

ALCHEMEA
BOOK I
A TALE OF WATER & DARKNESS



ZOZIMOS

ALCHEMEA PART ONE:
A TALE OF WATER & DARKNESS
BY ZOZIMOS

Special thanks to
The Sikh Art & Film Foundation, and the Sikh Research Institute for their
resources.

This tale is dedicated to the unknown and the unnamed thousands of
history.
You were lost, but not forgotten.
May your stories be told.

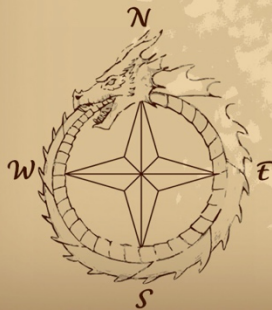
“Death would not be called bad, O people, if one knew truly how
to die.”

- Guru Nanak



The Eastern Mediterranean August 1922

- - Kingdom of Greece
- - Turkish Nationalist Movement
- - Italian Empire
- - British Empire



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|---------------|--------------------|
| 1. Alexandria | 7. Bodrum |
| 2. Rhodes | 8. Gallipoli |
| 3. Delfini | 9. Dumlupinar |
| 4. Kos | 10. Constantinople |
| 5. Athens | 11. Ankara |
| 6. Smyrna | 12. Lanarca |

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Cover and artwork by Ava Varszegi.
Cover design by Zozimos.

Digitally distributed by Zozimos, in the United States of America.

First printing, 2021.

www.alchemeaseries.com

I

From the Black Land

Saturday, August 5th, 1922

Al Sabel Al Shamali, Egyptian Protectorate

Light poured in through the darkness.

A rope soon followed, dropping from the hole in the ceiling, and the two men made their descent.

The first scrambled quickly down the line while the other remained at the opening with his rifle trained. Once he had reached the sandy floor below, he struck a lantern, drew his pistol, and gave his partner the signal. The second man then slung his own weapon, and climbed down to join him. When he reached the bottom, he took the lantern from his partner, its glow giving new life to their forms in the dark chamber.

From head to waist, the first man was dressed as a Bedouin in a *shemagh* and a loose white shirt. A scarlet sash around his middle secured his sidearms; a Highland broadsword fitted with an ornate basket hilt, and a holster for his Webley. If that were not unusual enough, his skin was colored fair and his hair an auburn-gold, and he wore a simple handlebar mustache where a Bedouin would grow his beard to full length. These differences continued below his waist, where he wore a pair of dusty brown trousers and sturdy leather boots, each stained white with salt marks. At six feet tall and broad in the chest, this mustachioed motley of a man was Mad Jack MacGregor, a true son of the Scottish Highlands; known by some as a rogue, others as a bastard, many as a ghost, and only one as a friend.

The latter stood behind him; Sanwar Singh Dhamija, Sikh warrior and son of Punjab. He was two inches taller than his fellow, and just as strongly built, if not more so. Unlike Jack however, he was dressed

in uniform blue; *dastar*, tunic, and trousers all spotless indigo, save the black bandoliers across his chest that held his pistol, pack, sheathed *kirpan* dagger, and his long, curved *tulwar*. Where Jack wore a simple handlebar, Sanwar's mustache curled upwards, freshly waxed, and his beard hung thickly all the way to his chest. This made his face look even longer, more placid than it was already. With solemn tourmaline eyes, he bore himself with a quiet countenance to match. He was known by few, though once it had been more.

As Sanwar cast the lantern's glow about the room, weird shadows fell across their faces, and its eerie light caught a wild glint in Jack's amber eyes. There was naught around them but great shelves of books, which stretched nearly to the ceiling high above, and empty, silent darkness.

Their surroundings gathered, the path seemed obvious, so together they proceeded straight ahead, across the sand heaped floors. Jack led with his pistol,

and Sanwar followed just behind carrying the light. Even as they moved, the boundaries of the room were yet invisible to them, obscured ahead and behind by the dark, and by the towering rows of shelves on either side. Papyrus scrolls and leather-bound books were stacked there in countless hundreds, their pages inscribed with draconic texts of ancient Greek or Hieroglyphs, or other tongues so long forgotten.

