

Mad Queen's Chess

By Joe Sweeney

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Authors Note

This is an alternative timeline book. While these stories are set in Kolkata, India, it is not the Kolkata you necessarily know and love today. Many of the places may be similar, but have developed differently because of the alternative timeline under which they grew.

This series got its start on a website called FanStory. I was a very active member of the website during the first quarter of 2009, and about half of these stories were written for their contests. I usually entered “The sentence starts the story” or “Strong character” (in which you write a story about a character in the picture posted).

The chess piece images at the start of each story are actually a screen shot of a font called “Chess Maya” by Armando H. Marroquin. I found the font on the En Passant (Nørresundby Chess Club) website at www.enpassant.dk/chess/fonteng.htm. I have not been able to contact Mr. Marroquin for the wonderful font, but I am very grateful for it.

Prologue

The toll on the North American colonies during the Seven Year's War was significant, and forged a stronger relationship between the Colonies and the Crown. As a result, the American Revolution never materialized.

The Indian Rebellion of 1857 nearly destroyed England. Mustering all of its reserves, the British Crown formed New England: a stronger union of the European and American possessions. The rebellion was quashed, and New England's grip on the world became absolute.

In this world, you were either a member of the royal family or you were not. The British royals controlled the technology; so common people (as a rule) didn't have access to modern conveniences, particularly computers and automobiles. The exceptions were the very rich. The common people unofficially considered themselves part of a loose coalition known as "Not England." The dichotomy between "New England" and "Not England" has kept the world in a stagnant state for about two-and-a-half centuries.

A secret society fronted by the Checking Piece Courier Service located in Kolkata, West Bengal, India, is working to effect positive social change. The members of the society are identified only as chess pieces. The "pawns" are the visible members – they are the couriers who primarily run messages and errands. The rest of the members are heard but never seen.



We Are All Pawns

"Hell has found me." Chuck's flat statement hung in the air.

Joel paused, hand hovering over his queen's knight, and glanced at his friend. Noticing the stricken look on Chuck's face, Joel peered more closely. Chuck was looking at something in the distance. Something unpleasant, obviously. Joel turned to look also, and then let out a low, mournful whistle.

"That is one peeved woman," Joel said.

"You got that right," Chuck said, trading his stricken look for a helpless one.

"What'd you do this time?" Joel asked.

Chuck shook his head, looking down dejectedly at the chess board.

Joel sighed. "Sorry, man" he said. "I'll catch up with you later." Joel stood up from the chess table and strode away across the park, sparing a backward, sympathetic glance.

Gail loomed over him, casting a shadow across the chess board. Her arms were crossed, and she was giving him that look. Chuck cowered; ashamed of his reaction.

"Well?" she demanded.

Chuck looked up at her helplessly.

"When were you planning on telling me about your job interview this morning?" She was clearly displeased.

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"Oh, that," Chuck said weakly.

"Yes, that," Gail said. The sneer on her lips and the acid in her tone sounded loud and clear.

"Well, it seems I'm not qualified to--"

"Not qualified! That's all I ever hear! Not qualified! So tell me, Chuck, just what are you qualified to do?"

"Well, I, I--"

"Nothing! That's what! Don't even bother coming home!" With that, Gail stormed off.

Chuck sat staring at the chess board. After about an hour, he picked up Joel's knight and moved it.

"Check," he whispered, then laid his head down on the board.

* * *

Joel found him the next morning, lying on the ground. Chuck had fallen asleep and then off the chair.

"Hey, buddy," Joel said, nudging Chuck awake and helping him back on the chair. "Kicked you out?"

"Yeah," Chuck replied groggily. "You know something?"

"What?"

"We are all just pawns in this game called life."

"That's a bit deep for so early in the morning," Joel said. "Come along, let's get some breakfast."

They walked across the park to a small café and sat down at a table near the door. Joel grabbed a copy of the London Times from a nearby rack and turned to the want ads. A waitress stopped at their table after a few minutes and poured coffee into the two cups.

"What'll you have?" she asked.

"A couple fry-ups for me and my pal," Joel said, glancing up from the paper. The waitress nodded and bustled off.

"Here's an odd one," Joel said after many minutes. "Looking for adventure in a far-off land? Healthy young people needed for work in India. Room and board provided. No experience necessary. Apply on board HMS Caturanga docked at the City Pier."

"I don't think I'd qualify," Chuck said morosely. He slumped in his chair as the waitress arrived with their meal and put the plates on the table.

Joel put the paper down and began eating with gusto.

"Sure you would," he said around a mouthful of eggs. "Room and board. No experience. It's perfect for you."

"Ha, ha," Chuck said, pushing his eggs around his plate with a fork.

"Tell you what," Joel said. "I'm in for a change. Let's go down together."

"Sure, why not," Chuck said unenthusiastically.

"Great!" Joel said. "Come on, then. Eat up! You'll need your strength."

Chuck ate his breakfast while Joel read the paper.

"Huh," said Joel. "Seems as if Lord Hadley has been charged with some misdealing in India. No evidence as yet."

"You don't need to read me the news," Chuck said.

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When Chuck was done eating, Joel paid the bill and they walked out of the café.

Their first stop was Chuck's, or rather Gail's, apartment. After making sure that Gail had gone to work, they entered the apartment and Chuck packed a small suitcase with some clothes and his identification. He scribbled a quick good-bye note to Gail, and then they headed for Joel's room at a local boarding house. After Joel had packed his suitcase, they were back on the street again.

"Now, then," Joel said, scratching his head. "Which way to the pier?"

Chuck pointed his head down the street.

"Oh, right. What are you smiling at?"

"You couldn't find your way across a street without help," Chuck said.

"Well, I'm glad to see your spirits up."

It was nearly an hour's walk to the City Pier. When they got there, a long line of men and women meandered all the way to Duke Street Hill. The line moved steadily enough, and by noon they had reached the gang plank to the HMS Caturanga. Men and women were being led across half a dozen at a time, and, about ten minutes later, none, some or all of them returned dock-side.

"Can't be much of an interview," Joel whispered as he and Chuck were led with their group.

"That could be a good thing," Chuck said. "Little chance of them asking about qualifications I don't have."

A nondescript woman in an overcoat led them down a flight of stairs to a small room. She pointed to the benches, and the group sat down. Standing in another

doorway was a large, swarthy-looking man leaning against the door frame. Behind him looked to be the galley.

"The company's looking for people to run errands in Kolkata," the man said in a guttural voice as he took a step into the room. "You'll be paid ten pounds per run, nothing illegal, no questions asked. You'll get room and board."

"What is this company?" someone asked.

The man ignored the question, and pointed out three people in the group, including Chuck and Joel. "You, you and you, if you're interested, out the door and to the left." The person who had asked the question was not included. "The rest of you back the way you came." He stepped back and resumed his position in the doorway.

Chuck and Joel, along with the young woman who had also been selected, turned left and followed the corridor, at the end of which stood another nondescript woman.

"Do you have your papers?" the woman asked.

All three pulled out their identification papers and handed them to the woman. She examined each closely before handing them back and directing the men to the left and the woman to the right.

They found themselves in a very large bunk-room with a few dozen other men. About a third of the bunks were already taken. Chuck and Joel secured two adjacent top bunks for themselves.

* * *

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The taxi stopped in front of the Kolkata Police Headquarters on Lal Bazar Street, and Inspector Chloe Robson climbed out. Her flight from London had been uneventful. She entered the building without hesitation, and approached the front desk.

"I am Inspector Robson of Scotland Yard."

The sergeant at the desk stood up and, after a moment of hesitation, offered his hand. "Sgt. Pranav Das. Inspector Banerjee is expecting you. Follow me, please." He led her to an office door down a hallway.

"Thank you."

The sergeant bowed his head and left. Inspector Robson tapped on the open door.

"Come," said the man sitting behind the desk.

"I am Inspector Robson of Scotland Yard."

The man stood and put his hands together just above his stomach and inclined his head very slightly.

"*Namaste*, Inspector Robson. My name is Inspector Vinay Banerjee. We will be working together. Please, be seated."

They both sat, and Robson watched quietly as her new partner shuffled a few papers on his desk.

"I remain unclear as to why the Crown feels it necessary to send a Scotland Yard inspector."

Robson exhaled through pursed lips, her cheeks puffing briefly, in an attempt to quell her anxiety. This assignment was going to be as bad as she feared.

"I am sure it's not meant as a reflection of your abilities, Inspector. The Crown feels partly responsible for the situation here, and only wishes to show support for your efforts."

"As I have been told."

"Why don't you fill me in? I wasn't given many details of the case."

Banerjee looked down at his desk as he shuffled a few more papers, and then selected a thick folder and opened it.

"It is more than a single case, Inspector. Rather, a collection of cases with a similar modus operandi." Closing the folder, he stood and handed it across his desk to Robson.

"Perhaps the most sensible first step would be to review the file."

Robson stood and took the file.

"Ah, yes. That makes sense."

Banerjee stepped from around his desk and walked Robson to the door.

"Sergeant Das will show you to your office, and will see to your needs. We will discuss as strategy this afternoon."

After closing the door behind her, he sat back down and stared at his desk. His treatment of Inspector Robson had not for the highest good. Tonight, he would stop by the temple and ask the priest for a prayaschitta. He had no wish to suffer negative karma-phala as a result of his actions, and felt it best to counteract it as quickly as possible. He silently vowed to do better, and returned to his work.

* * *

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A fortnight on board the sailing ship was almost more than Joel could handle. He was not cut out to be a seaman and was ecstatic when they were led off the boat and onto two buses, one for the men and one for the women. They boarded and were taken along Strand Road, and then passed through a gate with a sign proclaiming "Welcome to Fort William" in English. The bus carrying the men bore left; the women's to the right.

The men's bus stopped in front of a large building that looked like a hotel. The men got off the bus and entered the lobby of the building, where a smartly-dressed young man was standing in front of a counter.

"Your attention, please!" he said loudly, clapping his hands over his head. When the men quieted down and looked at him, he continued.

"You are now employed by the Checking Piece Courier Service as a messenger."

He pointed to several stacks of papers on the counter.

"Here's how it works: This first stack of papers are floor plans for the hotel. Each paper has a different suite marked on it; an available suite. You will pair up and take a suite with a partner. The second stack of papers is the rules for your employ here. Each of you will take a copy. Obey the rules to the letter. The third stack of papers is pedestrian maps of Kolkata. Each of you will take a copy. I strongly suggest you study it tonight, as your work will begin first thing in the morning. Any questions will be answered in the rules."

The young man stepped aside and signaled that they should take their papers. Chuck and Joel got into the

line that formed and eventually made their way to the counter.

"Two twenty-one," Chuck said, looking up from the floor plan. "This way."

They took a nearby set of stairs to the second floor and followed the hall until they reached 221. The door was not locked. They entered a small sitting room. In the center of the room was a book table with two sets of keys on it. Chuck picked up a set and put it into his pocket. Exploring the two doors in the back of the sitting room revealed two small bedrooms.

"Might as well read the rules," Chuck said, sitting in one of the chairs.

Joel turned on the overhead light, sat in another chair, and cleared his throat.

"Rule #1," Joel read. "Room and board is free as long as you remain employed. Refer to the hotel floor plan for the location of the common washroom and dining room. The dining room is open all day, every day. No drugs or alcohol permitted in the hotel. No fighting."

Joel paused.

"That seems clear and reasonable enough," Chuck said.

"Rule #2," Joel continued. "Errand notices are generally delivered to the room's mailbox by 8:00am. Mailboxes are behind the front desk. Check your mailbox every day at 8:00am. Errands must be completed as instructed in the notice. Do not discuss with anyone the contents of the errand notice, nor show the errand notice to anyone else. Upon completion of an errand, return the

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notice to the front desk for your payment of 1000 rupees, the equivalent of 10 pounds. Returning a notice for payment without completing the errand will result in immediate dismissal. Occasionally, an urgent errand notice will be brought around. Anyone in their room and accepting the urgent errand notice will be paid 2000 rupees, or 20 pounds, upon completion of the errand." Joel looked up. "Sounds simple enough," he said. "I'd still like to know the nature of these errands."

"Hm," grunted Chuck. "Me, too. They're legal, though. They said so. They did advertise; it all seems very public."

"True enough."

"Rule #3: Bicycles are available at no charge and may be used for any reason. See floor plan for location of bike garage. Bikes checked out are your responsibility. If a bike is lost, stolen or damaged, you will be responsible for replacement or repair."

"That's more than I expected," Chuck said. "Free transportation as well."

"Addendum," Joel read on. "If you are dismissed from employment, you will be evicted from your suite and left to your own devices. If you choose to leave employment, you will be given free passage to London on the next trip of the HMS Caturanga."

Joel turned the page over, and then looked at Chuck. "That's all there is."

"Sounds too easy," Chuck said. "Well, it's been a very long two weeks; I think I'll turn in." He got up from the chair and wandered into the closest bedroom.

* * *

Inspector Robson scanned through her scribbled notes one more time. There seemed to be very little to tie the cases together. He must have his reasons.

She found Inspector Banerjee still in his office.

"Do you have a minute to discuss the files?" she asked.

"Please enter, Inspector," he replied, half rising and gesturing to a chair across from his desk.

"May I be blunt?" At Banerjee's nod, she continued: "There does not seem to be much to tie these cases together. The only common factors I see are references to chess. Some are clearly high-profile cases, while others are just run-of-the-mill. I feel like I'm missing something."

A small sigh escaped from Banerjee. "You have understood the facts correctly. Have you read the supplemental materials included in the files?"

"No. At a quick glance, they did not seem to contain relevant facts."

"It is true; they are not directly related to the cases. The materials outline consequences of the crimes – events that would not have occurred otherwise. There is a – pattern – to these events that seems to indicate a guiding intelligence at work, possibly orchestrating events for a particular outcome."

"Interesting."

"You do not seem convinced."

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"I am not. However, the Chief Minister's office does believe there's a connection."

"Indeed?"

"That's why I'm here. I'll continue studying these cases."

"Review the Hadley case in particular. There are indications that something will happen soon."

They both stood, and Banerjee put on his coat. He walked her to the front desk.

"Sgt. Das, the Inspector will be responsible for the files." Turning to address Robson, he said: "We can discuss this more tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," She nodded to Banerjee and Das, and returned to her office.

"For how long are we to be blessed with her presence?" Das asked with disdain.

"Pranav, I will be stopping this evening at temple for a prayaschitta. Be wary of karma-phala." With that, Banerjee left.

* * *

"Chuck!" Joel said, sitting hard in the edge of the bed. "Looks like we've got marching orders already."

"Huh?" Chuck said, cautiously opening one eye. Morning people should be shot, he thought, and mornings should be banned.

"Here," Joel said, handing Chuck an envelope with his name on it. "Since we can't share the contents, I'm going to my room to read mine."

"Joel," Chuck called as Joel reached the bedroom door. "How'd they know which room we're in?"

"We're the pawns, remember?"

"Yeah." After Joel left, Chuck spent a minute examining the envelope. It was a plain, ordinary white envelope with his name and room number on the outside.

He opened the envelope. There were a handful of 100 rupee notes and a business card folded inside of a piece of paper. One side of the card had an imprint of a chess queen. On the note was written the following:

"Go to Gupta's Café at Park Circus Market for afternoon tea at 3:00pm. The market is located on the other side of Circus Avenue, between Nasiruddin Road and Beck Bagan Row. The rupee notes are so that you may pay for a meal and not look suspicious. Watch for a man who orders the vegetarian sandwich selection and green tea. Hand him the card and say the following: 'The Queen has made her move.' Leave the Café once the message has been delivered."

Chuck read the message several times. It sounded awfully mysterious. What could it mean? The Queen has made her move. It didn't make sense.

Opening his map, he was able to locate Park Circus Market easily enough. It was on Beck Bagan Row just south of Circus Avenue. It looked to be almost seven kilometers; an easy bike ride.

Joel had disappeared, probably on his own errand. Chuck used the common washroom, and then headed down for breakfast. Afterwards, he decided to walk around and get his bearings. Kolkata was, after all, a new

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city to him. If he was going to be working here, he'd best familiarize himself. He stopped in his room to grab his map before hitting the streets.

* * *

Robson looked up to see Banerjee standing in her doorway.

"You have been here all night?"

"Actually, no," she said. "I couldn't sleep, so I came in early."

"I must apologize for my behavior yesterday."

"Apologize?"

"Yes. I was rude, and I am sorry."

"Ah, well, it's perfectly understandable. I'd feel the same way if someone were called in on my investigation."

"That cannot excuse my behavior."

"Thanks. I appreciate that."

Banerjee nodded and returned to his office.

* * *

Three o'clock arrived before he knew it. Luckily, Chuck had decided to head to the Park Circus Market for lunch and do some browsing. He entered Gupta's Café just a few minutes after three. The Café was crowded, but he managed to find an empty table.

"Are you here for afternoon tea?" a waitress asked.

"Uh, yes, please."

The waitress handed him a menu and hurried off to another table. On one page of the menu was a large

selection of teas. On another page was an assortment of snack trays with every conceivable combination of sandwiches, cakes and pastries imaginable.

"What can I get you?" the waitress asked, having returned to his table.

"I'll have the Cucumber and Cakes special, and Earl Grey tea."

The waitress left again. Chuck spent the time searching the crowd and trying to surreptitiously listen in on what the men were ordering. Hopefully, he hadn't arrived too late.

The waitress arrived with his meal. He steeped his tea bag while examining the sandwiches, trying to decide which one to try first. He wasn't crazy about fish paste, but the smoked salmon looked good. After removing his tea bag and stirring in milk and sugar, he sampled the sandwich. Not bad, he thought to himself.

Just then, he heard it.

"I will have the Vegetarian Sandwich Special, and a large pot of green tea," a man's voice said.

Chuck turned and noticed a very proper Englishman sitting at a table not far away. He looked like a butler. Feeling stupid and foolish, Chuck got up from his seat and walked over to the man.

"Um, excuse me?" Chuck said.

"Yes?" the man asked. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I, uh, have a message for you," Chuck said, handing him the card. "The Queen has made her move."

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Chuck didn't really know what to expect. The words meant nothing as far as he could tell. However, the man turned very pale, and his hand was visibly shaking as he stared at the card.

"I see," he said. "Thank you." The man turned his head and stared out the window.

Chuck shrugged his shoulders and walked back to the table long enough to drop the handful of rupee notes on it. Hopefully, that would more than cover the bill plus a tip.

* * *

"May I help you?" Sgt. Das asked.

"Yes, you may." The gentleman approached the desk slowly. "I need to speak to Inspector Banerjee regarding Lord Hadley."

Das spoke briefly into the phone. A few minutes later, Banerjee appeared.

"Sgt. Das, please ask Inspector Robson to join us in my office."

"Yes, sir."

Banerjee led the gentleman to his office. Robson arrived shortly and sat in the other vacant chair in front of the desk.

"Inspector, this gentleman is Lord Hadley's butler. He has information."

* * *

Chuck was staring at the book table when Joel arrived later that evening.

"Hey, buddy!" he said. "I think I'm going to like this." Joel threw his jacket onto the back of a chair and then sat down in it. "What are you looking so long in the mouth for?"

"It doesn't make any sense," Chuck said.

"Doesn't have to, does it?" Joel said. "It's not illegal, is it?"

"No, I guess not."

"Then let's live it!"

