

THE GREAT GAME
AND OTHER STORIES

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With a dull thump, the last wooden figure was toppled. Alexandria had fallen, and Egypt was poised to become White territory.



Fabriard's ultimate victory.

X

The atmosphere *{hung heavily upon me, swirled with an airy grace, seemed to bluster against the chill}*⁶⁹ as I approached Sidney House. I *{knew, suspected, never understood that}*⁷⁰ it would be the final time I entered its doors as a participant in the Great Game, and a sense of uncertain trepidation seemed to haunt my footsteps. The dull, hardened burden of the pistol gave my right foot a slight limp, unused to its shape and obstruction. Raul was missing from his post. Later, I would learn that John had decided to send him away for the night, without informing the other members of the Game. In a sense, I suppose, that made what followed easier.

John was waiting at the table, and Emily had already assumed her hood as the Master of Ceremonies. Phillip came in with his envelope already clutched in a gloved hand, and shot me a look that I could only describe as *{conspiratorial, hostile, penitent}*⁷¹. After the events of last week, I suppose, it was only fair. Thunder crackled in the distance, and Wallace entered stained with a dark, dripping liquid that clung to his overcoat with unnatural resilience. *{Even the weather had turned against us, The rain attempted to warn us away, It was a portent of things to come}*⁷².

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"Wait," I said, when we had all assembled. "We shouldn't continue."

"And why would that be?" Wallace seemed to sneer as he asked, and I felt *{a surge of anger, a sudden burst of shame, a pang of fear}*⁷⁴. "The end of the game is close enough as it is." The sneer, I realised, was not a sneer, but a confident smirk. He thought he would win.

"Continuation is determined by majority assent," Emily intoned quietly, and it was clear the everyone else was ready to finish the Game, no matter the cost. Thus, she began the tabulations.

As Emily collected the envelopes, I said nothing. Her hands felt particularly soft that evening. As we assembled for the tabulations, Wallace made a soft noise. Looking back now, I realise it must have been a snicker. John looked over, annoyed.

"What?" Wallace said.

"Haven't you done enough already?" John was giving the game away.

"Silence is required during the Master of Ceremony's tabulations," Emily intoned quietly, and we all fell silent.

In a few minutes, the tabulation was complete. Emily's hands acted out our *{plan, compromise}*⁷⁵ - the armies moved in Egypt, Poland, Germany, carving up the seemingly inexorable White advance, vaporising the Tsar's troops left and right with no spaces left to retreat. I watched Wallace's face crumble, then spasm, as each defeat was tallied. Alexandria, Munich, Warsaw, all fell to the grand alliance. The Great Game was over. All that was left was to divide the spoils.

"Even you." Wallace, said, quietly, looking at me. "Even you."

"Yes," I said, even me.

"It is now the Winter of 1906. The parties may now withdraw to confer." Emily, seemingly oblivious, rang the bell. Wallace almost fell out of his seat, with such haste did he spring. One by one, he looked at the guilty conspirators, his hands twitching, mouth muttering obscenities.

"Who was it? Who plotted, who led the charge?" He was screaming, now, his face contorted beyond reason, a diseased look upon his wan face. "I want a *name!*"

But we all sat in our seats, and said nothing.

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I was overjoyed. Finally, the arrogant dictator, who had lorded his early lead over us all with his lackeys in Austria-Hungary and Germany, was getting his due. I had witnessed his ruthless backstabbing and meticulous plotting over seemingly interminable weeks and months, tearing our friendship apart. Until, at last Machiavelli's old maxim had come true and he had become not loved,

I was devastated. So much of Wallace, so much of the man we had once called our friend, had been subsumed by this folly, this hope of his, that the Theory might rise again. It was a silly thing, some might even call it delusional, but I understood his sorrow. For him, the game had been personal, and now his supposed friends had come and destroyed him.

And for what? For

I was panicking. What would Wallace do, now that the game had been overturned, now that his hopes had been dashed? A part of me desperately wished that we hadn't elected to play the Game, that we had burned the map and sought some other diversion, that we in that cold winter had decided upon amity instead of mutual destruction.

The other part saw the hateful gleam in Wal-

not feared, but hated. His beloved Theory, the hope of Napoleon Bonaparte risen again, had been well and truly discarded, in history as well as in the Game.

"It's over, Wallace." John muttered as he stalked, fruitlessly, around the ruined *mappa mundi*. "Give it up, the game is over."