Jack continued past them, his interest singularly forward. Some minutes later, a wall appeared in front of them, and as they neared it, something crunched beneath Jack's step.

Blackened bone protruded from the sand, a withered hand outstretched. Jack knelt beside it, and carefully wiped away the sand around it to reveal the grim visage buried underneath.

Flesh still clung to the body, tightly stretched over the man's shriveled skeleton like aged leather. His mouth was shrunken and twisted in a cruel half-smile. A bronze helmet rested atop the corpse's head. It was

Ptolemaic by the looks of it, its patina not yet green, but instead a reddish hue.

Jack exchanged a look with Sanwar, but continued on, leaving the body behind them. This one had clearly lingered here too long, and they would not do the same.

At the wall, Sanwar passed the lantern to Jack, and drew out a rock hammer and a stout metal pin from his pack. His gentle tappings upon the dusty stone yielded solid clinks for a good while, until at last, one strike gave a dull, hollow sound that left a lingering echo in the silent hall. Sanwar then replaced his tools with a brush, and swept away the dust around the area, while Jack kept watch behind him.

The cool, dry darkness down here was making his hair stand on end. His palms and brow still sweat however, a thoroughly unpleasant combination. Regardless, he kept the grip on his revolver firm, and his eyes fixed upon the darkness.

Moments later, Sanwar's brushing had revealed a shining golden plate on the stonework at just below his eye level. A device of twin serpents wrapped around a winged scepter was engraved in the center of this round metal piece, which sparkled like sunlight even in the gloom.

At his request, Jack passed a vial of *Aqua Regia* from their bags to Sanwar, who applied it generously. Within minutes, the liquid had dissolved the gold completely, and beyond it was a hollow catch with a lever inside. With some trepidation, Sanwar reached in, and pulled. The stone wall scraped back a moment later, revealing a hidden passage just behind, and a stairway descending deeper into the earth.

The air grew colder as they traveled downwards. The dry, sandy smell from the chamber above soon became replaced with a fetid stench like rotten eggs. Despite the smell, the men persisted until the stairs opened into a second chamber, smaller than the first, with this doorway as its only exit.

Here, theirs was not the only light. A faint green glow emanated from across the room, and as they drew nearer, treading lightly past bodies of ancient warriors fallen on the sand swept floor, they came to learn its source.

The Emerald Tablet rested on a slab of stone, held out at chest height by an onyx statue.

It was bigger than either had expected; twelve inches wide by eighteen in length, and just over two inches thick. Its weird glyphs rose off its smooth, glassy surface, and could be traced along with a finger, if one dared to touch it. The pair kept their hands at a distance however, and examined their surroundings further before making any sudden motions.

In unison, they turned their heads upwards to the statue. Staring down at them was an ibis-headed god with human form; a familiar sight, for he was a god of many names.

To the Egyptians, he was Thoth; To the Romans, Mercury; the Arabs, Idris; but no matter the age or culture, his dominion remained the same: Alchemy and Magic.

True practitioners of these crafts called him, *Hermes Trismegistus*; “Hermes the Thrice Great” in Greek, and believed him to be their secret art’s progenitor. Yet, if this icon kept any secrets now, his glossy eyes betrayed not one, and only stared back lifelessly at these two mortals.

Jack urged Sanwar to stand behind the statue as he collected a discarded spear off the ground. Joining his companion, Jack then used the butt end of it to lightly prod the Tablet forward.

Colorless acid spewed forth from the statue’s beak, reaching as far back as the doorway.

Sanwar raised an eyebrow as Jack grinned and tossed away the spear’s remaining half. He spent the next few minutes stroking his mustache, scanning the

statue up and down with that mad look in his eyes again.

At last, he arrived at a different answer. Finding himself a shield amongst the bodies, Jack rigged a spare length of rope to its inner straps. With ginger care, he then placed its convex bronze shape over the Tablet, and rejoined Sanwar's side behind the statue. His partner only sighed, and covered his eyes.