Chuck sighed. "Yeah, I guess you're right." He smiled wearily at Joel. "Well, I've had a long day. I think I'm going to turn in."

"OK, bud. See you in the morning."

* * *

Chuck woke up the next morning to find another envelope on his night stand. Groggily, he opened it and read the notice inside.

"Humph," he said to himself. "Nothing more complicated than yesterday. Maybe Joel is right."

Chuck cleaned up in the washroom and headed down for breakfast. He was surprised to see Joel still there, reading the paper. Chuck sat down with him at the booth.

"Hey, look at this," Joel said, showing Chuck the front page.

Chuck stared at the pictures of Lord Hadley and his butler. The butler was the same man Chuck had delivered

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the message to yesterday. The headline and first paragraph read:

"Butler Tells All. In an unexpected turn of events in the Hadley case, the butler stepped forward and disclosed intimate details of the goings-on at Hadley Manner. Lord Hadley has been arrested."

"Hey, what's up?" Joel asked. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Huh? Oh, it's nothing," Chuck said. "Nothing at all."



The Queen's Rook

The window was shut to keep out the cold. At least, that's what Mark kept whispering to himself. Kolkata didn't really get that cold. And it wasn't even winter. A light summer breeze nudged the leaves outside.

Despite the pervasive warmth and sticky humidity, a cold shiver ran up his spine.

"I should close the curtains," he said to the window. Yet, he continued to sit and stare. He was still in shock from what he had witnessed. He had never seen a cold-blooded murder before today.

Closing the curtains wouldn't close his mind to the scene that kept playing in his head...

* * *

Mark threw open the curtains and looked out with delight at the beautiful summer morning.

"Another wonderful day!" he said to the world. "I can't wait to see what adventures today will bring."

He had been in Kolkata three months now, having the time of his life. The suite was nice and the work was easy. It was like living a dream.

Mark hurried downstairs for a quick breakfast, picked up the envelopes in his mailbox, and returned to his

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room in the suite. His roommate was nowhere to be seen; perhaps already out on an errand.

More than one envelope in a mailbox was a good thing. It meant that you had proved yourself to the company. They rewarded you by giving you several errands a day. In addition to his name and room number, each envelope had a priority number so he'd know which one to open first.

Eagerly, he opened the envelope with the number "1" on it. Inside the folded letter was a small slip cover that was taped shut. The slip cover seemed to hold a card about the size of a business card. The letter read:

"Proceed to Congress Park. There is a thick copse of trees on the east end of the Orient Row side. Sit on the bench. About 9:30 am a young woman will stop for a drink of water. She will be wearing a jogging suit with the number 29 on the shirt and the colors of Lady Brabourne College. Stand up and unobtrusively drop the enclosed envelope on the ground, then calmly leave."

Flying back down the stairs, Mark checked out a bicycle and took off for the park. Let the adventures begin!

He arrived with plenty of time to spare, so he rode along the multi-purpose path for a bit, enjoying the fresh park air, before stopping at the bench. From where he sat he could see and hear the traffic on Orient Row; a minor disturbance to an otherwise beautiful setting.

There were a lot of people in the park: joggers, walkers, cyclists, women with babies. After a short while, a young woman with long brunette hair tied in a ponytail stopped and stretched against a nearby tree. Mark saw the number 29 on her shirt, and the colors were right.

The young woman reached for a water bottle clipped to her waist. Mark slipped the small envelope out of his pocket and was getting ready to stand up when a shot rang out. Something whispered past his ear. The young woman yelped and fell to the ground, blood seeping out of her head.

Mark sat frozen for a moment, startled by the unexpected turn of events. Slowly, he stood up and walked over to the prone girl, his eyes fixed on the unmoving body. He didn't know how long he stood there, but eventually he became aware of someone leading him back to the bench.

"That's it," a voice said. "Just sit right down here and get yourself together."

Mark's eyes came into focus on the well-dressed woman sitting next to him. On her tunic was a badge of the New Scotland Yard. A few constables were examining the body.

"Here, drink some water," she said.

Mark drank deeply from the bottle she handed him, then stopped and gasped a bit.

"Are you feeling better?" she asked. Mark nodded.

"Good," she said. "I'm Inspector Robson. I'll need to get a statement from you. What is your name, please?"

"Mark Hansen,"

"Did you see what happened?"

"Yes," Mark said, nodding his head.

"Good. Please tell me what you saw."

"Well," Mark began, "I was sitting here watching the traffic. The woman, that woman, that--"

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"The woman in the jogging suit?"

"Yes. She stopped and stretched against the tree.

Then, I heard a buzz or something go past my ear, and next thing I know she's laying on the ground bleeding."

"Okay," Inspector Robson said. "Do you know the woman?"

"Huh? Uh, no."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Okay," she continued. "What were you doing in the park today?"

"Oh, I was biking," Mark said, pointing to his bike.

"Biking," she repeated. "What is it you do for work, Mr. Hansen?"

"I'm, uh," Marks mind stumbled a bit. "I'm a messenger for Checking Piece Courier Service."

Her eyebrow twitched and an odd look crossed her face at the mention of the name.

"Is that your bike over there?"

"Yes," he said. Inspector Robson caught the eye of a constable and nodded at the bike.

"Are you working today?"

"Yes."

"You bike through the park and sit on a bench when you are working?"

"Yes. Once I make a delivery, the company doesn't mind me taking a short break, as long as there are no other deliveries waiting."

"I see."

The constable returned from examining the bike.

"The bike is registered to the Checking Piece Courier Service," the constable said.

"Good," she said. "Follow up with them."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Okay, Mr. Hansen," she said to Mark. "I may need to ask you more questions later. Let me have your address and phone number."

Mark gave her the address and phone number for the hotel.

"Is there a phone in your suite?" she asked.

"No."

"Okay. You are free to go, but don't leave Kolkata for the next few days."

"Thanks," Mark got up, mounted his bike, and sped home.

* * *

Inspector Banerjee looked up at the tap on his door.

"As you suspected," Robson said as she entered his office and sat down. "Although there's no direct connection, as usual."

"What is the situation?"

"A young woman was shot in Congress Park. One of your constables tells me she was wearing the colors of Lady Brabourne College, so she's possibly a student there. No identification on her, so I've got some of your men checking with the college. The odd thing is, when we got there a young man was kneeling over her, clearly in shock.

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A witness; I don't believe he shot her, but he does work for Checking Piece Courier."

Banerjee had clasped his hands and listened politely while Robson gave her report. When she finished, he closed his eyes for a moment and seemed to be murmuring a prayer.

"It is frustrating," he finally said. "I thank you again for investigating the scene. It is my duty to--"

"It's okay. I know you're busy with other cases."

A look of irritation passed quickly across Banerjee's face, and Robson realized that again she had somehow offended him.

"Anyway, I'll continue the investigation and keep you posted."

"Thank you."

Robson left his office in a sour mood. The great Inspector Chloe Robson of New Scotland Yard, on assignment in Kolkata, manages once again to offend the local authorities while continuing to not solve the case.

* * *

The knock at the door sounded again, louder this time. Mark turned his head from the window and stared at the door. When the knock sounded a third time, Mark stood up mechanically, walked to the door and opened the door.

A bellhop stood in the hallway with an envelope in his hand.

"A summons," he said simply.

"I... can't," Mark said dumbly.

"A summons, not an errand."

Mark took the envelope and closed the door. He sighed heavily, then opened the envelope and pulled out the note. It read:

"Your remaining errands for the day have been reassigned. You are being summoned to speak with The Queen's Rook. There will be a car waiting outside at 2:00."

Mark looked at the clock. The time was 1:45. After lunch already? He hadn't even noticed; wasn't even hungry.

The clock chimed two bells. Mark was still standing in front of the door. He dropped the note and envelope onto the stand next to the door and left the suite.

A non-descript black car was parked in front of the building. The driver stood next to it holding the back door open. Mark got in and the door closed after him. A moment later, the car began moving.

The interior of the car was odd. In addition to a partition between the front and back seats, there was another dividing the back seat in half. Mark couldn't see anything through the dark glass. As far as he could tell, he was the only person in the car.

"Mr. Hansen," a woman's soft voice said with a hint of a Hindi accent. Mark looked around and noticed a speaker in the panel of the door.

"Yes?"

"You've had a difficult day. I'm sure you'd like to talk about it."

Mark gulped. "Who are you? I thought we weren't supposed to talk about these things?"

Mad Queen's Chess

"I am The Queen's Rook. We recognize that there are times when one of our messengers may need to talk about an errand. I am here to talk to you about your errand of this morning. You may ask me anything. I may or may not answer."

Mark took a deep breath. He hardly knew where to begin.

"Well," he said. "So, who is that woman who was killed this morning?"

"She is, was, a graduate student who was seeking an employment opportunity."

"With our company?"

"No."

"Huh. What about that little envelope I was supposed to drop?" He nervously fingered the envelope in his pocket. He didn't remember putting it back.

"That is a business card of a person seeking an assistant. You may put the envelope in the slot in front of you."

Mark's eyes got wide. How could she know he still had it? He pulled it out of his pocket and dropped it like a hot potato into the slot in the back of the seat in front of him.

"So," he asked, "you were helping the woman get a job?"

"You could say that."

"But, why?" Mark asked, puzzled.

"Let's just say it would have been in the company's best interests if she were to be employed by this other person."

"I guess I just don't understand what it is our company does. Or why we'd care who works for whom."

The woman was silent, and Mark was beginning to think she was going to reply.

"Mark," she finally said. "You have a lot of potential with the company. I'll share this much with you. The company is involved with the British government and is trying to effect positive social change."

"Oh. So, the messages that we deliver--"

"Are messages among interested parties," she finished.

"Why not just call? Or send a letter by mail? It doesn't seem like a very direct way to communicate."

"There are agencies that oppose our work. Those agencies could easily intercept and interfere with calls and mail. A courier service has proven to be an effective way to communicate."

"I'm not sure this makes much sense," Mark said, shaking his head.

"You've had a difficult day. Why don't you take a few days off to clear your head? We'll talk again."

"Okay."

The door opened, and the driver was standing there. Mark hadn't even noticed when the car had come to a stop. He stepped out and saw that they were in front of the hotel. The driver tipped his hat to Mark, closed the door, and walked back around to the driver's side.

Mark watched the car drive off, and then walked back up to his suite. George, his roommate, was in a chair in the sitting room, reading a book.

Mad Queen's Chess

"You look like hell," George said.

"Thanks," Mark said, and sat heavily into a chair.

"Rough day?"

"Yeah," Mark grunted. "You could say that."

"Sorry to hear it."

"Thanks." After a moment, he asked: "Why are we here?"

"Easy money and no responsibilities."

"That's it?"

George shrugged his shoulders. "Works for me."

"What if that's not enough?"

"It's enough for me." George put down his book.

"What's bothering you?"

Mark hesitated. He knew the rule against talking about an errand. But he had to talk to somebody. George was the closest thing to a friend he had, which was not saying much. Both men kept very much to themselves and did not attend many of the ad-hoc social gatherings.

"I saw someone get shot today," Mark said. He figured that much would be safe, sans any details.

"People get shot every day. Or knifed, or bombed, or clubbed, or a dozen other things."

"I know that. I've just never witnessed it."

"I guess that would make a difference. Never witnessed one myself."

Mark sat quietly and chewed a finger nail.

"We live in a violent world. Just accept it. You'll be much happier that way."

"What if you could do something about it?"

"Why bother even trying? You can't change the nature of the beast."

"Hm. Well, I'm going down for a bite to eat."

* * *

Dr. Lakshanya Aggarwal, principal of Lady Brabourne College, rose from her desk and walked around to greet her visitors. She brought to Robson's mind an image of Mrs. Claus.

"*Pranam*, Inspector Banerjee," she beamed. "It is good to see you again, although I would wish for more pleasant circumstances."

"*Pranam*, Dr. Aggarwal. May I introduce Inspector Robson of New Scotland Yard? She has been assigned to assist in the matter."

Robson started to extend her hand, thought better of it. Instead, she clasped her hands together and offered a respectful nod. Dr. Aggarwal motioned them to sit and returned to her chair.

"I'm surprised that New Scotland Yard would take such an interest."

"Inspector Robson is here investigating another case. We believe this one may be related."

"*Accha!*" Aggarwal exclaimed. "How so?"

"I am sorry, we are not at liberty to speak of that," Banerjee replied. "Would you be kind enough to tell us about the young woman, Anna Carson?"

"Ah, the one who was recently shot in the park?"

"Yes."

Mad Queen's Chess

"I have her records here. She was a junior teacher completing her Ph.D. in Physics this term. She was working on a joint research project with Saha Institute."

"Where was she staying?" Robson asked.

"She was admitted to the hostel when she was accepted. She came to us from King's College where she had studied Mathematics. Her academic record was outstanding; she was a feather in our cap."

"What were her plans after graduation?" Robson asked.

"Well, I'm not sure. When I talked to her a few days ago she mentioned she had an opportunity, but I didn't have a chance to learn more."

"Is there anyone at the hostel she may have been especially close to?"

"There were a few women on the track team she spent a lot of time with. I don't know that I could say anyone in particular."

"What about a boyfriend?" Why do I feel like I put my foot in my mouth again? Robson thought as she watched Dr. Aggarwal's smile stiffen.

"I really wouldn't know anything about that."

"Thank you very much for your time, Dr. Aggarwal," Banerjee said as he stood. Robson stood also, realizing that was their cue to leave. "With your permission, we'd like to ask a few questions at the hostel."

"As you wish. Pranam, Inspector Banerjee, Inspector Robson."

"Pranam, Dr. Aggarwal."

Outside the building, Robson turned to Banerjee.

"I'm sorry if I said something wrong in there. I guess I'm still not up on the protocols."

"It is quite alright. We have become accustomed."

Banerjee said nothing more on the drive to the hostel.

* * *

Mark spent most of the next day wandering around the park. He even stopped at the spot where the woman was killed. Nothing remained but a blood stain on the pavement.

When he returned to the hotel, there was a message for him at the front desk. Inspector Robson wanted to talk to him.

At the police station, Mark didn't have to wait long. A constable showed him straight to a room with a table and some chairs. Mark sat down in one of the chairs and waited. A few minutes later, the inspector walked in with another man and sat down at the opposite side of the table.

"This is Inspector Banerjee. He's in charge of this case. We want to clarify a few points."

"Okay."

"You said you didn't know the woman who was killed," she said.

"Yes."

"You say you work for the Checking Piece Courier Service."

"Yes."

Mad Queen's Chess

"You said you had delivered a message and were taking a break."

"Yes."

"To whom did you deliver the message?"

"I don't believe I'm at liberty to answer that."

"What is the nature of the message you delivered?"

"Sorry," he said. "I don't read the messages, I just deliver them."

"Mr. Hansen, I've noticed there have been a number of crimes in which a messenger of the Checking Piece Courier Service has been a witness. Does that seem odd to you?"

Mark shrugged. "There are a lot of people in this city. I'm sure there are a lot of crimes."

"I suspect there is more to this Checking Piece Courier Service than meets the eye. Perhaps you could enlighten me."

Mark took a deep breath. This was one of those deciding moments. Who do I side with? The police? The company? He knew nothing, really, about the company. All he had to go on was his intuition. What was it telling him about the company? Best to bide for time.

"Well, they ask me to deliver a message. I deliver it. They pay me. I don't know what else to tell you."

Inspector Robson stood slowly, placed her hands flat on the table and leaned towards him. She glared at him for a moment before speaking.

"Is that all you can tell me?"

"Yes," Mark gulped.

"Perhaps Mr. Hansen is the innocent bystander he claims to be," suggested Banerjee.

Mark looked at the peaceful, benevolent eyes of the other man and had one thought: good cop, bad cop. They were fishing – casting out their line and hoping to hook something. Mark looked back at Robson, but said nothing.

"Okay." She stood up straight and folded her arms across her chest. "You may go."

Mark got up and walked to the door.

"You should know," she said as he turned to close the door. "We will be continuing our investigation."

Yes, he thought to himself. And next time it will be this Inspector who talks to him instead.

After Mark left, Banerjee gave Robson a quizzical look.

"We do get results, it's just not immediate. He should be more forthcoming next time."

"As you say."

* * *

Mark took his time returning to the hotel. He needed to think about what just happened. He had committed himself to the side of the company, right or wrong. On some level he felt it was right, but he would have to get more information the next time he talked with The Queen's Rook. He needed to know for sure.

He was surprised to see the black car parked in front of the hotel. The driver beckoned to him with a nod.

Mad Queen's Chess

"I need more information," Mark said, taking the lead as soon as the door had closed.

"We were hoping you would say that," said The Queen's Rook.

Mark decided to get back to that comment later. First things first.

"You said that you were working with the British government to effect positive social change."

"Actually," she replied, "I said that the company is involved with the British government and is trying to effect positive social change."

"What?" Mark whispered to himself, puzzled. Then it all fell into place.

"The company is trying to effect social change," Mark said. "Your involvement with the government is to the extent of opposing their rule?"

"You may draw whatever conclusions you like."

"You're not answering the question. Is that to protect me?"

"To some extent, yes. But mostly to protect the company. We can't risk you knowing any more without a commitment from you. As it is, what you already suspect makes you a borderline risk. Let me be frank with you. We believe the world can be a better place. There is a grass roots movement attempting to do just that. You could play a major part in the movement."

"How do I know that this movement won't replace England's rule with something worse?" Mark asked. "Not all revolutions result in a better government."

"You don't know. You can't know unless you are a part of the change. Even we don't know for sure. All we

can do is hope that the right thing is being done. It all comes down to doing what you feel is right."

"You are careful not to admit or commit yourself."

She did not respond. Mark thought back over the past three months. Up until the murder, he'd been very happy working for the company. Why? If he could just answer that question. The problem was that there was nothing specific about what he'd been doing that gave him such satisfaction. There must be a pattern to what he'd seen and experienced in all those errands--a pattern that led to a conclusion that he was doing the right thing.

"Why were you hoping I'd ask for more information?"

"I mentioned before that you have potential. By seeking more information, you are showing us that you are open-minded and at least willing to consider matters. Whether you decide for or against us is irrelevant, but that quality is important."

"Hm. I need to think about it some more."

"As you wish."

The door opened to show his hotel. It amazed Mark how they managed to end the conversation in front of the hotel. He knew the car was moving while they talked.

Mark was surprised to see Inspector Banerjee in the lobby.

"Mr. Hansen. It is a pleasure to see you again."

"Inspector."

"Is there a place we could talk in private?"

"Oh, the dining room should be quiet."

Mad Queen's Chess

They found a table in a quiet corner and sat down. A few others sat at the bar watching a game.

"Mr. Hansen, I was wondering if you have given more thought to this case."

Mark nodded, and then said: "May I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"Do you think this world could be a better place?"

"There is room for improvement, yes."

"Do you believe you are helping the world to be a better place?"

"Yes, I do."

"How do you know that you are?"

"I believe in karma-phala. What you would call 'fruits of your actions.' I see the results of my actions directly. But, more importantly, I feel the positive karma when I perform my job well."

"So, it feels good to you when you are doing the right thing?"

"Yes. It is my reward for sowing goodness in the world."

"As you sow, so shall you reap."

"Yes."

"Thanks, Inspector. That really helps."

"You are welcome. If I may ask again, what are your thoughts on this case?"