"Accept the defeat." I said, with a hint of a smile.

victory? For the division of a map that would no longer exist after the Grand Alliance dissolved? Or was it for revenge, because we couldn't stand the smug, arrogant bastard Wallace had become?

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"I'm sorry it had to end this way, Wallace." I said.

lace's eyes, read the dread way his forearms trembled, and began to quake.

"It's over, Wallace." John muttered as he stalked, fruitlessly, around the ruined *mappa mundi*. "Give it up, the game is over."

I silently tightened my grip on the cold wooden handle of the pistol.

"Traitors to the accord, all of you." he screeched, and the sound was harsh and piercing to our ears. "Every single one! The victory was destined to be mine - mine!"

"You act in a way unbefitting of your station." Peter said coldly. "It is but a game, an idle way to divide our weeks in this long winter."

"A game? A game?"

"Yes, Wallace. Perhaps you have forgotten this fact."

Then Wallace was upon him, and all became a blur. The room seemed to darken. The pictures on the walls, once so haughty and impartial, now seemed to scorn our folly, the candles flickering as the Wallace clawed at Peter with the desperation of some doomed convict. It was all we could do but to look on with petrified horror, until at last Wallace thrust Peter aside, and his gaze swept over us all once more. There was no longer a grand general behind those eyes, no cunning calculation or absolute confidence. No, the air was stained with something else: the rank smell, that repugnant stench, that accompanied fear. Then he happened upon Emily.

"And you, dear sister. Don't think I haven't seen your little glances, your little gestures. You were working with them, weren't you? All the way from the beginning... Everyone was plotting against me, from the very start!"

"I have done no such thing. The impartiality of the Game has been upheld." Till the end, her face never changed, nor even so much as twitched.

"Liar!" He leapt at her, and a sharp report broke our spell.

I had fired my pistol.

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I honestly couldn't tell you what I was thinking in that moment. Perhaps it was some heady mixture of fear, anger, and disarray, perhaps some other force had moved my hand. Whatever the cause, I had no way to alter my aim, to change what decision had been made in a split second of haste.

I knew exactly why I had shot. The bullet was guided not so much by gunpower as by instinct, by a force of will that had laid dormant in me since the beginning of the game but was now unleashed by this final moment of urgency. I never even so much as flinched as the shot found its mark.

Wallace staggered, groaned once, then crumpled to the floor. We all rushed over to his side, where a dark pool of liquid was slowly leaking onto the persian carpet. Even Peter was stunned into what could only be described as a pallid awe.

Wallace's face was a mess. His breath came in short, tortured gasps, his armed seemed to jerk and reach for nonexistent salvation, and a slow line of saliva made its way down his rapidly whitening face, as if a Greek statue had been shot. The bullet had caught him just under the ribs, and he seemed almost lost in pain, murmuring hollow words to himself. Then he turned to look at all of us, including me, and said four words.

"Tell them I won."

Then his eyes became glassy, his breath turned to air, and his arms settled on the floor. The Great Game was well and truly over. All that was left were six former friends, a slowly cooling corpse, and a Master of Ceremonies with no ceremony to conduct.

Three weeks later, we gathered for the final time in Sidney House. Emily was still dressed in mourning black, and the rest of us had dressed similarly out of respect for Wallace. The funeral had just ended a few days ago, and the sun shone merrily *{but with a cruel brightness, in spite of our mood, with hope for brighter days}*⁷⁸. For a long time, we stared at the scattered paraphernalia, the great and elaborate map, the divisions and materiel listings and records of military movements. Then, silently, resolutely, we began to pick up the pieces and send them, one by one, into the fire. First the troops, then the ships and supply tokens, then the records and the chronicles, and at last that great and beautiful map, modified with such deftness one could hardly tell its original purpose, was folded up, bundled, and cast into the fireplace. The stench of burning parchment filled the room.

"Well, that's about it, isn't it?" Peter muttered. His face was set in what approximated resolution, but he hadn't been able to hold his tears during the funeral. The death was explained as a duel.

"Yes, I suppose it is." John, too, was strangely silent.

"There is still one matter to resolve," Emily said. "The game is not yet complete."

"What?"

"The game remains unfinished. The victors must divide the spoils."

There was a long silence. Then, I spoke.

"Europe is forever to be free of the scourge of kings." And the rest of the victors nodded.

"Thus concludes the Great Game."