Line in hand, Jack gave the rope a tug. The shield jerked towards him from the slab, and took the Tablet with it. Without the Tablet's weight atop it, the slab lifted several inches, and the acid spewed forth again. It splattered harmlessly against the shield, but burned the rope apart. It made no difference, though. The whole thing had enough momentum to carry the Tablet right off the slab and straight towards Jack. It landed softly in the sand right at his feet alongside the undamaged shield.

Sanwar sighed, dusted off the heavy Tablet, and placed it inside his pack, while Jack simply gave him

a shrug. He would have followed the gesture with a joke, had he not noticed an eerie crimson glow rising from within the statue. In seconds, Hermes' dull onyx sheen had transformed fully into a threatening red.

A sudden cry sent Jack wheeling back around, pistol at the ready. A gnarled hand had reached out of the sand, and clutched Sanwar by the ankle. Instinctively, Sanwar had his *tulwar* out in a flash, and in another, the hand was slashed away. He brought down a second cut as the rest of the corpse tried to shamble to its feet, laying it to rest once again.

However, there were more.

Shapes writhed and twisted out of the sand, two, three at a time. Gaunt fingers grasped ancient weapons from the floor. Raspy air escaped from rotted lungs, but drew no breath. Flecks of scarlet glimmered in empty sockets beneath their helms. Bronze armor shimmered, as the growing horde of long dead warriors stood and advanced.

Jack holstered his pistol. The room was too small he realized, and a stray shot was bound to ricochet. Instead, he took Sanwar's flank with his own sword drawn. Keeping the statue at their back, they hewed at anything that lumbered into measure, aiming carefully for gaps in the armor.

The creatures' stiff movements were easy to anticipate and their aged bones easier to cut, yet the swarm of them came tirelessly on. Half a dozen bodies lay between the men when they abandoned their attempt to fight, and scrambled back. There was little room to retreat, but ducking behind the statue bought them a sliver of time, barely enough to catch their breath.

Jack fell against the statue's back, chest heaving. His heart pounded and his breath was labored, but the sound of moaning rasps and creaking bones soon drowned them out. He looked to his right to see Sanwar drawing out his pistol. His friend shut his eyes, and murmured a quiet prayer.

Jack drew his pistol too. Fuck the ricochet, he would go down fighting.

Then, he saw salvation.

Jack dropped his gun, and snatched away the fallen shield at his feet. With both hands, he tossed it like a discus, not at his enemies, but at the nearest wall. The shield bounced off it, back towards Hermes, where it sparked against his empty tray. It was not a beautiful throw, but the desired effect had been perfectly achieved.

The slab fell, then rose, as the weight of the shield struck, and for a third time, acid came gushing forth from the statue's beak.

The ancient warriors crumbled on their feet as they continued their stolid advance, unfeeling to the steaming acid on their skin. Fragile flesh was turned to ash in a matter of steps, leaving only empty bronze upon the sand when it was over.

Once the air had cleared, Jack stepped out from behind Hermes' buttocks, and retrieved his fallen pistol. With a lazy twirl, it landed back inside its holster.

“I swear that you will be the death of me one day, Jack MacGregor,” Sanwar bemoaned, once he saw that it was safe to poke his head out.

Jack threw his friend an insufferable grin. “You know, you’re acting awfully cross to the man who’s saved your life.”

“As are you.”

“You never fail to mention it,” Jack muttered.

“Well, you never fail to warrant it,” Sanwar countered.

Their banter could have gone all day had the moaning rasps not come again. More hands were bursting free from the sand to replace the others.

“Aw fuck,” Jack groaned.

The two went bounding up the stairs and out the room, the clang of armor sounding louder behind them with every step. Stealing a glance behind, Jack saw tiny red gleams filling the darkness, then a flash of tortured, rotted faces snarling after them, as the lantern swayed wild with Sanwar's running stride.

At the landing, he dropped the light, and rushed for the door. Jack dove through its closing frame, rolled, then jumped back to his partner's side. Together, with their backs against the door, he and Jack used all their weight to close it shut.