Mark shrugged. "I'm just a messenger. I feel terrible about that young woman, but I think it's just a coincidence that I happened to be there."

"I see. I thank you for your time." Banerjee rose, bowed slightly, and left the room.



The King's Rook

Sergeant Das looked at the phone wearily when it began to ring.

"Kolkata Police, Sgt. Das."

"Oh! You must help me. The most horrible thing has happened!"

"If you will please explain, perhaps I can help."

"I have received a most frightful package by this morning's post! A small box, shaped like a coffin, with a chessman in it!"

"A chessman, you say?"

"Yes! Please! I am in fear of my very life!"

"I will connect you with Inspector Robson. She can help you in the absence of Inspector Banerjee."

"Yes! Please! Anyone! It's most distressing, I tell you!"

"One moment, please." Das put the man on hold and dialed Robson's extension. "Inspector, I have a gentleman on the phone speaking of a chessman."

"Thanks, sergeant. Put him through."

Five minutes later, Robson came rushing out of her office, struggling into her jacket.

"When Inspector Banerjee arrives, let him know I'm off to Lord Carrington's and will fill him in when I get

Mad Queen's Chess

back." She crooked a finger at one of the constables behind the desk.

"You look troubled, sergeant." Robson paused as she adjusted her coat.

"It is not my place to say."

"Please. I want to hear it."

"Inspector Banerjee is too polite to say, but the English Nobles are a bunch of self-righteous whiners. Just because they rule the world they think they are better than everyone else."

"I see. I suspect you are too polite to add that you think the same of the English in general?"

Das looked at his desk, not wanting to meet her eyes.

"I'll be back."

* * *

"He's been like that all afternoon!" Lady Carrington whined.

"I will attend to him, Martha," Dr. Choudhury reassured her. "Perhaps you should get some air."

"Oh, if you really think it's best."

"Don't you worry; I'll take care of your husband." He ushered her out the door.

Once she was gone, he could focus his attention on his patient. Bradley Carrington lay prone on the divan in the sitting room, hands clasped on his stomach and staring into space. Dr. Friedman pulled up a chair.

"Alright, Bradley. Martha's gone. Perhaps you should tell me what the problem is."

Bradley took a deep breath and shook his head. Closing his eyes and resting a hand on his forehead, he sighed: "Oh, Tamal."

He said nothing more for several minutes. Sitting up, he put his elbows on his knees and hung his head.

"I'm into something, Tamal."

"Why don't you start from the beginning?"

Bradley pulled a business card out of his breast pocket and handed it to Tamal.

"The King's Rook," he read. Turning the card over, he noticed a handwritten message. "It is imperative we speak at once regarding the Balfour Trade Agreement."

"I'm not sure I understand, Bradley."

"This card was delivered to me by messenger a month ago." Now that he had started, Bradley found he couldn't stop. "I must tell you, no one but a select, trusted few know about the Balfour Trade Agreement. Naturally, I felt it necessary to meet with this 'King's Rook,' as he calls himself. I sent a reply with the messenger. That evening I received a note instructing me where and when to meet him the next day."

"And who is he?"

"I still don't know. I did not even see the man. I was shown to a room and left to myself. The phone in the room rang, so I answered it. Our meeting was conducted in this manner."

"What did he want?"

"He had the audacity to suggest I not go through with the agreement! He said it favored too heavily the

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nobles of the Crown at the expense of the poor and middle class."

"What did you do?"

"Why, I refused, of course! But that's when things started to happen."

"What kind of things?"

"Oh, little things, at first. Minor annoyances, actually. Missed messages, appointments cancelled for no reason. It was becoming increasingly difficult to continue forging the agreement, but I persevered. This went on for a fortnight. Then stranger things began to happen. My daily news would be on my porch, open to the obituaries. A dead mouse would be found in the oddest places. And then..." Bradley stopped.

"And then?"

Bradley pointed to a small coffin-shaped box on the book table. "That arrived by this morning's post."

Tamal picked up the box and opened it. "This is a chessman," he said, picking up the object lying inside. "A rook, if I'm not mistaken."

"Yes," cried Bradley. "Look inside."

Tamal did so, and noticed a piece of paper shaped like a tombstone. "This has your name on it! And it's dated two days from today!"

"He's going to kill me, Tamal!"

"Easy now, Bradley," he said, getting up to pour a brandy.

Bradley swallowed it in a single gulp. "What ever am I to do?"

"You have talked to the police. I noticed the constable outside."

"Yes, directly after the box arrived I called the station and spoke to an Inspector Robson, in fact. It seems she's the authority on crimes dealing with chessmen. I can't imagine there being so many crimes of that nature that a Inspector would be assigned. However, she could do nothing. No direct threat or evidence of endangerment. She did assure me I would receive the utmost attention, and assigned the constable to stand watch."

"Most interesting."

"What am I to do, Tamal?"

"I can't really answer that question without more information."

Bradley stood up and paced the room. He glanced out the window, and then returned to the divan.

"He asked the impossible!"

Tamal raised his eyebrows at the bald statement.

"You don't understand, Tamal! He's asked me to forsake my ideals for his. I have always operated within the letter of the law. I've earned my lifestyle and have the right to pursue such opportunities that permit me to maintain that lifestyle."

"And you draw comfort from those ideals."

"Yes, I do! I may be royalty, but I come from a poor family. My father squandered our fortune, and committed suicide rather than face the prospect of debtor's prison. My mother sacrificed much so that I could attend university. She gave her life to the church, organizing fund raisers for a pittance. I have worked hard to restore my family's name."

Tamal said nothing for a moment.

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"Bradley," he began. "Perhaps there's another lesson to be learned."

Bradley looked at him blankly.

"Your mother worked hard so that you could succeed. You learned to work hard."

"Exactly my point!"

"However, that is only one aspect of the message your mother attempted to impart. Tell me, Bradley, what was the purpose of the fund raisers she organized?"

"Mother was insistent that no one should live in such a state of destitution as those in prison. She wanted to save others from the fate that nearly befell her. Oh, you don't suppose..."

Bradley stopped. Tamal watched various expressions chase each other across his face as he considered this new thought.

"Do you suppose, Bradley, that this 'Kings Rook,' whoever he is, has asked for nothing more than your own mother chose?"

"Ah, yes, I see! That thought had never occurred to me. I've been so wrapped up in avoiding the poor house that I never once stopped to consider motivations."

"I think it's time for another meeting with this man."

"That is a splendid idea! By George, I feel as if a weight has been lifted from my shoulders! There is hope. I will hurry to his suite first thing in the morning."

* * *

Robson returned from lunch to see Banerjee standing at the front desk.

"Sergeant Das has just informed me of this morning's incident."

"Yes, we may finally have something solid."

"May we speak privately?"

"Yes, of course. Let me just put away my coat."

"I will join you in your office."

Banerjee closed the door as Robson hung her jacket and began filling him in. At the end of her discourse, she pulled the small coffin out of her pocket and dropped it on her desk in front of Banerjee.

The Inspector stared at it a moment, then gingerly picked it up and examined the box and contents.

"Circumstantial, but this represents the most conclusive piece of evidence we have so far."

"My thoughts exactly," agreed Robson. "It's clear that someone with a penchant for chess is applying pressure on Carrington."

"Yes. However, we still cannot link this to the Checking Piece Courier Service."

"No," sighed Robson.

"It is a matter of time."

* * *

Bradley's enthusiasm dwindled the closer he got to the office of The King's Rook. He hesitated at the main entrance to the building.

"It's either this or death, I suppose," he said.

Mad Queen's Chess

Bradley entered the building and climbed the steps to the third floor. The corner suite was not far. Upon entering, he saw the secretary seated behind the desk in the center of the room. To the left, a few seats for waiting visitors; and to the right a door that led to the inner room of the suite where he had talked to The King's Rook the last time.

The young man rose from his seat and bowed briefly. "Lord Carrington."

"Yes, good morning young man. You may recall I was here a month ago for an interview with the, uh, The King's Rook. I need to speak with him again."

"One moment, I will see if he is available." The young man seated himself and dialed a number. He spoke in low, unintelligible tones for a moment, and then hung up.

"If you can wait a few minutes, he can spare a quarter hour."

"Splendid!"

Bradley sat in one of the chairs, fidgeting and re-crossing his legs. Truth be told, he was not feeling as confident now. Tamal had made a very good point about Mother; she had worked very hard for the poor, and had felt great empathy for their circumstances. He had missed that completely, being so focused on his own family's lack of the luxury that was their due, and their struggle to survive.

He struggled to recall his last conversation with The King's Rook. Quite honestly, he had been so enraged at the thought of not going through with the Balfour Trade Agreement that he could recall little else. Bradley recalled

phrases pertaining to favored nobles and the cost to the poor and middle class, but he remembered those only because they recalled to his mind the struggles of his youth. The feelings brought about by those memories had blinded Bradley to anything else The King's Rook had said.

A short buzz pulled Bradley out of his reverie. Looking up, he saw the secretary signal to him to enter the inner room.

Once inside, Bradley sat and watched the phone, waiting for it to ring. He nearly fell out of the chair when he heard a voice address him from behind.

"Lord Bradley Carrington," said the indistinct voice. "How may I be of assistance?"

"Who? Where? Where are you?"

"The painting behind you."

Bradley turned and stared at the painting. To his surprise, he noticed that the eyes were moving and a small grill had revealed itself at the mouth.

"Oh, my."

"My apologies, Lord Carrington. We felt you deserved a more personal interview this time, in anticipation of a mutually beneficial joint venture. I apologize for not showing myself, I must remain anonymous."

"As you say, but I am quite alarmed by this turn."

"Again, my apologies. How may I be of assistance?"

"I wish to recall to your mind our interview of a month past. To be honest, I don't recall much of the discussion regarding the aims of your organization. Perhaps you would be so kind as to summarize."

Mad Queen's Chess

"Certainly. Our organization is attempting to effect positive social change. We are concerned about the growing disparity among the classes. To quote a worn-out cliché: the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer."

"If it is as you say, then it would be of grave concern to me. My own mother labored to the benefit of the poor."

"Yes. We feel you may have forgotten your past, and we have hopes that you could be persuaded to join our cause."

"Persuaded, possibly, but I must confess I question your methods! Implied threats of death! That hardly seems proper."

"True, Lord Carrington. However, we had to get your attention. I attempted to explain the situation when we last met, but you refused to listen. We then arranged to disrupt certain events to encourage you to think about it. You were so absorbed in your world; we had to resort to more drastic methods."

"I see, yes. Well, I would need to see evidence to support your idea of this dissimilitude, as well as the actions taken by your organization to ameliorate the situation."

"Certainly. If you check the bottom right drawer of the desk, you will see a binder of news clippings. If you wish to study them, you are free to use this office as long as you need. James, my secretary, will provide you with refreshments. You may not leave the room with the clippings. I can return in three hours to discuss this further."

The hours flew by as Bradley studied the clippings, which spanned about a decade. The binder was organized in three parts. The first part had articles containing a variety of demographic statistics relating to health, income, education and quality of life. It was certainly true that royal families were benefiting more and more as each year passed. Technology was reserved for the royals, while the rest of the world lived without.

The second section had articles relating to programs, events and honors for those working to help the poor. Each article was attached to its own page along with a cut-out of a chessman with three letters and four numbers written on it.

The third section of the binder contained a few graphs that charted the statistics and marked key spots with the three-letter, four-number coding that was on the chessman. A brief introduction to the section stated that the graph notations marked where the organization had effected a change. It was clear from the graphs that wherever the organization had an impact the situation had improved, however marginally, for the poor and middle class.

Bradley was once again startled by the indistinct voice from the painting.

"Well, Lord Carrington?"

Bradley closed the binder and returned it to the drawer.

"You have very compelling evidence, sir. However, a question still remains: Why all the secrecy? Why not reveal yourself to me?"

Mad Queen's Chess

"I'm sure you understand that the royal families are not happy about sharing the wealth. Therefore, members above a certain level in our organization must keep their identity hidden; otherwise they would be imprisoned or killed. I don't wish to demean your character, but we are particularly careful when dealing with members of a royal family. We simply can't take the risk."

"Ah, I see. That is certainly understandable. So, just to make sure I'm clear, my choices are to either cooperate or be killed?"

"There is more than one way to 'kill' a person. Death does not need to be physical, and we do that only as a very last resort. We can much more easily 'kill' your reputation."

"Hm. I will need to consider the situation further."

"As you wish. The final vote on the Balfour Trade Agreement is scheduled for tomorrow afternoon."

"Yes."

"We will know your decision based on how you vote."

"I don't see how you will know how I vote."

"We will know. I'm sorry, but this is all the time I have. James will see you out."

The grill and the eyes were covered, and the painting looked like a regular painting.

Bradley couldn't decide whether to be offended or not by the sudden manner in which the interview ended. And he certainly didn't like being pushed in one direction or another. He had much to think about.

The door to the inner office opened, and James escorted Lord Carrington out of the suite.

* * *

Bradley met his friend Dr. Choudhury for dinner later that evening, and recounted the entire conversation.

"So," Bradley concluded, "It seems I'm left with little choice. If my reputation is ruined, I may find myself back where I started. They certainly have found my pressure point."

"Perhaps it's time to stop thinking about yourself. See this as an opportunity. If this organization is everything they say they are, then this could be your chance to succeed in other ways."

"In what other ways?"

"Bradley, you can be a bit dense at times. If it is true that their aim is to spread prosperity, then what better way to honor your mother's memory than to collaborate with them?"

"Oh, well, I guess I hadn't really thought of it from that perspective."

Tamal chuckled. "No, I didn't think you had."

"You laugh at me, my friend."

"You should hear yourself sometimes! I often wonder if you are aware that others inhabit this world. You react in fear to anything that threatens your life style, and you protect it fiercely."

"So, do you think I should collaborate?"

"What I think is that you need to decide for yourself."

Mad Queen's Chess

"I don't think I know how to make such a choice."

"How would it feel if you could see others succeed as you have - to be saved from the poor houses and debtors' prisons?"

"Well, I suppose – "

"No. Not a quick answer. Don't think about it. How would it feel?"

They sat in silence as Bradley struggled to sort out his feelings, or even to identify them. Tamal was right. All he usually felt was the fear of losing; he rarely felt the joy of having. He focused on that joy, and tried to imagine it being multiplied thousands of times. He wasn't sure he could quite grasp it.

"I begin to see what you are driving at, Tamal. I get glimpses of the joy I could bring to people. I must admit, it gives me a bit of a heady feeling to contemplate."

"That is what I'm talking about. Let that feeling direct your decision, and you can't go wrong."

"Well, I believe I have a lot of work to do tonight."

* * *

Lady Carrington swept into the sitting room, smiling grandly.

"Inspector Robson, how nice to see you again!"

"I'm sorry to bother you at such a late hour. This is Inspector Banerjee; he is in charge of your husband's case."

"My pleasure, I'm sure" Lady Carrington exclaimed, offering her hand.

Banerjee politely ignored the proffered hand, and instead responded with a traditional Hindi greeting.

Lady Carrington withdrew her hand and, turning to Robson, said: "What can I do for you, Inspector?"

"We would like to speak with your husband. Is he available?"

"I'm afraid he's out to dinner with a friend. I expect him any moment. I do believe that is him now."

Lord Carrington entered the sitting room, his manner strikingly different from when Robson had seen him last.

"Inspector! And what can I do for you this fine evening? I'm afraid I haven't much time – I have much work to do."

"This is Inspector Banerjee, in charge of your case. We were hoping to talk with you about it."

"No need! No need! It was all a grave mistake. I have seen the error of my ways."

"The error of your ways?" asked Robson.

"Never mind that now. I have much work to do. The situation has quite resolved itself. Oh, and there will be no more need of the constable."

Lord Bradley left the sitting room with all the energy in which he had entered it. Banerjee looked clearly as confused as Robson.

"Well, well, so there it is!" said Lady Carrington. "All is right as rain. So nice of you to stop by."

"I am beginning to appreciate the sergeant's opinion of the English Nobles," Robson said as they walked back to the car.

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"Sergeant Das is young. He has yet to become accustomed to the way of things."

"The way can change."

* * *

Bradley arrived at work shortly after lunch the next day, having spent all night and all morning revising the trade agreement. He purposefully delayed entering the conference room until he was sure everyone else had arrived, entering with a flourish and carrying a stack of hand-outs.

"Gentlemen, and ladies," he said as he took his place at the head of the table. "Charles, if you please." Bradley handed the stack to his assistant, who began distributing them.

"What you will soon have in your hands is an extensive modification of the Balfour Trade Agreement. You will see some radical adjustments that I have worked all night to develop and justify. The bottom line is this: the profit margin will be reduced by an insignificant amount, less than one-tenth of one percent, and the distribution of goods and services will benefit a wider range of people. I will accept, and I am willing to discuss, honest criticisms of this proposal. What I will not accept is any agreement that does not better the human condition on a wider scale. It is time for this company to do some good for the world."



The Queen's Knight

Lady Nora Harwicke glared at the chess piece in her hand. It had arrived by the afternoon post in a non-descript box with no return address. The wooden piece, a knight, had clearly been heated in order to scorch the head. There was no mistaking the message.

"Anything wrong, ma'am?" asked Henry, her butler, as he stood with his hand on the doorknob. Lady Harwicke was on her way out, but had stopped by the front door for a quick check of the mail sitting on the stand. The small, plain wrapped package had caught her eye.

"Nothing!" She pushed the chessman into her purse. "The meeting will likely run late; don't wait dinner for me."

"Yes, ma'am."

Lady Harwicke, her thoughts on the meeting and the chessman, never saw the bicycle coming as she precipitously descended the steps outside her château...

* * *

Inspector Robson had just finished interviewing the cyclist when Inspector Banerjee arrived. The scene was in chaos, primarily because of the curious on-lookers. It wasn't every day a member of royalty was seen in such a

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state. The ambulance managed to inch its way out of the crowd.

"Well, she's not a courier," Robson said, indicating the cyclist. Whenever a bicyclist was involved, they were commonly employed by the Checking Piece Courier Service.

"She is not?"

"No. But this was found in Lady Harwicke's purse." Robson hand the bagged knight to Banerjee, who examined it in a perfunctory manner. He was growing weary of seeing the same things with every crime: couriers, chessmen and business cards. There was never any more than that.

"It seems clear that the Checking Piece Courier Service was applying pressure on the Lady," he said.

"Yes. But, we're not likely to find out why. The Lady is suffering from amnesia as a result of the accident."

"That is unfortunate. Does the household staff have any information?"

"No. The butler received the package with the rest of the mail. He saw the Lady open it as she was heading out for a meeting."

"Do we know to what meeting she was heading?"

"No. The butler has not been particularly forthcoming." Robson disliked uncooperative witnesses, and it showed in her tone.

"Have you posted a constable to remain with Lady Harwicke?"

"Yes."

"Very well. We will discuss options for this case tomorrow morning."

"I have a meeting with the Chief Minister's Office first thing, but I will catch up with you after."

* * *

Kenia slipped out of the women's hotel at Fort William, now operated by the Checking Piece Courier Service, and into the car waiting outside. The assignment notice she received in her mailbox this morning had said a car would be waiting for her promptly at 9:00am.

The interior was comfortable, if a bit cramped. The back seat was split in half by an opaque panel, and isolated from the front seat by thick, clear acrylic panel.

"You may refer to me as the Queen's Knight," a muffled female voice sounded through a speaker set in the back of the seat in front of her.

