then he seized up his rifle. As he rose, Emma struck him from behind and buried the knife in his back as she wrapped an arm around his throat.

The other guard began to empty his bladder with a loud grunt of contentment, which became a strangled cry as Lihau's poison fan struck him in the neck. She jumped back as he fell at her feet. In moments each thrashing man stilled. Emma left her blade in the man's back. Lihau carefully refolded her fan and wiped it on the dead man's clothing.

"Help me," Lihau said. It took the two of them to drop the heavy metal and chain ladder into the pit which clanked and clattered like Bedlam to Emma's mind.

Awakened by the racket or the yellow rain, Breakstone and Phillips called out querulously.

"What devilry is this?" Breakstone said. "No more of your games for God's sake."

"Silence," Lihau said. "The ladder. Ascend quickly."

"It's a trick, Sir," Phillips said.

"No matter. I have no strength to climb,"

"Come, damn you," Lihau spat. "Damned fools."

Emma put down the guard's rifle that she'd picked up. "I'll get them."

"I'll help. We have no time."

"You're too small. Keep watch up here."

Lihau drew her Lemat pistol as Emma lowered herself into the appalling stink, taking the metal rungs as fast as she dared. At the bottom she found the wretched envoys standing, blinking at her in confusion as if she had descended from the moon.

"It's a rescue, Lord Breakstone. No malarkey now,"

Phillips stared at her. "Champerdowne, damned traitor—"

She slapped him hard twice. "Get focused man. Where the bloody hell do you think you are?"

As if braced at Sandhurst, Phillips drew himself up. “Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.

She pulled Phillips forward, which seemed to break his dazed state. He took hold of the metal rungs and began to boost himself up.

“Now you, Lord Breakstone.

“No,” said the older man. “I’m done in. I’ve been down too long. Take Phillips, he has a chance, and go.”

“Sorry, sir,” Emma said, hauling the older man up bodily. “The Queen won’t have it, a relative dying at the hands of the Emir. You’ve got to come too or there will be a bloody war.”

“There’d better be a bloody way, anyway,” Phillips said. “But come on, Sir. Give it a go. I won’t leave without you.”

With Phillips pulling and Emma putting her shoulder under Breakstone’s rear, they struggled up out of the hellish hole. Emma promised herself a month of scented baths if they got out of this mess. With a last pull and heave they mounted the top of the hole and fell onto the stone and dirt of the surface. As they rose, they faced the grinning Emir, Lihau and four of his guards.

“God damn you all,” Phillips said, standing next to Emma. “I told you it was a trick.”

Breakstone didn’t speak, remaining on his hands and knees.

Emma looked at Lihau, whose gray eyes showed nothing. She thought of her revolver, determined to take Lihau, at least, with her. But the four leveled, Russian-made Krnkas, told her that she’d never reach it.

“My dear Lihau,” The Emir said, “it seems that your conquest of this particular English territory was not thorough enough. Have I not told you that you cannot trust them? Ever. She has used you and me both.”

Lihau fluttered her fan. “Ah, Emma, I am so disappointed in you. How could you betray me like this!” Anger flared in her face and she threw her arms wide, the fan touched the Emir’s neck.

“Damn it, woman,” the Emir said, “watch yourself! You’ve cut me with...” Suddenly he staggered, made a strangling noise and fell forward an astonished look on his face. Lihau gasped and leapt back, the fan falling from her hand.

The guards surged forward, one reached for the Emir, just as Lihau dropped to one knee and brought up the Lemat pistol. The shotgun shell in the center of the Lemat banged off into the closely packed men. One fell. The others, their clothes torn by the round, fired back, just as Lihau opened up with the pistol part of the Lemat.

Emma felt something pluck at her sleeve and heard the wet smack of a bullet striking Phillips, who fell with a groan.

Lihau may have been a fantastic seductress, but even at eight feet she missed all of the guards, banging away with the wildly swinging Lemat. Emma ripped her Webley out and fired just as a flash lit the night behind one of the guards, blowing out the man’s chest. She shot the man next to him. The third man spun to face the new threat, only to be run through with a bayonet as Thaws hurtled into him, Martini-Henry at the ready.

Emma looked down. Phillips was on his back staring up, sightless, into the night sky. She turned back to the others.

“That was quite the worst display of marksmanship I’ve ever had the misfortune to see,” Emma said, to Thaws. “If it wasn’t for the shotgun round, would she have hit anyone?”

“Now, Ma’am,” Thaws said, as he pitched the bodies into the stinking hole, “credit where credit’s due. Doubtless her banging away made it possible for me to pot those fellows and keep you alive.”

“Some of us anyway,” Emma said, looking down at Phillips. “I’m afraid he’s had it, Lord Breakstone.”

“Ah no, Lad, not now, not on the edge of escape,” Breakstone said, his voice choked with emotion.

“We’ve got to go,” Lihau said.

“We can’t leave him behind,” Breakstone demanded.

Emma grabbed his arm, dragging him upright. “You were willing to stay behind, alive, to give him a chance. He’d do no less for you.”

“Yes, sir,” Thaws said. “Listen to Ma’am, the living over the dead.”

Emma felt a slick wetness run down her side. She too had been hit, but not badly, or she’d have gone down by now.

They ran toward *Lilith*. Shouts and lights behind them showed the fortress coming to life. They had only minutes before the area was swarming with guards.

