

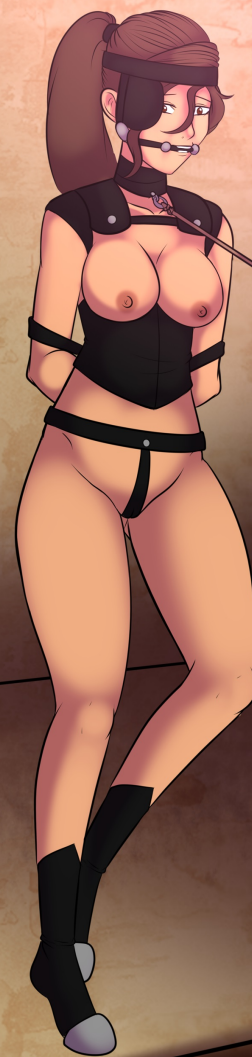
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REINS OF THE

TOMB RAIDER

- REMASTERED -

## Chapter 1 : Reins of the Tomb Raider

It was late spring when the Earl of Faringdon came to the glorious kingdom of Parmistan.

I, Zamir Pokupec, had been given the task of meeting him and showing him around our small yet rich country. We were able to keep track of his coming by radio and did so, for the going is a week long excursion fraught with peril. Very few make the trip successfully, and never in months outside this one. Our Emperor found it curious that a man such as this, an Earl of far-off Britain, would accept the offer we had made so long ago to all the nations on NATO – that of embassy. Perhaps that was why I was chosen for this task.

Parmistan is a proud country located in the mountains between Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Pamir. Founded in 39 AD by Gaius Caesar, we have since maintained our independence in his name, and our modern Emperor is a descendant of him. Many times nations have come against us, and many times they have been repelled, for the pathways to our country are treacherous and easily defended.

Even in this modern world, there is no place for an airplane to land, and the winds of our home make flying or landing helicopters far too great a risk. Our country is small and independent, needing for nothing, and the world was content to let us live in peace until the early eighties of your twentieth century. Towards the end of the Cold War, both Soviets and Allies had wooed our nation, recognizing that through a trick of geography we were perfectly situated to spy on any political power.

The Americans had won our favor, stopping a royal coup while also winning the Great Game, a means by which our royalty has always judged the worthiness of entreaties. NATO gained our aid, and less than ten years later the Soviets fell... and yet, no power has ever taken up the offer of embassy, and we have never seen fit to send an ambassador to any other nation.

What could they offer us that we do not already possess?

Until Lord James Berners, the Earl of Faringdon.

My cousin, Ivo Paley, is head of the security apparatus that protects all of Parmistan. He tells me that he has looked into this man, and so I am not surprised by his feminine physique when he arrives. This is a man who faints during fox hunts, who prefers composing symphonies and poetry to any true physical exertion. The journey should have killed him – his guide, who has made the journey many times, looks exhausted.

“Hello,” I say, greeting the man and slapping him on the back. He stumbles like child. “I am Zamir Pokupec, and I will be your guide from here.”

“Lord James Berners,” the boy answers me. He is clean shaven, and I think him weak until I see his eyes. There is anger there, and hurt, and I see it is both of these things that keep him upright. “A pleasure.”

His hand finds mine, and his grip is strong. I offer him a drink and he takes it, a full swallow of the strong vodka we brew in the snow-capped mountains that surround us. He is impressed by its strength, I see, and takes a second helping. I am impressed he is still upright.

Waving away offers of help for himself, I lead both him and his guide to the home that has been set aside for him. It is a modest place, a mere two stories with ten rooms and two bathrooms beside. A small gated garden and staff have been provided. There are guards that have been assigned to him, four, that have been ordered by the Emperor to keep him safe. I tell him this.

“They will die for me?” he seems amused.



“Yes,” I answer. “It is their duty and their glory.” James nods, accepting this.

Over the next few days he sheds his drab English clothing for the bright colors and warm fabrics of our people. We go to the tailor together, and he accepts my advice on coloring – a yellow shirt and red jacket, all the better to display the fire that drives him. He is amused by this, and asks the tailor to trace the cut of clothing to that of his homeland, but in the colors I recommend. I wonder who would find his look more ridiculous, his own people or mine?

Word of the Englishman spreads, and the people offer him their wares. We are celebrities, and celebrated, and he takes to the spices of our food and the strength of our drink happily. I steer him from things that might upset him, the traditions established two thousand years before, but I can see that his mind is elsewhere, that it is pain that has brought him here.

And as summer fades and autumn settles, I come to care for him. He grows a beard and keeps it neatly trimmed, and he has composed a symphony for us – the Triumph of Neptune, on honor of the Roman Gods we worship. He has dined with the Emperor but asks for nothing, content to be present among us and learn our ways.

We travel together, he and I, throughout the capital. We pass the statues of Bacchus and Neptune and he makes the proper offerings at each. He asks about the other villages that litter our land, but they are few and with threat of winter we are more concerned with the fight to come. I tell him we will go and see them in the spring and summer, and he is content to hear this. We drink, play chess, talk music and world events. The technology NATO brought here has only been improved by us. There is nothing that happens in the world that we do not know about, no secret that is safe.

One night, we sit together at the pub and we drink.

“My friend, my friend, why did you come here?” I ask him. He fixes me with narrowed eyes, but I press on. “You are a good man, one I proudly call friend, but our glorious country is small and harsh. There is music in your eyes, my friend, and such anger.”

“You ever been in love, Zamir?” he asks me. His words are slurred from drink, but he has learned our native tongue well. “I am. W-was. There was a girl, a Countess I was engaged to. You wouldn't think there'd be romance there, but I liked her. Was used to her. I was gonna marry her. She was gonna... *going...* to be my wife.”

“Was she good looking?” I ask. He hands me a picture. Short hair the color of chestnuts, eyes bright with intelligence. She wears brown pants and a blue shirt that reveals the top of her breasts. She is beautiful. She is breathtaking. I tell him so.

“Yeah, she is,” he agrees. I hand him back the picture, but he tells me I can keep it. “Fucking bitch. She went to University College London. Worked her way through it. That was fine, we would meet for lunch and... and things. And then she met this Japanese bitch, Sam Naka-something. Nisha-something? I don't know.”

“Your girl, she is a lesbian?” I ask.

“She seemed to like my cock enough when we were together,” James answers, scowling and looking into the night. “No, Sam wanted her to go to some fucked up island in the middle of nowhere with some famous nutjob. Something Whitman.”

“James Whitman?”

“The only good thing about that man is his first name,” James grumbles. I disagree, but hold my tongue. Whitman's World was a popular show here, an excellent comedy. “Something happened out there. She came back and was all stand off-ish. Ducking my calls, breaking dates. People were saying

she'd gone nuts. And then I find out she's fucking off to Syria and I go to ask her about that and she... she..."

I nod and place my hand on his shoulder. I understand. We finish the bottle in silence.

We finish late, the guards helping us both to stand. He offers to let me sleep in his home that night, and I take him up on the offer. There is something about being the guest of a man who is my guest that I find funny, and he laughs when I share the joke. We are nearly to his home when we see it – a farmer coming to market early, his wares in a cart pulled by a pony.

"What the...?" says James, and I turn to look at him. He has stopped, staring at the farmer and the mostly naked girl that is his beast of burden, and I remember that the English do not have this.

"It is a ponygirl," I tell him. "I will explain in the morning, when we are both sober."