"Uh, okay."

"You have received your instructions."

"Yes, I am to take a volunteer position at the Lady Dufferin Hospital."

"We feel it's necessary to clarify the task and stress its importance. The Lady Harwicke has been admitted to Lady Dufferin, but we have no information as to her condition. A constable of the Kolkata Police is guarding her room. You will be our eyes and ears. Your duties will be to watch and listen, no more than that."

"Okay."

"You will be paid 50 pounds a day to compensate you for your time, in lieu of any errands you would normally do. It is very important that you do not speak of

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your position with our company. You have been specifically selected because you have demonstrated an ability to be discrete."

"Thanks! I'll do my best."

The car door opened and it seemed to Kenia that it had not moved from its spot in front of the hotel, despite the fact she had felt it moving. She got out and headed to her room, knowing full well she would not get much sleep tonight. She was too excited – this was her first major assignment with the company, and she couldn't wait to start.

* * *

Robson tapped on Banerjee's door and stopped with one foot starting her entry into his office. She was beginning to understand how she rubbed him the wrong way. Banerjee tended to be very formal and polite. Barging into his office unannounced was, to his way of thinking, ill-mannered. Not that he would admit to it, though. He was far too formal and polite to say anything.

"Yes, Inspector?"

"I have information on Lady Harwicke's meeting." Robson said, resuming her motion into the room. "It seems she was meeting with other nobles to discuss problems with the trade unions."

"Yes," he nodded thoughtfully. "The trade unions have been more actively pursuing egalitarian ideals. They seek modifications to current business methodologies."

"Hm. Risky. The Crown will not be happy with any changes to the balance of power. The question is: What

does the Checking Piece Courier Service have to do with it?"

"That is not clear."

"I can think of a few theories. They engineered the accident to prevent her from attending the meeting, and therefore indirectly supporting the trade unions. Or, were they in support of her position and she was injured by someone from the trade union. Or, she's a member of the upper echelons of Checking Piece Courier." Robson paused for a breath.

"All very good theories," Banerjee said after a moment.

"There's been no change in the Lady's condition; she still has no memory of who she is."

"Unfortunate. It seems unlikely the attendees of that meeting will provide additional information."

"Why is that?"

Banerjee raised an eyebrow, and it seemed to Robson that he wasn't going to answer the question.

"It has been my experience," Banerjee finally said, "that the aristocracy prefers to maintain a discrete distance from the working class."

"Ah. Well. I a few more leads to follow up on."

"Thank you, Inspector."

Robson returned to her office and sat down heavily into her chair. She was not comfortable with this assignment. Local authorities rarely appreciated outside assistance. Add to that the strain of adjusting to the culture. All she really wanted to do was return to London.

This was by far the most frustrating assignment Kenia ever had. Her previous assignments had always been simple message delivery. She never had an assignment that involved more than that. Yet, here she was. Watching and listening. But so far unsuccessful in seeing or hearing anything of interest. Yet, she remained excited, despite the frustration. If she did well, hopefully there would be more assignments.

Getting the volunteer position was easy – the hospital was always in desperate need. The initial difficulties had been in finding Lady Harwicke's room, and then managing to get work assignments that kept her close enough to learn anything of importance. It was several days before she had anything to report. Surprisingly, the car was waiting outside her hotel that very evening when she arrived home from work.

"What have you learned?" asked the Queen's Knight. Kenia thought she detected a hint of a Hindu accent in the woman's voice.

"She has post-traumatic retrograde amnesia. Her doctor thinks she'll recover, but can't say when. She's going home tomorrow, the doctor hopes the familiar surroundings will help bring back her memory."

When she got no response, she asked: "Did I do okay?"

"I'm sorry. Yes, you did very well. Continue at the hospital for one more week, and then return to your normal duties. We may have more assignments like this one for you."

Kenia left the car relieved and delighted. More assignments!

The Queens' Knight sat in silence on the trip back to his office. She spared a nod to James, the secretary, as she passed through the anteroom and into the inner office. Once behind the closed door, she accessed a hidden panel and entered another room.

This was a larger room with a small conference table in the middle. There were signs that other members had recently used the room. That did not surprise her – it was common practice to hold interim strategy meetings here, or to communicate via phone with outsiders sitting in the adjoining office.

She sat down, picked up the phone and dialed a number.

"Queen's Knight, Kolkata," she said.

"Status?" inquired a garbled voice.

"Amnesia. Release tomorrow."

"Fortunate."

"Yes, the delay works to our advantage."

"Report again in three days."

The phone line went dead, and the Queen's Knight replaced the receiver.

* * *

Something out of the corner of her eye caused Robson to hesitate as she closed the door to Lady Harwicke's room. Scanning the hallway, her eyes rested on the nurses' station. The young girl standing at the desk,

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wearing a volunteer's smock, had cast another furtive glance, only to turn away quickly when Robson caught her eye.

Robson walked over to the desk.

"You are a volunteer," Robson said.

"Yes," answered the girl.

"What's your name?"

"Kenia Nuñez, ma'am."

"I've seen you around here a lot."

"I work here."

"Do you have a particular interest in the patient in that room?" Robson indicated Lady Harwicke's room.

"Should I?"

"You seem to be paying a lot of attention to what goes on."

"It's my job."

"You seem to be a very dedicated volunteer."

"Inspector," Inspector Banerjee said, joining Robson at the nurses' station. Kenia took advantage of Robson's distraction and slipped away.

"Inspector," she replied, and then turned to see Kenia's back as she disappeared around a corner. "Huh!"

"A possible lead, Inspector?"

"Yes, a volunteer. I noticed she's been hanging around a lot, listening in."

"What is her name?"

"Kenia Nuñez."

Banerjee looked thoughtful for a moment, and then said: "I will need to check my records, but I believe she works for the Checking Piece Courier Service."

"They are obviously keeping tabs on the Lady's condition."

"Yes. Unfortunately, that information does not strengthen any one of our theories. Nor is her relationship with the courier service sufficient reason to detain her."

"Hmm. Do you have anyone you can spare to keep an eye on her?"

Banerjee came close to sighing. Robson's desire for action often conflicted with his more sedate approach. He preferred to deliberate before taking action. Combine that with the fact that there was some confusion as to who was actually in charge of the case. The assistant commissioner had placed Banerjee in charge when he first pieced together the chess-based offender profile from the study of several cases. Robson was assigned to the case by Scotland Yard when the Crown learned that the targets in the cases were mostly British Royals. With the Chief Minister's Office keeping tabs on her progress, there was an implicit assumption that Robson, as a representative of Her Majesty, was in charge. It was not wise to argue with the Crown.

"Constable Singh will be available once the Lady Harwicke is released"

"Singh? Yes, she's a good choice." Robson bit her tongue as she finished the sentence, wincing less from the pain than from Banerjee's nearly imperceptible reaction.

"When will the Lady Harwicke be released?"
Banerjee asked.

"This afternoon."

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"The trade unions have become bolder with her absence. I have met with the West Bengal Vice President of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions. Their triennial conference is scheduled for next month, and it seems they have been under some pressure in regards to their schedule."

"From the Crown?"

"Not directly. Several nobles with interests in Kolkata have formed a loose coalition in an attempt to orchestrate punitive measures."

"Hm. The Lady is probably part of that. We still don't know how Checking Piece fits into all this."

"Unfortunately we do not. I must return to my office, I have more data to analyze. We are scheduled to interview the Lady Harwicke later this afternoon."

"I'll see you there."

* * *

"You wish to talk?" the Queen's Knight asked.

Kenia marveled at how the Queen's Knight always seemed to be around at the most convenient times. She had spoken to the hotel manager not much more than an hour ago, not knowing who else she could turn to. The next thing she knew she was there to talk to her.

"Yes," said Kenia. "I think I'm being watched."

"Tell me."

"It started the other day when a police inspector noticed I was hanging around the Lady Harwicke's room. Ever since, I've been running into this other woman everywhere. I think she's a cop."

"Lady Harwicke has been released." It was not a question; Kenia remained silent. "Continue working at the hospital as planned. Continue to focus your activities in the same wing – it will give the impression that that is your real interest."

"Oh, that's smart."

"Attempt to cultivate the police constable's friendship, discretely of course. It will benefit the company to have that link."

"Sure!"

"You are doing very well. We will have more need of your skills."

Kenia got out of the car and decided to spend the afternoon shopping. Grabbing a bike, she rode over to Park Circus Market. It was amazing how much the market had grown in the years she'd lived here. The variety of shops and eateries made it feel like a small village.

After locking up her bike, she headed straight for her favorite clothing shop. She noticed a rack of newly arrived saris outside the front door and stopped to admire them. The rack was filled with a wondrous assortment Dhaniakhali cotton saris. She picked out a red one lace with an intricate gold and silver pattern and, draping it over her shoulder, admired the particular shade of red against her dark skin. Sighing, she put the sari back on the rack. Even though it was well within her budget, Kenia could not work up the nerve to actually buy and wear one.

She dismissed the fantasy from her mind and looked up to see the woman who had been following her

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on the other side of the rack. Idly, Kenia worked her way around until she was standing next to the woman.

"These are beautiful, aren't they?" Kenia said.

The woman failed to hide her dismay. "Yes, very nice," she answered.

Kenia leaned over, reaching for a sari, and brought her lips close to the woman's ear.

"You're a cop, aren't you?"

The woman's eyes widened in surprise. "H-how did you know?"

"It wasn't hard to guess."

"I am not very good at this. I usually have routine assignments."

"Let's get some tea. There's a great café here called Gupta's."

"Yes, I know the place. Okay."

Gupta's was crowded. The tea hour had just started, and every table was taken. After a few minutes' wait, they grabbed a seat just as another couple left.

"So, I figure you already know who I am."

"Yes. You are Kenia Nuñez."

"Yep. What's your name?"

The woman hesitated before replying.

"My name is Arundhati Singh."

"Why are you following me?"

"I really do not think I should say."

"That's alright. I think I can guess. I got caught hanging around Lady Harwicke's hospital room, so that lady inspector in charge asked you to follow me to see what you could learn about me. And I'll bet," Kenia

finished, hoping to shake her up a bit, "you already know that I really work for the Checking Piece Courier Service."

Kenia's gamble paid off. The look on Arundhati's face was priceless. The waitress arrived at that moment, giving Arundhati a moment to recover.

"I'll have the cucumber sandwiches and earl gray tea," Kenia said.

"A green tea, please," Arundhati said. After the waitress left, she asked: "How is it you know so much, and I so little?"

"I have my ways," Kenia replied in an off-hand manner. Then, noticing Arundhati's dejected look, she softened: "I guess it's not any easy job, trailing people."

"No, it is not."

"Hey! Maybe I could teach you!"

"I'm sorry?"

"Yeah! It'd be fun! We could hang out, and I could teach you some stealth tricks."

"You would do that for me?"

"Sure!"

"Okay." Arundhati smiled. "And please, my friends call me Aru."

* * *

Lady Harwicke was sitting comfortably in her tea room when Inspectors Banerjee and Robson arrived. The maid had just placed the setting.

"Tea?" she asked.

"Please," said Banerjee.

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"No, thanks," Robson replied.

They sat while the maid served the tea. Lady Harwicke finally stirred after the maid left the room.

"This is simply an impossible situation."

"Your memory hasn't returned?" Robson asked.

"There is nothing here that reminds me of anything."

"Perhaps this will help." Robson pulled the bagged chessman out of her pocket and handed it over.

Lady Harwicke put down her tea and accepted the bag. She pulled the piece out and rolled it between her fingers, scrutinizing it carefully.

"The Queen's Knight!" she spat, gripping the piece until her knuckles turned white. "I remember now."

"What can you tell us?" Robson could barely contain herself. This might be their first break in the case.

"I never met the man, but his level of impudence was quite beyond belief. He had the gall to suggest we cooperate with the trade unions!"

"Indeed? That would suggest your first theory might be the correct one," Banerjee said to Robson.

"If you have a theory about what's going on, I have a right to hear it," demanded Lady Harwicke.

"We suspect," said Robson, "that the accident was engineered in order to keep you from your meeting. Indirectly, that would delay your plans to influence next month's trade union conference."

"I'm impressed. You've learned much. However, your theory sounds a bit feeble. What are you not telling me?"

"We are not at liberty to disclose everything we know," Banerjee said.

"Clearly, this 'Queens Knight' belongs to some organization," Lady Harwicke pressed, paying no attention to Banerjee. "I assure you the Crown is most interested."

"I am here on assignment from Scotland Yard, working with Inspector Banerjee and the Chief Minister's Office to resolve this issue."

"In that case, I leave it in your capable hands, Inspector Robson." Lady Harwicke's tone made it clear that the interview was over.

"We really don't know much more than we did before," Robson said on the drive back to the station.

"We do not," Banerjee said.

Outwardly, she could see no change in his demeanor. But she could feel it. It was as if the past few months had never happened. The minimal partnership they had forged seemed like it was back to square one.

* * *

Kenia was waiting for Arundhati when she arrived late in the evening at the Hospital Road entrance to Fort William on Khidirpur Road. They shared a brief hug, and then Kenya led Arundhati to a covered bench.

"There'll be a trolley along soon," Kenya said. "It's how we get around. Now, before we get there, let's practice. Watch me." Kenya's face adopted a bored look as she slowly panned the golf course across the street. "Now you try it."

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Arundhati carefully mimicked Kenia's act.

"Not bad." Kenia said. "Try it again, but move your head a little slower and tilt it a bit like this. Also, it really helps if you raise your eyebrows a bit and slightly close your eyes."

Arundhati tried again, but broke into a giggle halfway through.

"I feel silly," she said.

"You're doing great! Oh, here comes the trolley. Practice while we're on board, then we'll compare notes."

"Okay."

It was a short ride, and the women got off at the Kalyani Shopping Arcade. They walked across the street and entered the Stalemate Pub. Arundhati couldn't keep her eyes from roaming as she and Kenia sat down at an empty table. Her police training was hard to dismiss. She'd heard rumors of this place, but never had a chance to experience it firsthand. In fact, she was not much for socializing at all, so this was truly an unusual experience.

"Relax, Aru," Kenia laughed. "We're here to have fun!"

"My apologies. I have never been around so many--"

"Don't say it!" Kenia leaned close and whispered into Arundhati's ear: "Watch what you say. If anyone figures out you're cop, they'll kick us both out on our tails!"

Arundhati nodded and took another sip from her drink.

"So, did you see the guy with the guitar?" Kenia asked.

"He was sitting in the back, yes?"

"Yes. What color were his socks?"

"His socks?"

"Yes."

"I did not see the color of his socks."

"He wasn't wearing any!" Both women burst out laughing.

"How long have you been in Kolkata?"

Kenia took a deep pull from her drink and said:

"Oh, about three years now. What about you?"

"I was born and raised in Kolkata. Why did you move here?"

"My family vacationed here when I was in high school and I just fell in love with it! My parents had wanted me to go to Universidad Autónoma in Mexico City where we live, but I really wanted to come here to study."

"What is it you are studying?"

"Uh, well, I couldn't really decide on a course of study. I failed out after the first semester. So I got this job instead."

"Do you enjoy your work?"

"Yeah, I do. It's exciting and different every day. I'm never bored."

"I envy you. I thought my -- work -- would be more satisfying."

"Maybe you should think about a career change."

"Maybe yes."

The evening flew, and it was almost closing time when they left the pub. Kenia rode with Arundhati back to the entrance.

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"Will you be okay getting home?" Kenia asked.

"I will be fine. I am -- well-trained."

"And drunk!" Kenia laughed.

"I did not have much to drink. I am fine."

"This was fun. Let's do it again soon."

"Yes!" They hugged goodbye, and Kenia watched while Arundhati hailed and boarded a rickshaw.

As she headed back to the trolley stop, Kenia saw a familiar car parked nearby. The car began moving as soon as the driver was back in his seat.

"How is it progressing?" the Queen's Knight asked.

"Good, I think. Aru might be willing to help us."

"You like her."

"We could become really good friends. We are a lot alike."

"You must be cautious. Loyalties can easier to change than you realize."

The door opened and Kenia saw that the car was stopped in front of her hotel. She walked a bit unsteadily from the alcohol and lack of sleep, but made it to her room. As she lay down in her bed, it dawned on her what the Queen's Knight meant by his last words. He was afraid her loyalties might change because of her friendship with Aru. She was sure she'd be watched closely for a while, and not likely to get many more assignments like this one until she could justify the confidence they'd previously had in her.



The King's Knight

The afternoon tea crowd at Gupta's Café was just beginning to thin, but there was still enough hustle and bustle to cover the sound of a small box as it tumbled into a dark corner.

"You're not even listening to me," Jeff said.

"Huh?" Matt looked across the table and said: "Sure I am Jeff." Matt had seen the box fall. He was sure no one else had seen it.

"What's got your attention now? I swear you've got the attention span of a two-year old!"

"Just as second." Matt got up and retrieved the box. "Strange," he said after returning to his seat.

"It's just a box."

"It's not the box; it's how it got here."

"Yeah? You picked it up off the floor. What's strange about that?"

Matt's eyes swept the room with a conspiratorial glance, then leaned over and whispered to Jeff: "About ten minutes ago, some gal approached the gentleman's table and handed him the box. Now, I couldn't see his face, but from the set of his shoulders and the way he stuffed it into his jacket pocket I could tell he was not happy about it. The box fell out when he picked up his jacket."

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"So, the box belongs to the gentleman, whoever he is."

"Hey, sweetheart!" Matt called to the waitress. She walked over to the table and said:

"Is there anything I can get for you?"

"Well, I'd like a date, but I'll settle for the name of the gentleman who was sitting over there."

"Lord Gregory Carmichael," the waitress replied.

Jeff choked on his tea. "Lord Carmichael?"

"Yes," Matt said with a smug look. "Thanks, honey"

"Here's your check," she said, putting it on the table and hurrying off.

"I wonder what's inside?" Matt said, his attention back on the box.

"You'd best leave it alone. Lord Carmichael is not someone you want to cross."

"Too late." Matt pulled a chessman out of the box and stared at it. "Huh!"

"Looks like a knight."

"Yep," Jeff agreed.

"Why would someone give just one chessman? And why a knight?"

"I don't know, but I would put it back in the box and put the box back where I found it."

"Where's your sense of adventure?"

"You have it, don't you remember?"

Matt rolled the chessman between his fingers thoughtfully.

"No," Jeff said in exasperation.

"I think I'm going to wander over to Lord Carmichaels. I'm sure he'd want this back. There might even be a reward in it."

"It's your hide, my brother, not mine."

* * *

Inspector Banerjee slid another file over to Inspector Robson.

"This case has only one of the factors," he said.

Robson scanned the case summary.

"The card with a chessman imprint on one side, and a message on the other." Searching the stacks of case files, she located the one with an index card labeled 'Card Only' and placed the file under the card.

"There doesn't seem to be any pattern to the occurrence of the factors," she continued. "All the stacks are about the same size. Do we have a complete list of all factors?"

Banerjee consulted his notes. "I have four factors: a chess piece in a box; a business card with a chessman imprint and a message; a meeting with a person identified as a chess piece; and a courier for the Checking Piece Courier Service."

"Mm. The only common theme to those factors is chess. Of the sixteen possible combinations, we've got cases with twelve. It is interesting that the combinations we haven't seen yet are those containing both a chess piece and a business card."