Lilith awaited them. Tanweer’s Lascars, their eyes gleaming in the firelight, stood by every gun. Emma could see bodies lying about the ship. Dead guards.

They raced up the ramp.

“Take off,” Emma shouted. “Max rise. Full pressure on the air tanks, max on the rotors. Throw over anything you can. Thaws, get to the two-pounder.”

Lilith trembled and roared as the tanks released the non-flammable ether. Emma cut loose all ballast, even emptying most of the ship’s water. Shots cracked as her crew began to duel roused guards. *Lilith* strained upwards, gaining a few feet.

Emma saw Lihau roll two dead Lascars off the ramp. They must have been killed earlier when the crew finished the guards. Well enough, the crew wouldn’t have done it, but they’d turn a blind eye to Lihau doing so.

The engineers had stoked the boilers at Thaw’s insistence and *Lilith* had pressure for the rotors to aid the gasbags. Up they went, a hundred feet then more. Emma saw a gun crew struggling to elevate a fieldpiece at them. She snatched up a Martini-Henry, a pouch of ammunition and rapid-fired .455 at them, causing them to at least duck. Then, a gout of flame knocked several over. Thaws was active on the 2-pounder.

Lilith strained upward as small arms fire bounced off the underside of the armored gasbags or simply tore through the lightly-built airship. A Lascar next to Emma screamed and fell dead. A bullet had ripped up through his body and out through his skull. Emma tipped his body over while firing continued.

Three hundred yards vertical. While the fire from below was increasing in volume, it was decreasing in effect, as the Emir’s men fired straight up. Only the modern weapons were even reaching them and without force. Cracks from Thaws in the two-pounder came fast and furious as he sowed confusion below them.

The wind caught at them, taking them away from Herat. Emma tilted the rotors. Even if the Emir’s men could get something into the air there would be no catching *Lilith*. Still, no point in taking a chance.

“Thaws,” she called down through the voice pipe. “Drop the turret and two-pounder. Have the crew pitch the ammo overboard. We will run light and fast.”

“But I was becoming quite fond of it, Ma’am,” he roared back in high good humor.

“Never fear, I shall buy you a new one,” she said.

By now the lights of Herat were beginning to recede. It was an hour to dawn, but from the airship’s height they could see a brightening in the East. Emma set her course and called for best speed. *Lilith* whipped away at easily thirty miles an hour. Emma was grateful for the pilothouse windows and walls that kept the noise and buffeting at bay.

The door opened and Lihau ducked in.

“I put Mr. Breakstone in my cabin,” she said, “with food, water and blankets. I even left him some brandy.”

Emma nodded. “Gave me quite the turn when I came out of the hole and saw you with the Emir.”

“Did you believe I had turned on you, my dear? That I had caught you up is some devious trap?”

“Rather did.”

Lihau laughed a gentle tinkling sound. “The Emir was restless and sought me out. Not finding me, he decided to gloat on his prisoners again. I heard him come and circled behind him, saying I had followed you out of your room, suspicious of where you were going.”

“Won’t you get into trouble for killing your own man?” Emma asked. The airship bucked slightly, the morning air might be rough as the sun came up.

“Oh, perhaps. But I could not risk that the fool would plunge us into war at a disadvantageous time. Besides he might not have believed that you were alone in this. My own position was in peril and the Jade Throne values me highly. The Romanoff’s may grumble, but they will be pleased war is avoided. With the death of the Emir, for the death of Phillips, likely honor will be satisfied on your side, with perhaps some minor demonstrations.

“Besides, the Emir has a son, almost a man in his own right. Perhaps I will call on him and console him when things are, shall we say, more settled?”

“Do you ever stop working?” Emma asked.

Lihau considered. “Doubtless you have some matters to attend to making sure we are safely away. I will await you in your cabin. We will discuss that point more then.” The slender woman slipped out the door, the blast of air raising her night black-hair like a banner.

Emma stayed on the bridge for an hour more, with Thaws bandaging the scrape along her ribs from the bullet that had grazed her. Then, when she was sure they were beyond the reach of anything that could pursue them, she turned it over to Thaws. “Have Tanweer check on Lord Breakstone. Call me if there’s any need.”

Thaws looked ahead at the morning sun. “As you wish.”

Emma made her way back to her cabin and opened the door carefully. She smelled rosewater and soap. Lihau, wrapped in a light robe, stood over a large basin of water. In the background a big tea kettle streamed.

“Come in,” Lihau said. She stood, naked under the robe and came over to Emma, undressing her and casting the fouled clothing through the door. Emma stood in the basin and Lihau added more hot water and then began to sponge and wash Emma, starting at her grimed legs.

Afterwards, Emma stepped out of the basin, which Lihau emptied. Emma sat back on her bed as the other woman toweled her dry.

“We work well together,” Lihau said. “We are alike in many ways. I think the Tsar could find room for another fine operative in his service.”

“Now, Lihau,” Emma said softly, “I’ve just regained my respectability and you wish me to fling it away by going over to the enemy?”

“We are not enemies, Emma,” she said.

“No,” Emma said. “Not now, Lihau, not tonight.”

“Ah” she said. “Well at the least, you are deserving of a special favor. Let us say that it comes to you from the Jade Court, since the Tsar is not in your favor.”

Lihau let her robe fall and she took the towel off Emma. She pulled back the blanket and slid on top of the taller woman.

“Now,” Lihau whispered. “I will show you that whatever you English know of Empire, you know nothing of sex.”

The End