The stonework groaned slowly forward. The rasping moans and metal clatters grew louder from within. Footsteps sounded like artillery shells as the mass of bodies thundered up the stairs, while the door was only halfway shut despite their strain. The men pushed harder, slipping and sliding on the fickle sand.

Red light glowed brighter through the door way. Leathery fingers reached out and clawed at Sanwar's

wrist. The weight of the onslaught now pressed back against them, as the creatures shoved into one another to break free. In a show of final desperation, the two men let forth a scream of effort. Together, they heaved with all their might.

Jack's feet slid out from under him and Sanwar toppled forward, but the door slammed shut, and the rasping moans fell silent.

“Well, that could have been worse,” said Jack, spitting out sand.

Sanwar tossed away a severed hand from his shoulder. “Please. Do not utter that phrase again.”

“Why?”

Slapping sand away from his beard, Sanwar took back the lantern. “Because without failure, matters inevitably worsen in every instance that you do.”

Jack was about to retort when Sanwar was proven right...again. A cluster of dark shapes wandered out from behind the bookshelves.

“Fair enough,” Jack could admit.

Creaking bones turned to face them. Red eyes beamed impassively at their newfound prey, ready to kill. Weapons exited scabbards, poised to strike.

Sanwar only sighed, snapped his pistol into hand, and fired.

A skeleton fell away with a shattered head, tearing an opening in their undead ranks. The others erupted in violence as the men bolted through it, and gave chase after them.

Sword in his right hand, pistol in his left, Jack guarded Sanwar’s rear as he lit their passage down the towering aisles of shelves. A javelin hurtled past, smashing into a pile of scrolls and sending loose parchment fluttering. Jack returned the shot, lead tearing through bronze armor, and felling the attacker.

A sword cut followed after. Jack parried it, blocked another, then spun about, and continued after Sanwar.

They raced towards the distant halo of light beneath the entryway, their footfalls pounding on the sand. Every step was a struggle on such treacherous ground, yet the two men could not slow themselves, for the shambling horde was tireless behind them.

Their legs had turned to rubber when they stumbled into the blinding circlet of light. The rope was there, dangling from the gap in the ceiling.

Jack pushed Sanwar towards it. “Go!”

The swarm was nearing, each twisted face coming into horrid visibility, closing in from every side.

Sanwar leveled his pistol. “No, I will hold them!”

“You’ve got the Tablet!”

Sanwar nodded, realizing, and hurled the lantern. Kerosene immolated a pair of foes that drew too close. Then hand over hand, he climbed at a leopard’s

speed towards the opening. Jack fired his last few shots into the nearest enemies, sheathed his weapons, and followed after.

He was barely up the line, when a sword came swinging for his neck. Twisting back, he tried to dodge away. Instead of flesh, the blade sliced hemp, sending Jack falling straight back to earth. He dropped the chord of rope to catch himself with both hands, then sprung instantly back onto his feet.

His was sword drawn in time to counter an oncoming strike. Jack reposted it, and danced away from another clumsy blow. There were a dozen of these horrid things around him suddenly, and even more glowing lights were coming from the darkness. In desperation, he fell back against the nearest bookshelf, as his enemies encircled him.

A pair of the nearest lunged forward to strike. Jack could not parry both attacks at once, but he had no need. As soon as they advanced, they fell away, heads crumbling in a smoking ruin.

Shots rang out from above. Sanwar had resumed his position at the entryway with rifle in hand. In practiced rhythms, he fired off a round, and pumped back the bolt to chamber another. His aim was deadly true, and anything that got too close to Jack soon dropped in scatter of metal and bone before it could strike.

Knowing his partner's ammunition would not last long, Jack jammed his sword back into its scabbard and clambered up the bookshelf, where the creatures were too awkward to follow.

In seconds, he was at its top. The rope hung only a leap away. He stepped back to the shelf's far edge, ready to jump the distance. Yet he nearly fell instead, as the whole shelf teetered. Jack could only press himself flat against its top to keep his balance. Glancing down, he watched as skeletal shapes swarmed below him to shove their bodies against the shelf. Their sheer mass rocked the sturdy bookshelf slowly back and forth.