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"Yes. I believe that may be due to incomplete data on the cases. I have no reason to exclude those possibilities."

"The same could be said of any of the combinations."

"Unfortunately so. Until we understand the underlying reason why these factors occur as they do, we cannot begin to solve the cases."

Robson exhaled through pursed lips, her cheeks puffing briefly; a habit she had when she was feeling anxious. In contrast, Banerjee observed the process with enviable composure.

"I need more coffee," Robson said, standing up with a sudden motion.

"Perhaps a break would be in order."

"Sounds good to me. I'll be back in a few."

* * *

Lord Carmichael's villa was immaculately Spartan. Clean, precise and simple. It presented the image of a man with an attention to detail and no interest in niceties; a focused man not to be reckoned with.

Matt approached the front door with his usual oblivious style and rang the bell. He found himself facing a very stern butler, who merely scowled in greeting.

"Hi, uh, I was at Gupta's Café earlier and saw this box fall out of Lord Carmichael's jacket." Matt fumbled for the box and showed it to the butler.

"One moment." The butler closed the door, and it was several minutes before he opened it again.

"This way."

Matt entered the foyer. The butler closed the door and led Matt to a sitting room on the left. The butler left without a word, and Matt found himself waiting once more. He was beginning to think he'd been forgotten when Lord Carmichael strode into the sitting room.

"You have something for me," he said in a perfunctory tone.

Matt, for once, was at a loss for words. He turned to reply and froze -- the man could be Matt's twin. Lord Carmichael seemed not to notice the resemblance.

"I don't have all day." The curtness in his voice jolted Matt back to his task.

"Sorry," Matt stood and fumbled the box from his pocket. Lord Carmichael took the box and placed it in his own pocket without even looking at it.

"It fell out of your pocket at Gupta's Café," Matt said, fidgeting under Lord Carmichael's steady and silent gaze.

"Yes," he said. "You strike me as a man in search of adventure."

"I guess so."

"I have a proposition for you. I could make it worth your while."

"Sure."

Lord Carmichael slowly circled the room as he talked.

"I have an – appearance – I must make tomorrow night that I would rather not. It seems to me that you could do that for me."

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"How would I pull that off? The minute I speak to anyone the game would be up."

"It is not necessary for you to interact much with anyone. It would be a simple matter to coach you."

"What do you want me to do?"

"The Phantom of the Opera opens tomorrow night, and it would be improper if I were not seen."

"Ah. So I make the appearance and keep my lips buttoned while I'm there."

"Essentially."

"You can count on me."

"Excellent. Return here tomorrow after tea."

The butler appeared as if on cue and led Matt out. He returned to the sitting room to find Lord Carmichael still standing in the same spot, a slight smile playing on his lips.

"Sir?"

"He will do nicely as a lightning rod."

"The Traders?"

"Precisely. Now, if I can just figure out what to do about the King's Knight." Lord Carmichael pulled the box out of his pocket, tossed it into the fire place, and then walked back to his study.

* * *

"You aren't seriously thinking of going through with this!" Jeff exclaimed.

"You worry too much, my dear brother."

They were sitting on the patio outside a local diner in Park Circus.

"Matt, I swear I'll--"

"We're not kids anymore, Jeff. You don't need to protect me."

"You're acting like a fool."

"It's my act, I'll play it the way I want."

"You'll get yourself killed."

Matt rolled his eyes.

"Anything more for you?" the waitress asked as she stopped at their table.

Jeff shook his head, not trusting to open his mouth.

"Just the check, honey. Thanks." Matt winked and smiled his most charming smile.

The waitress ignored him and set the padded guest check holder on the table.

"Have a pleasant evening, gentlemen. Please come again." Something in the tone of her voice suggested to Matt that she would rather he didn't come again.

Matt picked up the check and opened the holder.

"Huh. What's this?"

"What, now?"

"Well, I'll be. It's a business card with a picture of a chess knight on one side. The other side says 'Beware the Phantom'. This is pretty cool."

"I'm telling you, this is a big mistake."

"It's probably a warning about the show tomorrow night." Matt's eyes glowed as his imagination whirled with the possibilities.

"Don't go. Matt, if someone is warning you, perhaps you should listen to them."

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"Jeff, you're such a worry-wart. Nothing's going to happen. Ready?" Matt tossed some cash onto the table, making sure to leave a generous tip. Both men left the diner, still bickering about whether or not Matt should go to the show tomorrow.

* * *

Inspector Robson felt weary. She stood for a moment outside of the Kolkata Police Station and felt the weight of it on her shoulders. After spending most of the night poring over the case files for the umpteenth time, she was no closer to understanding. The last thing she felt like doing was to walking back in again so soon.

Sergeant Das greeted her as she came in the door.

"A message for you arrived this morning," he said handing her a plain white business-sized envelope.

Robson took it with her free hand and studied the front side. Except for her name, there was nothing on it to indicate where it came from.

"Who left it?"

"A courier, without speaking a word."

Robson's eyebrows rose at that. She headed for her office and tore open the envelope as soon as she had some privacy. Inside were two tickets to opening night of The Phantom of the Opera, and a business card with an imprint of a chess piece – a knight.

Inspector Banerjee tapped on her door.

"Sgt. Das informs me we had an unusual delivery this morning."

"You could say that." She handed him the contents of the envelope. "It seems we're to make an appearance at the opening tonight."

"Indeed. This is most puzzling."

"You can say that again."

"I'm sorry?"

"Just a figure of speech. Apparently, something is going to happen that we need to see. Other than the show."

"It would seem so. We could surmise that those in charge at the Checking Piece Courier Service wish us to prevent that 'something'."

"Yes, but what? I must admit I'm confused by this sudden turn. It's the first time we've ever received a communication from them."

"We will know tonight."

"Yes, but there are too many unanswered questions."

* * *

Matt felt strange in the formal wear. Luckily, there was very little for him to do. Watch the play, and answer questions with either a glare or a one-word dismissal. Lord Carmichael had filled him in with short list of appropriate words. Most likely, no one would ask him any questions. Lord Carmichael's reputation for conversation was well known. All that mattered was that he was seen at the play.

The seats for Inspectors Banerjee and Robson were well placed. They had an excellent view of most of the

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theater exits, but they had no idea what to watch. All they could do was keep a watchful eye as the play progressed.

"It'll be intermission soon," whispered Robson.

"They'll make their move either then or after the show."

"That seems reasonable," Banerjee whispered back. He glance around and caught the attention of the constables. They nodded and assumed a more alert posture, spreading out a bit more to cover the theater.

The curtain fell, the audience applauded, and the room lights brightened. Too many people moving about, thought Robson to herself, biting her lip. Can't watch them all.

Matt steeled himself for his role, and left his balcony seat. He stopped for a glass of wine, then began wandering around the theater. He want to make sure he was seen, but he was also curious about the stage. Unobtrusively, he worked his way up to get a closer look.

"Did you hear that?" asked Robson, her eyes scanning the theatre.

Banerjee pointed to a back exit. "It seems there may be an altercation." He signaled for back-up and they ran to the exit. As they approached, two men dropped a third and bolted out the door. Robson chased after the two, while Banerjee knelt by the fallen man.

"Are you alright, Lord Carmichael?"

"I, uh," Matt started, and then passed out.

Robson returned with a handful of constables and the two men in handcuffs.

"I'll get these two down to the station."

"Very well. I'll meet you there with Lord Carmichael as soon as he regains consciousness."

* * *

Banerjee was standing outside the interrogation room when Robson came out. After closing the door, she said:

"This one finally broke. He and his friend work for one of the trade unions. It seems Lord Carmichael's been putting pressure on them, and these two thugs were hired to beat some sense into him."

"Indeed? This case is even more interesting. The gentleman they were going to 'beat some sense into' is not Lord Gregory Carmichael."

"He's not?" The news took Robson by surprise. This was an unexpected wrinkle.

"His name is Matt Kroger. He was hired by Lord Carmichael to attend the opening tonight in his stead."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Hm. I don't quite see how it fits into any of our patterns so far."

"This the first time we have received a message from the Checking Piece Courier Service."

"Could they have been warning us that an attempt was going to be made on Lord Carmichael?"

"That would seem a logical conclusion."

"But, why?"

"Perhaps they did not want to be implicated."

"Meaning they don't want us to think they had anything to do with it."

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"Yes."

"Well, at least that theory covers the facts if this case."

"In this case, yes. However, there now seems to be a discrepancy in their actions. In previous cases, they have always acted against the nobility. This is the first case in which they have acted to protect a noble."

"True. But they have also never resorted to violence. In this case, they acted to prevent violence."

"How is Mr. Kroger doing?" Robson asked, changing the subject.

"He is quite discomposed. As soon as he has calmed, I'll allow him to leave. We have no reason to detain him."

"I don't suppose he could tell us anything about Checking Piece?"

"He had never heard of the agency."

"I suppose our next move is to talk to Lord Carmichael."

"Perhaps it would be best if you met with Lord Carmichael tomorrow. I will make a visit to the Centre of India Trade Unions."

"Okay. I'm going home to get some rest."

* * *

Jeff arrived at the Kolkata Police Station to find Matt sitting with a disconsolate look on his face and his shoulders slumped.

"I told you not to get involved! Look what's happened."

Matt looked up and took a deep breath. He straightened his shoulders and replaced his stricken look with his usual, care-free one. Standing up, he walked over to his brother and clapped him on the back.

"It was nothing," Matt said, mentally shrugging off the events of the evening.

"What do you mean, nothing? You could have been killed!"

"Nonsense. You exaggerate the situation as usual, my brother."

"As usual, my brother, you minimize the situation!"

"Ah, you know what? I think I'm gonna head over to the pub for a drink." Matt changed direction and walked away without another word. Jeff stood for a moment, staring at his back, before shaking his head and continuing home.

* * *

Inspector Robson waited in Lord Carmichael's sitting room, hiding her impatience. It was clear that he intended to set his own terms for this meeting. She could play that game.

When Lord Carmichael entered the room, he found Robson inspecting the contents of the mantle piece. He stood watching her for several minutes, waiting for her to speak first.

"I'm a very busy man," he finally said.

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Robson picked up a small objet d'art and took her time admiring it. When she sensed Lord Carmichael was about to speak again, she put it down and face him.

"Are you, now, Lord Carmichael?"

"I have no time for games."

Robson walked slowly to the other end of the mantle, and then said: "Is that what you think this is? A game?"

"I don't have time for--"

"No, I don't suppose you do. It's clear to me why you chose Matt Kroger to take your place last night."

"I don't see that's any of your business."

"Tell me why I shouldn't charge you now as an accessory to attempted murder."

"Murder!"

"Ah. I'm sure you lack the skill to act so surprised. What do you know of the events at the theater last night?"

Lord Carmichael said nothing; glowering at her from the opposite side of the room.

"Nothing? What is your standing with the trade unions?"

"I'm am not obliged to answer your questions."

"I'm afraid you are. I am investigating an attempted murder under the full authority of the Chief Minister's Office. You can either answer my questions or you can answer theirs."

Lord Carmichael sighed. "Very well. It's no secret that I oppose the objectives of the trade unions. I had reason to believe they might attempt to dissuade me from my views. I believed it prudent to absent myself from certain functions as a precautionary measure."

"So you hired Mr. Kroger to take your place?"

"He was an unexpected convenience."

"Hm. What do you know of the Checking Piece Courier Service?"

"Nothing."

"No? Mr. Kroger told us about the chessman."

"Indeed? It is my belief that they are in league with the trade unions."

"Have you received any threats from them?"

"I would say more like strong suggestions."

"Strong enough that you felt it necessary to hire a double?"

"Purely precautionary, I assure you. A man in my position takes no chances."

"And there's nothing more you'd care to tell me about them?"

"Nothing."

Robson could tell by the set of his mouth that she wouldn't get anything more from him this round.

"Very well, Lord Carmichael." She crossed the room and stopped at the door. "I appreciate your cooperation. I will see myself out."

* * *

Robson was in the middle of a chuckle when she looked up from her desk to see Banerjee about to knock on her door. She waved him in as she stifled the chuckle.

"Is there a joke?" Banerjee asked.

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"I was just thinking about my interview with Lord Carmichael." She noticed his confused look and continued: "I'll tell you a little secret about myself if you promise not to tell anyone."

"I cannot promise without knowing the nature of the secret."

Robson smiled. "Okay. I'll tell you anyway. I think it's fun to provoke the men of the Court."

"Indeed? Why is that so?"

"For the most part, they are arrogant and condescending. They think they rule the world. I guess that's true, to some extent. The Lords are the worst of the lot. They run around like two-year-olds. I think they need to be knocked down a peg or two once in a while."

"It does not trouble you to behave in such a manner?" Banerjee was clearly troubled by the behavior.

She shrugged her shoulders. "In London, it's expected that you behave that way, especially if you're in law enforcement. The criminal element will quickly get the better of you."

"I'm sure I would not do well in London."

"It's a very different world."

"As you say. Were you able learn anything from Lord Carmichael?"

Robson shook her head.

"Ah. What is it you learned?"

"Hm? I didn't learn anything. As far as he's concerned, Checking Piece and the trader unions are one in the same. He takes their threats only seriously enough to take 'precautionary' measures, nothing more."

"I see. We remain no closer to an answer."

"No. The Chief Minister's Office is not going to be happy. They would like to see more progress."

"Their primary concern is the safety of the nobles."

"Currently, yes. That may change with the next election."

"I suspect so. People are increasingly discontent. There is a chance that a change in political power may occur."

"It would certainly be interesting to see if that power can be wrested from the aristocracy. The Crown has managed to maintain considerable control for a very long time." Robson paused, and then realized that Banerjee was holding back. "You know something!"

Banerjee shifted slightly, the only sign that she was right.

"Perhaps. I am not yet certain."

"You heard something at CITU today."

"I am not yet certain. I must ponder the information. However, it seemed the council members were hinting at a possible attempt to influence the constituency and, indirectly, the legislators."

"Mm. Well, Indians are in the majority in India. It's only a matter of time before they unite to elect a native Chief Minister."

"Yes. Until then, we still have our chessman."

"That we do."



The Queen's Bishop

Roger Kinsbury wandered around Diamond Harbour port after debarking from the passenger ship. He didn't mind this down time while he decided the next leg of his adventure; it gave him a chance to absorb his new surroundings. Roger stopped like every other tourist to enjoy the spectacular view of the river. The sun was beginning to set, and the sky turned a magnificent orange before fading through the purples and blues.

"It is beautiful, yes?"

Roger turned to see a rough-looking Indian man, perhaps about ten years older than himself.

"Beautiful, yes," Roger agreed.

"You are touring, yes?"

Roger shrugged his shoulders.

The man smiled to himself. "Perhaps you are looking for something else?"

Roger turned and leaned back against the rail.

"What do you have in mind?"

"The bus for Kolkata leaves in a few minutes. I have some work to do there; I could use the help."

"Sure, let's do it. I'm Roger Kinsbury, by the way," Roger held out his hand.

The Indian took his hand and said: "Aamir Khandelwal."

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They walked over to the bus station and bought tickets. The ride was an uneventful hour - Aamir wasn't much of a talker. They arrived in Kolkata, and Aamir got off the bus at the Kalighat Metro Center. Roger followed Aamir onto a tram for a ten minute ride to the Park Circus Tram Depot. They got off the tram and entered the Zeeshan Restaurant nearby.

Aamir walked in and headed straight for the bar. He pointed to an empty table off to the side. "Wait for me there," he said. Aamir walked over to the other side of the bar where he had a very animated discussion with two other men. Roger ordered a drink while he waited.

"You are able to pay for sleeping arrangements, I trust?" Aamir asked when he returned.

Roger took a deep pull from his drink and nodded. "Yes."

"Good." Aamir pulled out a well-worn tourist map.

"We are here," he said, tapping the map.

"Here is Hotel Camac." His finger traced a path from the restaurant to the hotel.

"At noon tomorrow, meet me here." His finger traced a path from the hotel to Park Circus Market, the Beck Bagan Row side.

"There is a shoe market at this corner. Noon."

Roger studied the map. "Okay," he said, folding the map and putting it into his pocket.

"Good." Aamir clapped him on the back and left.

Roger stayed for a few more drinks, listening to the crowd. A few hours of absorbing the local culture was more than enough, and headed for the hotel.

* * *

"Your pardon, sir. Would you come with me?"

Roger froze for a microsecond, hoping the security guard wouldn't notice the small hesitation. Taking his hand off the shoes he had just replaced on the rack, Roger turned to look at the guard.

"Excuse me?" he asked in a mild tone.

"Come with me, please." This was more of a directive; not as polite as the first time. Roger shrugged my shoulders and started walking in the direction the guard indicated. The last thing he needed was to cause a scene. Going along quietly would buy some time. Getting caught was not part of the plan. Out of the corner of his eye, Roger noticed the guard picking up the pair of shoes.

They stopped just outside the security office at the front of the store. A burly man filled the doorway with a name tag on his chest which proclaimed "Frank Reilly - Store Manager." He turned his head and stared at Roger.

"You sure this is the guy," Frank's question was more of a statement, and directed to the security guard. Roger glanced from Frank's stare to the young man, who ducked his head in acknowledgment. His badge said "Jeff Sanders."

"Hmp. Hardly strikes me as the sort." He carefully inspected the shoes Jeff handed him. Handing the shoes back, his gaze shifted to a spot over Jeff's shoulder. Down the main aisle, another security guard was escorting a rough-looking man towards the office.

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Roger bit his lip, trying to hide that fact that he'd seen this guy before. Had seen him try on the same pair of shoes Roger had been caught placing back on the rack. His hand slipped into his pocket and fingered the business card he found in that pair of shoes. Come what may, he could not let these goons get this card. His buddy had gone through a lot of trouble to lift this card from its rightful owner.

Mr. Rough-guy was playing it cool. At least, up until the point he reached the edge of the women's department.

"Aiyyahahgaa!!!!!" Shrieking like a banshee, he started flailing around and threw himself into a rack of dresses. The rack fell over with a loud clatter. The screaming and flailing continued with such unbounded energy that Frank and Jeff, after a moment of stunned silence, jumped to the rescue.

"This is it," Roger thought. "This is my moment." He turned and ran.

"Hey, stop!" Frank yelled as Roger dodged through the crowd and ran out the door.

Roger ran down a nearby alleyway and found himself in another section of the marketplace. Noticing a public restroom across the street, he ducked inside to catch his breath.

After waiting what he thought would be long enough, Roger left the bathroom and ran straight into the arms of two police officers.

* * *

"Master Roger Kinsbury," Inspector Banerjee announced as he entered the interrogation room with Inspector Robson. He carried a file, which he handed to Robson as they sat down.

"Of Kinsbury Manor, Gloucester?" She frowned at the young man sitting on the other side of the table.

"Yes. What of it?" he responded.

Robson made a show of opening the file and took her time glancing over the pages within.

"Looking for adventure, huh? It seems you're a bit of a black sheep."

"And proud of it! Who needs the dull and drear of society, anyway?"

"Where'd you get this?" Robson tossed a business card onto the table. One side was imprinted with an image of a chessman and the words "The Queen's Bishop." Handwritten on the backside was "Show this card at St. Paul's Cathedral."

Roger slouched into his chair and crossed his arms, saying nothing.

"According to the report," Robson continued, "the store security officer saw you take it out of a shoe. It seems your partner in crime, a Mr. Aamir Khandelwal, placed it in that shoe."

"Is that right?"

"Do you work for the Checking Piece Courier Service?" demanded Robson.

"Never heard of them."

"It would be most helpful for you to cooperate," Banerjee suggested.

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"Why should I?"

Robson shared a glance with Banerjee, and then they both left the room.

"I think we could put him to use," Robson said.

"In what way?"

"We'll give him the card back on the condition that he reports to us everything that happens."

"That seems risky. Master Kinsbury is a civilian."

"Yes, a civilian who's bound to find trouble with or without our help. This will give us a chance to find out more about the Checking Piece Courier Service."

In all the time she'd been in Kolkata on this assignment, Robson observed that Banerjee's countenance always remained passive. At most, she would catch a glimpse of a fleeting expression on his face.

"Very well," he acquiesced. Robson thought she saw a hint of resignation in his face.

They re-entered the room and sat down, Robson resuming her glare.

"Perhaps we can help each other, Master Kinsbury," Banerjee said.

"Yeah? How?"

"We return the card, and in exchange you report to us the events that transpire."

"What's in it for me?"

"For one thing, you get your card and your freedom," Robson said.

"We can offer you some measure of protection in this endeavor."

"Yeah?"

Robson watched Banerjee's reaction with amusement. He certainly struggled with understanding English mannerisms. That probably explained some of his reactions to her. There were times she felt he'd rather she went away.

"Sure, what the heck? I'll do it."

Robson scowled. Banerjee picked the card up off the table and handed it to Roger.

"You are free to go," Banerjee said.

Roger got up and edged out of the room, expecting at any moment that they would change their minds.

After he left, Banerjee turned to Robson and said:

"I hope you are right."

"Trust me. I've done this before. I usually get a good short run of it."

"Short run'?"

"For a short period of time, I get a good response. The source usually cools off after about a week or so."

Banerjee nodded. "A most interesting tactic, this 'good cop, bad cop'."

"It's too bad it didn't work on Mr. Khandelwal. I would love to know who he got the card from."

"Mr. Khandelwal is a seasoned criminal, whereas Master Kinsbury is a novice."

"From the looks of his record, Kinsbury seems to be more interested in adolescent rebellion than actual crime."

"If that is so, I do not understand why he agreed to cooperate."

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"It gives him a chance to stay in the game and play spy. He'll milk it for as much as he can before moving on to something else." Robson smiled and said: "Get all he can out of it."

"The English have the most unusual expressions."

"It's a matter of what you've grown up with. I could say the same for Indians."

"Admittedly so."

* * *

Luckily, the police had taken Roger to the Karaya Police Station - a short walk from the Zeeshan Restaurant. He decided to wander back to the restaurant for a late lunch. The dining room was empty, but he could see Aamir over at the bar talking with the same men from last night. Aamir noticed Roger and, after a few minutes, sat down at his table.

"You are okay, yes?"

"Okay, yes," Roger said. "I still have the card." He began to reach into his pocket, but Aamir gestured frantically.

"Please do not," he said. "You must not speak of it."

"Why? Does it have anything to do with the Checking Piece--"

"Please! They have eyes and ears everywhere. Our lives will mean nothing if they find out."

Roger leaned forward. "I think you've got a little explaining to do. I'm just a mark to you, aren't I?"

"I'm sorry. This was not to happen. We expected the police would keep the card."

"What's this all about!"

"The royalty are troubled by... this group. They are paying good money for others to run interference. We like the money, but we don't like to take chances. We find a mark and set them up."

"Unbelievable."

Aamir said nothing.

"Well," Roger said, wiping his mouth and dropping the napkin on his plate. "I'll thank you to pay for my meal. It's the least you can do."

Roger left Aamir sitting at the table.

* * *

St. Paul's Cathedral looked like so many others Roger had been to in London. The interior was decorated for St. Valentine's Day – the chancel was filled with carnations in various shades of red, from vermilion to burgundy. An altar boy, attired in the same theme, was at the pulpit working on the microphone.

"Pardon me, boy," Roger said.

The young man looked up, but said nothing.

"I was given this card."

He took the card and glanced at it. Handing it back, he pointed down a hallway, signaled left and held up three fingers. It took Roger several minutes, and a dozen more gestures from the boy, before he realized the boy was

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mute and attempting to tell him to go to the third door on the left down the hall.

Roger knocked on the closed door. When a buzzer sounded, he pushed it open and stepped inside the room. It was empty except for a simple desk and chair. As soon as the door shut itself, the phone on the desk started ringing.

Curious, he answered it.

"Master Roger Kinsbury," a garbled female voice said through the receiver.

"Yes? Who is this?"

"You may call me The Queen's Bishop."

"How very quaint."

"You find that amusing?"

"Oh, very!"

"Mr. Kinsbury, I don't think you realize what you've gotten yourself into the middle of. It would be wise for you to leave Kolkata peacefully."

"Perhaps you'd care to enlighten me."

"We have no reason to trust you."

"I have no reason to leave. And you can't force me to go."

"We could make it very unpleasant for you to remain."

"What are you going to do, kill me?"

"That would serve no purpose. And we prefer not to kill. Intimidation and fear go a long way."

"Huh. Well, do your best, then."

"Do you think this is a game, Mr. Kinsbury?"

"I don't know what else it could be! The Queen's Bishop? A card with a chessman on it? The Checking Piece Courier Service? So tell me, what's the next move?"

"Perhaps you should reconsider your position."

"Indeed? Oh, that's rich! Do you know any other clichés?"

"You've been warned."

"Wonderful! Absolutely wonderful! Wish I could stay and hear more of your delightful witticisms. Good day to you."

Roger hung up the phone and left the room, chuckling all the way back down the hall. He stopped at the pulpit and walked around the chancel, admiring the altar boy's work.

He chuckled all the way back to the Kolkata Police Headquarters.

"Is Inspector Robson in?" he asked.

Sgt. Das looked up at Roger and frowned at the silly grin in his face.

"May I tell her your name?"

"Roger Kinsbury."

Das spoke into the phone for a minute, and then turned back to Roger.

"Inspector Robson's office is the first door on the left down this hall." Das indicated the hallway to his right.

"Thanks, buddy!"

Das' frown deepened, but he said nothing as Roger walked away from the front desk.

Robson looked up from her desk when he appeared at her door.

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"Come in, Master Kinsbury. Have a seat." She pointed to a chair across from her desk.

Roger, still suppressing amusement, sat in the designated chair. Robson watched him silently for a few moments. He seemed a different man from the reluctant hooligan of last night.

"So, tell me what you know." She was sitting erect at her desk with an intense look on her face and her pencil ready.

"It was all quite a show! She was like an illusionist, this 'Queens Rook,' as she calls herself. Revealing to the audience only what she chooses. Marvelous!"

"Yes. Please tell me what happened."

"Oh, well, I took the card to the cathedral. A mute altar boy directed me to an empty room. I spoke to a woman by telephone for a few moments, and then I left." Roger repeated the conversation to the best of his memory.

"That is all?" She didn't sound very satisfied.

"Oh, quite. Amusing, isn't it?" Honestly, I don't know what more she could want, Roger thought to himself.

Robson stared up at the ceiling in frustration. This man could tell her nothing more than she already knew.

"Thank you for your report, Master Kinsbury," she finally said, bringing her gaze back down from the ceiling.

"You are quite welcome! Good day to you."

* * *

It was late in the afternoon and close to happy hour. Roger started to head back to the Zeeshan Restaurant, but then had second thoughts. He really didn't want to run into Aamir again; he'd lost his interest in that game. Instead, he hopped onto a tram at Park Circus Market. The tram was heading west. Roger just watched out the window as it moved along from stop to stop. Eventually, the tram reached the Fort William stop. Something nagged him in the back of his mind, so he got off at that stop.

He sat on the bench for a while, trying to remember what it was about Fort William. It came to him all of a sudden - he vaguely recalled a conversation among a couple of the patrons at the next table over when he was drinking at the Zeeshan. He had heard mention of Fort William and pawns, and thought it odd that those two topics would be part of the same conversation. He thought he had imagined it, and passed his attention on to another conversation.

Somehow, it was beginning to make sense. If there was a Queen's Bishop, why not pawns? Low men on the totem pole, so to speak. Maybe that was the tie-in with the Checking Piece Courier Service. Did these 'pawns' work as couriers? Was Fort William the headquarters?

There was only one way to find out. Roger got up from the bench, walked across the street and into Fort William. Just inside was another bench. After a short wait, a trolley came along and stopped, letting Roger on. Eventually, the trolley came to an interesting looking stop. Roger got off and looked around. A sign nearby identified

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the stop as Kalyani Arcade. He walked around a bit, and soon discovered the Stalemate Pub.

"Looks like a great place!" Roger said to himself, and walked over to the pub.

A very strange thing happened, though, when he entered the room. There were about a dozen people scattered about. The room fell completely silent and everyone just looked at him. Roger walked up to the bar with two dozen eyes on boring into him. He felt a little spooked. The bartender stood shaking his head slightly.

"We don't serve your kind here," the bartender said.

"I'm sorry?"

Several chairs scraped on the floor. Roger turned and saw the denizens of the pub converging on him.

"There's only two ways outta here," the bartender said. "Voluntarily or involuntarily."

Roger knew better than to hang around where he was this unwelcome.

"Very well," he sighed. The crowd parted, making a path for him back to the door.

It's time to say good-bye to Kolkata, he thought to himself as he boarded the tram. It's no fun here anymore.



The King's Bishop

Author's Note: This is actually the first story I ever wrote in this series. Some of the back story has been pulled out and moved into the prologue, but there is still a significant amount that might help make sense of the previous stories.

"The Lady Sandford Edington III," Margo whispered into the mirror. "Wife to Viceroy Sandford Edington III of India."

She chuckled sardonically. "I hope she's happy with the title," she told her reflection. "I've got the man and his money, without the obligations."

Bunching her long, black hair on top of her head, she swayed seductively, half-naked, in front of the mirror. Her black silk robe, a dark contrast to her milk-white skin, was draped over her left arm. Her pastel sleeping gown had fallen to below her waist, hanging on for dear life to her left hip.

The life of a mistress certainly had its rewards: all of the money and none of the responsibility. Sandford was very generous with her allowance; she wanted for nothing. And she had the freedom to wander the city and spend as she pleased. No formal dinners or government functions to attend. And all for the small price of quick and

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predictable sex once or twice a week. Margo would not trade places with the Lady Edington.

Even these very nice rooms in the heart of the city were paid for. She eyed the small bedroom reflected in her mirror. There were two doors on either side of the unmade bed behind her; one opening into a small closet, the other leading into the front sitting room. The room was dimly lit from the sun shining through the sheer curtains covering the window beside the closet. The eastern light cast the whitewashed plaster walls in an odd shade of off-yellow.

A knock on the door to the sitting room startled Margo. She hastily pulled her gown up and slipped back into her robe, tying it on the side.

"Who's there?" she called through the door.

"Jake," a familiar voice replied.

Margo unbolted the door and opened it. Standing in the hall was a craggy old man. His clothes hung on him loosely like discarded rags. She beckoned him in and pointed to a wooden chair in the corner. The sitting room was modestly furnished with a few comfortable chairs and a book table. An oriental rug covered the finished wood floor. A picture window on the wall opposite the door looked out onto the street below.

Jake lurched across the threshold and sat in the indicated chair, resting his cap on his knee. He smiled a toothless smile. Margo closed the door, then walked over and drew the curtains. She turned to face him.

"What are you doing here, Jake?" she demanded. "You know it's not safe to come around my rooms, especially in the day time."

"Tis about yer john, mum," he slurred in a very Cockney accent.

"What about him?" she asked, ignoring his reference about Sandford. She was a mistress, not a prostitute, but then Jake didn't understand the difference.

"Can't says I know, mum, but The Bishop is want to see ya about him."

The Bishop! He was not, as you might think, an actual bishop of the church. The Bishop was part of a secret order, and his official title was "The King's Bishop," taken from the name of a piece in a popular board game. She had worked for a while as a messenger, "pawns" they sometimes called themselves, for the Checking Piece Courier Service and had delivered many messages for him. If you believed the word on the street, this secret order was actually an underground resistance group plotting to overthrow the Crown.

The Bishop wanted to talk to her! Could that mean...? A look of interest flitted briefly in her eyes, and her lips pouted slightly.

"Tell The Bishop I will be in for confession this afternoon. Now, you must go!" Margo walked over to the door and opened it a crack, peeking up and down the hall. Jake shuffled over to the door and stood next to her. Seeing that the hall was clear, she opened the door and guided him out, then closed the door quickly behind him, locking it.

She stood for several moments deep in thought, her hand resting on the bolt. The Bishop! This could only mean one thing. Margo sashayed into her bedroom and

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picked up her toiletry bag, then left her rooms for the communal washroom at the south end of the hall. She took her time, reflecting on the unexpected. Fate had landed a unique opportunity on her doorstep.

Margo, like most of the rest of the world, favored a very pagan outlook towards life in defiance of the autocratic presence of New England. She favored it only because it kept her life simple, free and joyful. No one, especially the riff-raff she hung out with in Kolkata, would ever have guessed that she had been born and raised a Lady and had studied history at the University of London. Her keen and perceptive mind had quickly seen through the pretentious society. So, while on a holiday tour through the East Indies with her family, she managed to disappear. After years of struggle, she was now, at the age of 27, right where she wanted to be.

Margo roused herself from her thoughts, and padded back to her rooms. No time for that now. Have to get ready to meet The Bishop. She dressed conservatively, taking care to select comfortable walking shoes, and left her rooms.

The first order of business was lunch, then The Bishop. She walked a few blocks down the street to Gupta's Café.

"Sathya!" Margo cried, seeing her friend.

"Margo! Good to see you." Sathya was the owner of Gupta's. She was a petite woman, much shorter than Margo. Her dark eyes were bright and alert, and her short hair gave the impression of a young boy rather than a mature woman.

They hugged briefly, and then Sathya led Margo to an empty booth.

"How's business?" Margo asked.

"Good," Sathya said. "I just received this morning that delicacy you are so fond of."

"Perfect!" Margo said. Sathya patted Margo's hand and headed off to the kitchen.

Margo's reflective mood returned as she watched the hustle and bustle of vendors and shoppers on the street outside. Her thoughts were interrupted when Sathya, returning from the kitchen laden a plate of Cumberland Sausage with mashed potatoes, and a side of steamed peas and carrots.

"Ah!!" Margo said, inhaling deeply.

"'Bangers and mash' as you say," Sathya said, smiling.

"I don't know who your supplier is, but this is the best sausage!"

Sathya left to greet another customer who had entered the Café. Margo dug into her meal with gusto, her mind totally in the present moment. When she finished, she noticed that the Café was bustling; the lunch hour had begun. Margo quickly freshened up, waved to Sathya, and headed back into the street.

Her next destination was a small church in a dark neighborhood a few miles away in Black Town. She was in no rush; she rarely ever was. She liked to enjoy the journey. Seeing the sights, hearing the sounds, smelling the scents; that's what made her feel alive. She loved that she had the freedom to take the time.

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The neighborhood was dark in more ways than one. It was dirty and run down; the paint of the houses seemed to be made from the very grime on the streets. The sun hid its baleful gaze from this place, almost as if a perpetual cloud hung over the land. It was a poor neighborhood, but a safe one for residents. The people here looked out for each other, and strangers rarely ventured in. Margo knew they knew she was here by leave of The Bishop, and would not bother her.

She stood before the church that she had only heard about through hearsay. Enough of her old friends at Checking Piece had talked about The Bishop's church over drinks at the Stalemate Pub that she knew what to do. Enter the main door, turn right, follow the hall, enter the last confessional on the left. No one ever talked about what was said. If they did, they did not live for long.

She walked through the main door and stopped to look at the hall. Dirty stained glass windows lined either side of two narrow columns of pews. Somehow, sunlight managed to find its way through, giving the glass an eerie and mystical subliminal glow. Margo turned right and followed the dusty hallway. About midway along on the left side, she saw the confessionals. The door to the last one opened with a creak that echoed in the empty hall. She sat down inside and closed the door. After a few moments, the curtain on the left wall slid aside. She could see a very faint silhouette through the grill.

"I, uh, it's been a while since I've had confession," Margo said.

"Unnecessary, my daughter," an indistinct voice said. "This is not a real confession. Listen; do not speak

except to answer my questions. Correct answers are 'Yes, Father' and 'No Father'. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Father." Margo said.

"Sir Edington has become a nuisance, and it has become necessary to take unusual steps. We will make it worth your while to cooperate. If not, speak not of this to anyone and you will be left alone. What is your choice?"

Margo's mind raced. Clearly, this secret order planned to kill Sir Edington. Obviously, that would be much easier with the cooperation of his mistress. If she cooperated, she would be an accessory to murder. If not, she would have to live with the foreknowledge of his murder; technically, still, an accessory.

"I understand your hesitation," the voice said.

"Your role will be merely to provide the opening. Another will complete the act. What is your choice?"

So they would use her rendezvous with the viceroy and kill him in her rooms! She took a deep breath and replied:

"Yes, Father."

"At your next engagement, after he has undressed, make an excuse to leave the bed and walk into the sitting room. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Father."

The curtain slid closed over the grill, and she felt the absence of the voice. She sat for a moment, breathing slowly to control the shake in her limbs. The path of life was filled with interesting twists and turns! This was almost more of an adventure than she cared for. Almost, but not quite! Her minor part in this drama would be an

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exciting experience. Since she was not going to actively participate, there was nothing to bother her conscience. He would die whether or not she participated, so why not get a piece of the action? Besides, she was starting to get bored with him; it was time for a change.

The rest of the afternoon passed into late evening. Margo did not even notice. She sat at the windowsill in her rooms, staring out at the streets below. The bags by her feet told her she'd been shopping, and the fullness of her belly told her she had eaten. The sound of paper swishing along the floor broke her trance. She looked and saw an envelope just inside the door. From where she sat, she could see the wax seal of Edington House on it.

She walked over to it, and stooped to pick it up.

"This envelope," she mused grimly, "marks the date of his death." She slid a finger under the flap and broke the seal. The page inside was folded neatly in half, as usual. She already knew what it would say. Sir Edington was very consistent. She always received his notice the evening before. He would be over tomorrow night after supper.

She dressed for bed, but couldn't sleep. As she lay staring at the ceiling, it occurred to her that he would be murdered, here, in this room, while she was in the other. What would the newspapers say? They loved this stuff. She could see the headlines now: Viceroy Found Dead in Mistress' Bed. She would just have to go back to The Bishop and tell him she couldn't do it.

Late the next morning, she completed her toilet promptly and decided to dress conservatively again,

choosing a different outfit. Her stomach grumbled. It would be lunch first, again, before seeking out The Bishop.

She didn't see Sathya, so Margo headed straight for a booth and anxiously studied the menu. The Café was still empty; the lunch rush would not begin for another half hour.

"No sausage today." Margo dropped the menu and looked up. Sathya was smiling down at her. "Did not see you come in."

"Oh, I'll just have steak and kidney pie," Margo said. Sathya signaled to one of the help, and gave Margo's order. When they were alone again, Sathya gave Margo a hard look.

"Okay," Sathya said. "What's wrong?" She sat down across from Margo, looking at her intently.

"Oh, well...," Margo began. "I think I've gotten myself into something bad."

"What is bad?" Sathya asked. "What is good?"

"Well..." Margo began.

Sathya shook her head. "Rhetorical question. Good and bad are defined by who ever in power. What matters in the end: Is the situation improved? Will the karma generate beneficial or harmful response from Ishvara for you?"

Margo's lunch arrived. Sathya got up, gave Margo a significant nod, and went back to work. Margo then committed what, in her home town, would be a serious gaffe: she reached for the ketchup. Ladies and Gentlemen of Society did not put ketchup on anything. Lucky she was not a Lady of Society.

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Her thoughts of society kept Margo's mind from her dilemma.

"You know right the thing to do."

Margo looked up into the smiling face of her friend.

"I hope so," Margo said as she stood up. They hugged briefly, and then Margo was back out on the street.

The walk through the dark neighborhood and back to the church was not as pleasant as the day before. In her distraction, she hardly noticed the sights, sounds and smells. Her uncertainty about her role in forthcoming events deadened her senses. However, she did sense a difference when she entered the dark neighborhood. Yesterday, the people paid her no attention, as if she were just another resident. Today, she noticed furtive looks from nearly everyone, as if she were being tolerated but that it would be better if she left immediately.

The church looked the same. She entered the main door, turned right, and arrived at the last confessional on the left. She hesitated, her hand on the doorknob. The door creaked open, and Margo sat down nervously.

Margo twiddled her thumbs, tapped her feet, strained her eyes and ears for the slightest indication that The Bishop was on the other side of the curtain.

Eventually, she realized he wasn't going to show. Discouraged, she left the confessional and paused in the hall to gaze at the altar. She didn't believe in God, but wondered how her actions would be judged. Heavy of heart, she left the church, left the dark neighborhood. She wandered into a nearby park and sat down in a bench overlooking the pond.

Her head throbbed from thinking too much. That was surely a sign. Nothing was worth agonizing so much over. She'd made her choice yesterday, and she'd go through with it. As Sathya said, good and bad are relative. Would the situation improve if she cooperated? She didn't have all the facts, but she knew that Sir Edington would die either way. She had to believe The Bishop and his secret society knew what was best. She trusted them, and knew they would not want to draw undue attention to their activities. Besides, this would be just another life experience, which was her entire reason for being. Or so she kept telling herself. Maybe one day she'd believe it.

The sun was setting; it must be close to eight o'clock. Margo decided to take supper in the hotel's dining hall where she roomed. It was an uninspired meal, as expected, but the hall was filled with people who knew her only in passing. The anonymity helped her distance herself from all that had happened in the last day and a half.

She arrived back in her rooms by nine-thirty, and spent the next twenty minutes getting ready for Sandford. Precisely at ten, a knock sounded on her door. Putting on her best seductive smile, she opened the door. Sandford stood stiff and regal in the hallway. His demeanor broke momentarily for a brief glint in his eye.

"Margo," he said, entering the room and closing the door behind him. He kissed her on the cheek, and now it was her turn to feel stiff. She was nervous about the drama unfolding and hoped he didn't notice.

"You look even more ravishing than usual," he said, untying her robe and pushing it off her shoulders. She was

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wearing a snug-fitting chenille halter that outlined her large nipples and moved suggestively with the sway of her breasts. The robe fell to the floor to reveal matching panties that rolled with her hips. His lips moved to the nape of her neck, and then he stepped back, took off his jacket and tossed it onto a chair as he headed for the bedroom.

She was not far behind him, but already he was sitting on the bed removing his boots. Moving to the bed, she slowly removed his shoulder holster and began unbuttoning his shirt, pausing to caress his chest. She took the holster with the gun and hung it from the chair by her cosmetic table.

"I, uh, forgot to check the door," she said. Sandford merely nodded, and continued undressing. At the front door, she touched the thrown bolt and rested her head against her hand. She took a deep breath to calm herself. Just one more moment...

A muffled sound came from the bedroom. Margo looked up and began to turn, but never completed it. Something hit her head with a sudden, painful impact. She slumped to the floor.

* * *

It was like coming out of a tunnel. She was aware of darkness first, and then a point of light that quickly expanded to a view of her sitting room ceiling.

"Inspector, she is conscious," a voice nearby said. An arm reached around her back and helped her to stand. A flask was thrust into her hand, and she took a swig of

brandy from it. The shock of the pure alcohol sharpened her focus, and she felt more in control.

"What...", she began. The room was in a shambles, and, from what she could see of the bedroom, it was in no better shape.

A broad-shouldered man in a suit turned his attention to her.

"My lady," he said. "I am Constable Harden. It seems a burglar broke into your rooms and killed your boyfriend. Did you have any valuables? We'll need to make a note of anything that was stolen."

"I, uh, I'm not sure."

"Fine then," Harden said. "If you can come down to the station later and provide a detailed list."

"Sure. What about Sir Ed..."

"My Lady," Harden interrupted. "Your boyfriend," he stressed the word boyfriend, "has been killed. His identity will be established at the morgue."

"But..."

"My Lady," he interrupted again. "I am sorry for your loss, but we don't want to make a big production of this, do we?"

"No," she said, then sat and watched the police. The coroner showed up, and the body was carried out by two stout officers. The police finally finished up and left. The last to go was Constable Harden.

"My Lady," he said. "Get some rest. Please come by the station tomorrow and make your report." He nodded, and left.

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Margo could not stay in these rooms tonight. Not after what happened. She went into the bedroom long enough to get a change of clothes, then changed in the sitting room. As she was getting ready to leave, she noticed a small black figurine on her book table. She'd never seen it before. Absentmindedly, she picked it up and put it in her purse before heading out the door.

A few minutes' walk brought her to Gupta's Café, now closed. She headed straight for a door on the side of the building at the front of the alley.

"Sathya!" she called, banging on the door. After forever, a light came on and she heard footsteps. The door opened, and Sathya peered out.

"Margo? What are you doing here?" She opened the door, and Margo collapsed into her arms, sobbing. Sathya walked Margo upstairs and sat her on the couch.

"I will make tea," she said. When she came back with the tea, Margo managed to get the whole story out: her meeting with The Bishop and her part in the murder of Sir Sandford Edington. Sathya said nothing. When Margo finished her story, she pulled the black figurine out of her purse.

"A bishop," Sathya said.

"It was sitting on my book table," Margo said. "It wasn't there before, I'm sure of it." It all made sense. The Bishop must have been one of the officers in her rooms last night. He left the figurine as a message to her. She was certain that news of her relationship with the viceroy would not become public knowledge.

She relaxed into the corner of the couch. Her eyelids drooped for only a moment...



God Save the Queen...

Arundhati Singh flipped through the rack of saris until she found what she was looking for.

"Here, Kenia," she said, handing it to her friend.

"Try this one."

"Yeah?" Kenia Nuñez asked, pausing in her search to take the garment. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure! The style suits you just right. Go try it on."

Kenia went inside to find the fitting room.

Nervously, she changed into the sari, draping it carefully the way she'd seen Aru arrange her own.

"Let me see!" Aru called from the other side of the fitting room door.

"Oh, I don't know!" Kenia's eyes glittered as she admired herself in the mirror. If it weren't for Aru, she never would have tried one on.

"Let me see!" Aru called again, a little more stern this time.

"Don't use that tone with me, I'm not a criminal." Kenia took a deep breath, and then stepped out of the fitting room.

"Beautiful!" Aru re-arranged it a bit, and then nodded in approval.

"Is it really?"

"Oh, yes! You should get it."

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"I don't know. Where would I wear it?"

"Everywhere! Just like you wear your jeans and blouse."

Kenia returned to the fitting room and changed back into her street clothes.

After paying the cashier, Kenia said: "Lunch?"

"Yes! Gupta's is close by."

Gupta's Café was packed with the noon lunch crowd. Kenia and Aru managed to find a seat on the patio. The waitress breezed by and placed menus, silverware and glasses of water on their table. By the time she was able to get back to their table, they had already perused the menu.

"Are you ready to order?" the waitress asked.

"Yes," Kenia said. "I'd like the Tandoori Vegetable appetizer as meal, please."

"I would like the spicy eggplant, please."

"Okay, I'll get your order right in."

Aru took a sip of her water and cleared her throat. In a low voice, she said:

"Do you remember what I was telling you the other night?"

"You mean about the - uh - research?"

"Yes. I have heard that paperwork may be ready tomorrow afternoon, and a visit is sure to happen soon after."

"Ah. Good to know. Thanks."

"I feel a little like I am betraying my people."

"You're not, and you know it. This is a good cause, Aru. They really are trying to help make this a better world."

"I know that in my head. It's hard to believe it in my heart."

"It makes a difference when you are more a part of it all. You're only seeing it from an outsider's view."

Aru sighed. "From all I've heard you say, I believe you."

They sat in silence for a minute, and then began planning the rest of their day. There were a few more stores to shop before turning in for the evening.

* * *

Joel returned to his suite after his morning run and headed straight for Chuck's room. Sitting hard on the edge of the bed, he said:

"Up and at 'em, buddy!"

Chuck peered out from under the covers. He hated morning people.

"Look," Joel said. "An envelope with both our names on it. That's a first."

"Oh, yeah?" Chuck pulled at the covers.

"Yeah." Joel opened the envelope. "Hm. Looks like we've got some place to be at 10. Just an address and a time. C'mon! Let's get down to breakfast."

Chuck groaned and rolled out of bed. He put on a robe and slippers, and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Terrific!" Joel said, smiling at him.

They headed down to the dining room – Joel his usually bouncy self and Chuck shuffling along side.

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"Hey, Mark! Hey, George!" Joel greeted his friends, already seated at a table.

"Hey, guys!" Mark said. George nodded, but continued eating. "I see you dragged little Miss Sunshine along with you."

"Mind if we join you?"

"Not at all," Mark replied around a mouthful of toast and jam.

Chuck and Joel returned after a few minutes with their breakfast. Chuck's plate was laden with a fry-up. In contrast, Joel carried a large cup of steaming coffee, which he began nursing as soon as he sat down.

"Anything unusual about your assignment this morning?" Joel asked.

"Yes," Mark answered. "It was addressed to both of us."

"I know we're not supposed to talk about the assignments, but--"

"Then don't," Mark cut Joel off in mid-sentence.

"What's the harm in it?" Joel asked.

"The harm is losing your job and being out on the street."

"How many times do we have to have this conversation, Joel?" Chuck demanded, rousing himself.

"Mark's right. I, for one, am very happy to be here. No more Gail, and no more feeling like a schmuck because I can't find a job I'm qualified for. I've finally got a job and I want to keep it. So, we follow the rules."

"Fine." Joel shut his mouth and finished his breakfast in silence.

* * *

A non-descript sedan stopped behind an open moving truck parked in front of the office building on Carmac St. A woman stepped out of the car and onto the sidewalk. The light hooded jacket she was wearing to cover her head was an odd accessory for her traditional sari outfit. She entered the building and went directly to a corner suite on the third floor.

"Welcome, my Queen," James said, rising from his chair behind the desk and bowing slightly.

"James," the woman said with a smile in her tone. "You know that I am not a real queen."

"As you say, madam."

"How are the preparations?"

"We are on time. George is finishing the work on the passage as we speak. Mark, Chuck and Joel have almost finished removing the boxes."

"Very good."

She walked into the next room of the suite and examined it carefully. There seemed to be no sign of a secret passage into the next room. Nodding, she stepped back into the ante-room. Sparing James a brief glance, she walked around the corner and into a conference room. A few boxes remained on the table. Three men were just leaving, dragging hand trucks laden with boxes. She walked over to a fourth man working on the wall. The secret passage to the suite next door had been here, and had been very useful during their tenure. She noted with

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satisfaction that the man was doing a professional job concealing any evidence of the passage.

In the elevator on the way down to the first floor, Joel said:

"Who was that? She looked important."

"If you needed to know, you'd know," replied Mark. "It's not for me to tell you."

The exited the elevator and dragged their loads to the truck. While they were stacking the boxes in the back of the vehicle, the woman left the building and stopped to watch them. As soon as the were finished, she turned to Chuck and said:

"You are Joel?"

"Ye-es."

"You may call me the Queen," she said, and handed him an envelope. "Your service with us has been satisfactory. I thank you for that."

She turned and got into the waiting sedan. The car pulled back onto Carmac St. and was gone. Chuck opened the envelope to find 500 pounds and a note. The note read:

"Your services are no longer required. If you choose to return to London, show this note at the HMS Caturanga - you will be granted a berth at no charge. The 500 pounds should be sufficient until you are able to secure employment."

"Huh!" Joel said.

"What is it?" Chuck asked.

"End of the road for me, man." He showed Chuck the piece of paper.

"Wow," Joel said after reading the note. "What are you going to do?"

"Back to London, I guess. It's for the best - I was getting tired of this gig anyway."

Joel put a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"It's alright, man," Joel said. "I'll be alright. Gonna miss those chess games, though."

Joel turned to Mark and George and exchanged goodbyes, and then he walked away.

"C'mon, buddy," Mark said to Chuck. "Let's get the rest of those boxes."

"Yeah. Okay."

* * *

It was after lunch before Robson managed to return to the station. She headed straight for Banerjee's office. Her tap on the door was answered with an invitation to enter.

"I have a search warrant for the office on Carmac," she said.

"Indeed? How did you manage it?"

"Needless to say, the Chief Minister is not happy with the continuing harassment of the nobles. He decided we had enough circumstantial evidence to sanction it."

"That is excellent news, although unexpected." Banerjee rose from his desk. "Let's put a team together and go now."

It sure is a day for surprises, Robson thought to herself. First the search warrant, now Banerjee's swift

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response to the news. She'd never seen him respond so quickly.

They left his office and rounded up several constables. A van was brought around, and the group boarded the vehicle. It was a short drive over to Carmac Street, and they pulled up just as a moving truck left the lot. Robson pulled her pad and pen out and quickly scribbled something down.

As they disembarked, Robson ripped a piece of paper out of her pad and handed it to one of the constables.

"This is the plate number from the truck. Find out who owns it and get the rental records. I want to know who's using it today."

"Yes, ma'am," the constable said and returned to the van to call the number into the station.

Robson caught up with Banerjee just as he entered the building manager's office.

"May I be of assistance?" The man rose from his desk and bowed slightly to Banerjee.

"I am Inspector Banerjee of the Kolkata Police," he said, showing his badge. "This is Inspector Robson of Scotland Yard."

"Nizami Kumar," the man said, bowing again. "It will be my pleasure to serve."

"Mr. Kumar," Banerjee said, showing him the warrant. "We have a search warrant for one of the offices in this building. We respectfully request your cooperation."

"As you wish, Inspector," Kumar said. "May I ask which office?"

"Suite 311."

"Yes, right this way." Kumar picked up his jacket from a coat rack and put it on, then walked past the inspectors into the hallway. Banerjee, Robson and the constables followed him to the elevator.

They got off the elevator and Kumar escorted them to suite 311. He put his hand on the knob and turned. The door was not locked, so he pushed it open. James was just coming out of the inner office; a look of surprise crossed his face.

"Mr. Kumar," James said. "I believe all our paperwork is in--" He stopped mid-sentence as first Banerjee, then Robson and the constables, slowly filed into the ante-room.

"My apologies," Kumar said, bowing to James. "Inspector Banerjee of the Kolkata Police wishes to search the office."

James inclined his head and stepped away from the inner door. "Please, be my guest."

Banerjee and the constables spread out and began searching every corner of the two-room suite. Robson walked up to James and asked:

"Do you work for the Checking Piece Courier Service?"

"For whom?"

Robson raised an eyebrow. "How long have they been using this office?"

"I have been the secretary in this office for the past two years."

"Yes. What can you tell me about your employer?"

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"My employer is a strategic consultant specializing in operational improvements for industrial service agencies."

"Oh, really? That sounds like a fancy way of saying your employer compels industry to make changes."

"If you choose to put it that way."

Robson was preparing her next question when she noticed Banerjee walking towards her.

"It seems they anticipated us," Banerjee said.

"Hm. Someone tipped them off."

"Yes." Robson thought she detected a sigh as he spoke. "I will speak with Constable Singh."

Banerjee turned to James and Kumar, who were talking in a corner.

"We appreciate your cooperation in this matter, and regret any inconvenience we may have caused."

"You have caused no inconvenience," Kumar assured him.

"No trouble at all," James agreed.

The ride back to the station was quiet. For once, Robson understood Banerjee's desire to ponder. There had been too many twists and turns today.

They entered the station and Banerjee approached the front desk.

"Sgt. Das," he said, "Please locate Constable Singh and have her come to my office."

"Yes, sir," Das replied.

* * *

Constable Singh rapped nervously on Banerjee's door.

"Come in, Constable," he said. "Please sit down."

"Yes, sir," she said.

After she was seated, he began:

"I understand you have established a close friendship with Kenia Nuñez."

"Yes, sir."

"Ms. Nuñez is employed with the Checking Piece Courier Service."

"Yes, sir."

"You are aware that we were endeavoring to secure a search warrant for the suspected headquarters for the Checking Piece Courier Service."

"Yes, sir."

"It seems the tenants of the office were forewarned."

She didn't reply this time, knowing where he was heading.

"I apologize constable," Banerjee continued, "but I must ask a personal question. Has your friendship with Ms. Nuñez engendered sympathies for the activities of her employer?"

Singh dropped her head. "Yes, sir."

"You realize this is contrary to your duties as a constable." When she didn't respond, he continued: "How deep are your sympathies?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I cannot explain it, but I believe in what they are doing."

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They sat in silence for several minutes; Banerjee considering his next action while Singh waited for his verdict.

Finally, he said: "Please hand me your badge and gun, Constable."

Singh stood up and handed over the requested items. Without another word, she turned and started for the door.

"Ms. Singh."

She paused and looked back at her former boss.

"I wish you success in the path you have chosen."

"Thank you, sir."

* * *

Banerjee pulled into the parking lot of the head office for Kolkata Commercial Truck Rental. He and Robson got out of the car and entered the building.

"Greetings. I am Inspector Banerjee of the Kolkata Police. This is Inspector Robson of Scotland Yard."

"Greetings. I am Sabyasachi Chowdhury. How may I be of assistance?"

"We are conducting an investigation and would appreciate information regarding this truck yesterday." Banerjee handed Chowdhury the slip of paper from Robson's notebook.

"One moment, please." Chowdhury picked up the paper and turned to a file cabinet. He searched through the folders until he found the file. Pulling it out of the cabinet, he handed it to Banerjee.

"It seems the reservation was made in the name of Saneetha Biswas, with the Kolkata Municipal Corporation," Banerjee said, reading the rental agreement.

"Yes," said Chowdhury. "The KMC rents from us frequently. They will often rent a truck and team for a day and coordinates several moves."

"Indeed?"

"*Misez* Biswas is well known to me."

"I thank you for your cooperation, *Miṣṭar* Chowdhury. *Namaste*."

"Namaste, Inspector."

"The case is getting more interesting," Robson said as they drove to the KMC office.

"It is. This is rather a surprising turn."

"Working for the KMC is perfect. It's a great cover, and they'd be in the know for everything going on in the city."

"Assuming we can show a direct relationship. Unfortunately, most of our evidence is still circumstantial. We are not able to prove anything."

"I am hopeful."

"As am I."

They arrived at the KMC building and found Saneetha Biswas' office in the Social Sector Department after a brief study of the directory.

"*Misez* Saneetha Biswas?" Banerjee asked.

"Yes. How may I help you?"

"I am Inspector Banerjee of the Kolkata Police. This is Inspector Robson of Scotland Yard. We are investigating a case and would appreciate any information you can

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provide regarding a truck you rented from Kolkata Commercial Truck Rental yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

"Yes."

Saneetha pulled a file out of a drawer and opened on her desk.

"Yes, we needed to distribute supplies to several safe houses. Here is a copy of the itinerary."

Banerjee and Robson studied the papers.

"It seems one of the stops was at an office building on Carmac Street."

"That is correct. We maintain a records office at that location. Several archive boxes were moved to off-site storage. The papers stapled behind the itinerary detail what is to be done at each stop."

Banerjee flipped through the papers and found the page for the Carmac Street stop. The destination was a known document storage facility.

"I thank you for your cooperation, *Misez Biswas*.
Namaste."

"Namaste, Inspector."

Back in the car, Robson sighed heavily as she sank into the passenger seat.

"It is so frustrating," she said. "We were on to something, and it fizzled right out."

"Fizzled?"

"Came to nothing. I don't suppose it would be worth our while to visit the document storage facility."

"I don't believe it would be fruitful. It is likely the boxes are labeled appropriately."

"No doubt. And they can move those boxes at their convenience to their new headquarters. Argh!"

"Are you okay?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Just very frustrated. I had hoped to resolve these cases quickly and go home to London."

"I am sorry this investigation is not going well for you." Banerjee paused, then asked: "Are you familiar with the concept of karma-phala?"

"Karma? As in fate or destiny?"

"Not quite. In my religion, we have free will to choose among good or evil, and we live with the consequences of our actions."

"That's an interesting point of view. It's like we shape the path of our lives based on our actions."

"In essence. May I ask personal question?"

"Sure."

"Do you believe the consequence of your assignment to Kolkata is a result of good or evil actions on your part in London?"

"Wow. That's quite a question."

"My apologies. I withdraw the question."

"No, no, it's okay. I don't mind answering it."

Robson paused a moment to reflect. "I would have to say good actions. My superiors at New Scotland Yard have been pleased with my work. I have a talent for being able to sniff out the truth from difficult cases. I love my job and I honestly believe I'm doing good for the world."

"Your assignment here is the karma-phala of your work in London. If your work there was honorable and good, then so is this assignment."

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"Yes, I guess so. I hadn't thought of it that way. It's been so difficult adjusting to the customs here."

"'Adjusting' is a rather harsh word. Consider 'accepting' the customs here instead. One who is adjusting is one who is still fighting the change."

"Good point."

Banerjee parked the car. Inside the station, they stopped momentarily at the front desk to check for messages. As they began returning to their respective offices, Robson smiled at Banerjee and said:

"Thank you, Inspector."

"You are quite welcome."



...And the Conscience of the King

Inspector Chloe Robson of New Scotland Yard glanced briefly at the impassive face of her partner, Inspector Vinay Banerjee of the Kolkata Police. They were sitting in a conference room on opposite sides of the table, studying their notes on the "Chessman" cases. She exhaled a heavy sigh, her cheeks puffing slightly as they often did when she was feeling frustrated.

"We're not getting anywhere," she said.

"That does seem to be the case."

Something about the way he ended the sentence caused her to look up from her notes.

"What's wrong?" She had been working with him long enough now that she was beginning to catch the very minor nuances in his tone or expression.

"I find myself wondering if we have a case at all."

"What do you mean?"

"Except for two murders and an attempted kidnapping, all of our 'cases' can be classified as nuisance, lacking criminal action. I am beginning to think I have imagined this obscure organization when there is, in fact, none."

"I've reviewed all of your case notes. And I've been working these cases with you for almost a year. It seems reasonable to me that there is an organization behind this.

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I'm convinced, and the fact that I'm still here means the Crown is convinced."

"We lack satisfactory proof. We lack the ability to take effective action. I do not think we should continue."

Banerjee's words stopped Robson cold. She had never heard uncertainty from him before. He was always sure of his path and his actions.

"Listen, Banerjee," she began. "I know it's been tough. Who ever is behind this is slippery, that's for sure. They're very organized and clearly have more resources than we do. Just because we can't pin down anything definite doesn't mean they don't exist."

Banerjee remained unresponsive. She continued: "Do you remember what you told me when we first met? You said: 'there is a pattern to these events that seems to indicate a guiding intelligence at work, possibly orchestrating events for a particular outcome'. I didn't believe you, at first. But I do now because I've learned that you have a knack for seeing patterns."

"I have been wrong before."

"You're not this time, and I'll tell you why. Your knack for patterns is based on a very strong intuitive sense. The reason I've climbed the ranks at New Scotland yard so fast is because I have a strong intuitive sense, too."

"Intuition alone cannot win the day."

"No, it can't. But often it's the place to start. We can't both be wrong. We just have to be patient enough to see it through. Do you remember what you told me last week about karma-phala?"

"Yes, I do."

"I believe that the work we are doing is for the good. If we were to stop now, we'd invalidate all of that."

"You may have a point."

"You bet I do. Now, let's get back to work."

"Thank you, Inspector."

"You are quite welcome."

* * *

Lord Rodney Kilbourne stirred his tea in an absent-minded manner as he studied the financial section of the newspaper. He nodded with satisfaction and set the paper down for a sip of tea, stopping midway to his mouth when he noticed a very angry man approaching his patio table.

"What is it you are doing?" demanded Partha Deb. "Why is it you wish to ruin me?"

"I'm sorry?" Rodney asked with exaggerated innocence and a smile on his face.

"You have sabotaged the trade negotiation with the London Trading Company. I know you have done this!"

"You don't know anything."

"Yes, yes I do. I have proof."

"Oh really, now?"

"Is everything alright, Lord Kilbourne?" asked Eric Patel, owner of the London Tea Shop where Rodney was indulging in his usual afternoon high tea.

"Everything's fine, Eric."

"Everything is not fine! I see with my own eyes a man in his employ," Partha turned his palm to indicate Rodney, "speaking with the representative, who then

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withdraws from negotiation. I follow this man, and see with my own eyes he talks to Lord Kilbourne. I see an envelope exchange hands from Lord Kilbourne to the man, with my own eyes!"

"What I see with my own eyes is a man who has nothing better to do than accuse the innocent," Rodney laughed. "You have no proof!"

"Sir," Eric addressed Partha. "I must ask you to leave. You are disturbing our customers."

"I will leave," Partha said, still looking at Rodney. "But you will pay for what you have done!"

Eric turned to Rodney after Partha left.

"My apologies, Lord Kilbourne."

"Thanks, Eric."

Rodney drummed his fingers on the table. Downing the rest of his tea and folding up his paper, he got up from his table and walked briskly back to his suite.

"Albert," he said to his butler, "I'll be in my office. Please see to it that I'm not disturbed for the next half hour."

"As you wish, sir."

Rodney sat down at his desk and spun the Rolodex a few times. He recalled to memory the number he wanted.

"Yes," said a voice on the other end of the line.

"You were followed from the London negotiations."

"Who?"

"Partha Deb. Take care of him."

"Consider it done." The line clicked off.

* * *

"Inspector Banerjee." He listened for a moment, and then said: "I will be right there."

Banerjee put down the phone, picked up his jacket and walked to Robson's office. She looked up at the tap on her door.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Our presence is requested at a crime scene."

"Chessmen?"

"Yes."

"Let's go."

They arrived on the scene within fifteen minutes. The fourth-floor apartment seemed crowded with constables and the coroner.

"Inspector Banerjee."

"Inspector Lahiri. May I introduce Inspector Robson of New Scotland Yard."

"Inspector Robson," Lahiri bowed to Robson.

"What is the situation?" Banerjee asked.

"A burglary and murder," Lahiri said. "The victim is Partha Deb, a trade union representative. The entry point was the bedroom window. There is a fire escape. The perpetrator broke in, killed Miştar Deb in the kitchen, rifled the apartment and left, apparently through the bedroom window."

"It seem pretty straightforward."

"Yes, Inspector Robson. However, several items of value remain in the apartment, including Miştar Deb's

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wallet with cash. Also, this card was found on the body." Lahiri handed Robson a small plastic bag.

Robson examined the card. On one side was imprinted an image of a chessman; on the other side was printed the words "Beware the King". She handed it to Banerjee. He scrutinized the message on the back, and then handed it back to Lahiri.

"I assumed you would want a chance to investigate the scene yourself," Lahiri said.

"Thank you. I appreciate your consideration," Banerjee said.

After a thorough investigation of the apartment, they thanked Lahiri again and returned to the station.

"You've seem occupied," Robson said.

"Yes. I do not believe the card was left by the Checking Piece Courier Service."

"I noticed you looking at it pretty closely."

"The card does not fit the pattern. The message mentions the king, but the image is not a king."

"You're right! On all of the other cards, the image matched with the piece named in the message."

Sgt. Das tapped on Banerjee's door.

"Yes."

"An envelope has been left for you." Das entered the office and handed the envelope over.

"How was it delivered?" Banerjee asked.

"A courier, sir."

"Thank you."

After Das left, Banerjee opened the envelope. Inside was a newspaper clipping advertising the London

Tea Shop and a business card with the imprint of a king on it. He handed both to Robson.

"Just like the tickets to opening night several months back," Robson said.

"Yes. Apparently, there is information relating to the case at the London Tea Shop."

"It seems so. Shall we get some tea?"

* * *

Eric Patel led Banerjee and Robson into a small office in the back.

"I apologize," he said, closing the door. "I did not want this discussion to be public."

"I understand," Banerjee said.

"Now, please repeat your question?"

"We are investigating the murder of Partha Deb," Robson said. "We believe you may have information that can help us."

"Partha Deb, you say?"

"Yes."

"He did come to the restaurant yesterday, quite upset. He made some accusations of one of my best customers. I asked him to leave."

"What is the name of the customer?" Robson saw Eric's hesitation: "I remind you that we are investigating a murder. If you choose not to answer here and now, we'll bring you down to the station."

"I see. The customer was Lord Rodney Kilbourne."

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"Thank you. And what was the nature of the accusations made by Partha Deb."

"I don't know. I noticed an altercation, and came over to the table. Mr. Deb was insensible, I asked him to leave."

"Then how do you know he was making accusations?"

"Lord Kilbourne mentioned it after Mr. Deb left."

"And you heard nothing of Mr. Deb's accusations?"

"Nothing."

"And Lord Kilbourne did not repeat those accusations to you?"

"He did not."

Banerjee and Robson shared a glance.

"Thank you, Mr. Patel. That will be all for now. We will be back if we have any more questions. Please feel free to call the station if you think of anything else."

They found their own way out of the restaurant.

"I suggest we talk with Lord Kilbourne next," Banerjee said.

"I'll radio the station and get his address."

They sat in the car while Robson called in for the address. As soon as she got it, she drove to Lord Kilbourne's suite. Robson knocked on the door and it was opened by the butler.

"May I help you?" Albert asked.

"Inspectors Robson and Banerjee with the Kolkata Police," Robson said, flashing her badge. "We'd like to speak to Lord Kilbourne."

"Please, come in." Albert indicated a sofa in the foyer. "I will see if Lord Kilbourne is available."

Albert closed the front door and disappeared into the suite.

A few minutes later, Lord Kilbourne came sauntering in.

"What can I do for you?"

Both inspectors stood up.

"I'm Inspector Robson, this is Inspector Banerjee. We would like to ask you a few questions about Partha Deb."

"Partha Deb. Partha Deb." Kilbourne made a show of searching his memory. "Now, where do I know that name from?"

"He was a representative of the Kolkata Trade Unions."

"He was?"

"Yes, he was. Partha Deb is dead."

"Dead? You don't say!"

"Lord Kilbourne, this is a serious matter, and I would appreciate your full cooperation."

"Of course."

"I understand that you and Mr. Deb had an altercation yesterday at the London Tea Shop."

"Oh, I wouldn't call it an altercation."

"Mr. Deb made accusations against you."

"Did he?" At Robson's scowl, he added: "I do seem to recall he was very angry about something or other."

"What was it he was angry about?"

"He seemed to think I had something to do with, how did he put it? Oh, yes, 'sabotaging his negotiations'."

"And did you?"

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"I guess that would depend on your perspective."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, you have to consider whether or not the negotiations should have been entered to in the first place."

"You don't think they should have?"

"No, I don't."

"Why not?"

"The agreement provided benefits to India residents at the expense of, well, us."

"What do you mean by 'us'?" Robson thought she could feel Banerjee stiffen slightly.

"You and me. The ruling class."

"The ruling class?"

"Don't play dumb, Inspector Robson. It doesn't suit you. You know as well as I do that the working class are not our equals." Kilbourne passed a disdainful glance in Banerjee's direction. "They don't deserve the spoils of technology."

"Lord Kilbourne, Partha Deb was murdered last night. You are a prime suspect."

"Me?" Kilbourne laughed. "You've got to be kidding!"

"I assure you, I am not. You have a motive - Mr. Deb accused you of sabotaging his negotiations. What were you doing last night between 10:00 and 11:00?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Please answer the question."

"I know my rights. Unless you're going to charge me with something, I must ask you to leave."

"I could charge you with obstruction, Lord Kilbourne. We are investigating a murder."

"Then do so. And then we can continue this discussion in the presence of counsel."

"You would like that, wouldn't you? I'm not here to satisfy your secret fantasies. We will speak again. Good day, Lord Kilbourne."

Robson made an abrupt exit, with Banerjee close at her heels.

* * *

Banerjee remained in his office and talked to no one the rest of the day. Despite her best efforts, Robson was not able to stir him from his despondency.

He left quietly and, after stopping at the market, went directly to temple. Once inside, he knelt down before Krishna, made his offering, and began his almost-forgotten mantra. It had been far too long since he'd been to worship.

Banerjee lost track of time, but eventually become aware of someone chanting. He looked up to see a priest standing beside him. The priest's wizened face was partly obscured by a hood, thick facial hair and deep wrinkles.

The priest stopped chanting and said: "You are deeply troubled."

Banerjee stood slowly and face the priest.

"Yes. I find myself conflicted because of duty and honor."

The priest said nothing, so Banerjee continued:

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"I am an officer of the police, sworn to uphold the law. I exercise due diligence to ensure justice is served - no one falsely accused or erroneously acquitted." Banerjee paused to collect himself.

"Today, I met a man, a suspect in a case, whom I find contemptible in his attitudes towards - certain classes of people. I am finding it difficult to balance duty and honor in the face of such inequity."

"Oppression is a treacherous path," the priest said.

"How can that be a viable solution for society?"

"In the long run, it is not. The oppressed revolt; the oppressor banished."

"I have seen signs of unrest. I suspect we may not be far from such an eventuality."

"Oppression is a disease. The nation becomes infected and, for a while, the infection is rampant. Soon, the body begins to fight back. The temperature rises; the antibodies begin to attack."

"How does one determine what action to take?"

"The foundation of your duty and honor is not in the law books. The written word is black and white in a shaded world. Consider the rule of law."

"An abstract concept."

"And difficult for one who is concrete."

Banerjee reflected for a moment, and then said: "I think I understand."

The priest bowed; Banerjee returned the gesture.

"Namaste, Inspector Banerjee," the priest whispered, and was gone before the startled Banerjee could straighten.

He looked around, but could find no sign of the priest. Banerjee turned to say a parting prayer to Krishna when he noticed a business card on the rail. He picked it up and was surprised to see an imprint of a chess king on one side. The other side was blank.

* * *

Robson ventured to Banerjee's office the next morning, unsure of what to expect. Seeing him at his desk, composed as usual, she decided to take a chance on his mood. She tapped on his door.

Banerjee looked up and said: "Yes, Inspector Robson. Please come in."

She entered his office and sat down.

"How are you doing?"

"I am fine." He seemed to come to a decision and added: "I had what you would say is an 'attack of conscience'?"

"I can understand that. I wanted to throttle Lord Kilbourne after what he said yesterday. I hope you know that not all of the English are like him."

Banerjee nodded. "There are notable exceptions."

"Anyway, Inspector Lahiri left a message regarding the Deb case. His team found a viable fingerprint and matched it. They're arresting the man today and thought we'd like to be in on the interrogation."

"Indeed." Banerjee retrieved his jacket and left with Robson.

Lahiri greeted them when they arrived.

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"Here is his file," Lahiri said, handing a thick folder to Banerjee.

"John Doe," Banerjee read, holding the file so that Robson could see also it.

"Convenient name." Robson commented.

"Probably an alias."

"If it is, my men have not been able to find out his real name," Lahiri said. "Every source we traced shows that name."

Robson shrugged.

"We are ready," Banerjee said, handing the folder back to Lahiri.

John Smith was slouching in his chair like a model criminal. Lahiri, Banerjee and Robson sat down across from him.

"Must be my lucky day," Smith said. "Never had three cops before."

Lahiri looked at Banerjee, who nodded to Robson. That was her cue that she would take the lead on this one. She stood up, folded her arms, and glared at Smith.

"Mr. Smith, where were you between 10:00pm and 11:00pm two nights ago?"

"Out and about, I suppose. I don't remember."

Robson's voice hardened. "I suggest you try to remember."

"Mm. Nope, sorry, can't remember."

"I see." She paced across the room. "How do you know Lord Rodney Kilbourne?"

Smith shrugged his shoulders. "Only what I read in the paper."

"Perhaps I can stimulate your memory. Lord Kilbourne called you two days ago with a job: Murder Partha Deb. You break into his place that night, shoot him, and rifle the place to make it look like a burglary."

"That's a fancy story. Got any proof?"

"We have a fingerprint."

"Didja find the gun?"

"No, but we don't need it. With your record," she patted the file, "just the charge will be enough to send you back to jail for a few years."

"I guess you got me."

"We could get that time shortened for you if you--"

"--finger Lord Kilbourne? That's a very appealing offer."

"And?"

"And I can't help you. I get calls all the time. Don't know who it is. We cut a deal. Sometimes I get caught, spend some time in jail or prison. That's life."

"Not much of a life."

Smith shrugged again. Robson glanced at Lahiri, who nodded his head. It took her a moment to realize he meant 'no'. Banerjee nodded also.

"Don't go anywhere, Smith," Robson said, and followed the two men out of the interrogation room.

"That was not very helpful," Lahiri said after closing the door.

"Par for the course," Robson sighed.

"She means," Banerjee translated, "this is the usual outcome. We have our suspicions, but are unable to prove anything."

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"That sounds very frustrating."

"Yes. I thank you for your assistance, Inspector Lahiri."

"You're welcome. If I learn anything more, I will call."

Banerjee and Robson left. Once back in the car, Robson said:

"Well, another case for the unresolved pile."

"Yes, however, I think it would be wise to keep a close watch on Lord Kilbourne."

"Is that because--"

"It is because his actions and opinions are detrimental to society."

"Okay."

Joe Sweeney was conceived in Alabama and born in Upstate New York (a relative location). He spent the next 18 years in the tow of his Air Force family, living in all four corners of the States - Florida, Arizona, Northern California and Maine - and picking up five more siblings along the way. As a child he loved to write, but high school had somehow transformed him into a geek. He spent the next 30 years programming computers, at first as a hobby and in later years as a career. Now living in Arizona and starting 50, he has decided it's time to return to his first love - writing.

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