Timing its motion, Jack scrambled back onto his feet when the shelf reached its apex again. Then, when it tipped forward, he made his jump, using its momentum to propel himself even farther.

For a long moment, he was airborne.

Then, somehow, some way, his fingers found their hold around the rope and grasped it hard. He jerked with the sudden halt of motion and lost his grip in one hand, but still he held on.

As he dangled there above the swarming mass, javelins flung towards him. One sailed past his cheek, sending forth a rush of air. Yet, Jack was rising. The next few that came, arced beneath his feet.

In his confusion, he looked up to find his savior in Sanwar, who was dragging him towards the light. As he rose, the light blinded Jack, and the coldness of the chamber fled. The day's heat stung his face. He smelled the salty air again, and heard the seagulls crying. Then, strong hands caught his wrists, and

yanked him forward. Jack came spilling back into the summer swelter. He landed hard in the sand and tumbled over, flat on his back.

When at last his eyes had adjusted to the brightness, Jack rose to see Sanwar dropping a heavy slab of stone back over the entryway. His friend sank down from the effort and for a moment, the two men sat there among the sand dunes under a blazing Egyptian sun to catch their breath.

The respite did not last long. A grin stretching across his face, Jack rushed forward and near toppled Sanwar with the biggest hug he had ever given.

“Mera bhra! We’ve got it, you bloody bastard! We’ve got it!”

“So we do. So we do,” Sanwar managed between panting laughs. Despite the heat, they held the embrace for a good long while.

“You’ve got it, right?”

“Yes, I have got it,” Sanwar chuckled.

Jack released Sanwar to let him draw the Tablet from his pack. Instantly, they recoiled from the emerald brilliance shining off its glossy surface.

“Aye, you’ve got it alright,” Jack laughed. He tried to lift the Tablet in triumph, but lost his balance from its unexpected weight, and fell over in the sand.

From their post at a nearby withered tree, their camels snorted in amusement.

“Aw, quiet you,” Jack returned playfully. He turned back to a smirking Sanwar, and patted the Tablet. “Aye, it’s beautiful. We’d best be getting this back to Alexandria.”

“Actually, you’d best be giving that to me.”

The expensive scent of Turkish tobacco lazed downwind just then, and with it came a familiar voice, just as smoky, just as rich.

Jack scowled.

“Saxon.”

He and Sanwar turned around. A line of rifles had appeared atop a low ridge just a few yards away. Hard eyed men stood behind every weapon, aimed and ready.

Their leader stepped out in front of their ranks, empty-handed, save for a long, plump cigar twirling in his fingers. One last drag and he tossed the thing away, then strode down the dune to meet Jack and Sanwar face to face.

The shape of the Lord John Henry Saxon loomed over them, blocking out the sun.

“Hello Jack, old boy.” A pearly smile flashed through the shade around his face. “Glad to see you’re still alive. I’d heard the most dreadful news about you. Thought I’d never see you again.”

“So did I,” said Jack.

“Devilish as ever, old boy,” Saxon grinned. He then looked to Sanwar. “And you must be the Indian I’ve heard so little about.”

“I have heard of you, Lord Saxon,” was all Sanwar said.

“Who hasn’t?” Saxon replied. “Now as delightful as this reunion is, gentlemen, my boat is waiting for me, and it is awfully hot. I think it’s high time you handed that over to me.”

“The Tablet?” Jack’s incredulity was on full display. “What would you ever want with it?”

Saxon shrugged. “The same thing as you, Jack. The Philosopher’s Stone.” He then extended forth a massive hand, the ruby studded ring on his fourth finger catching a glint of sunlight as he did. “And I’m much obliged that you’ve retrieved the Emerald Tablet on my behalf. So much easier to make the Stone when you’ve got the formula, isn’t it? Give it here now.”

Jack made no motion. “Go ahead and kill me then, you bastard.”

“How you wound me, Jack!” Saxon laughed. “I would never want to kill such a dear friend as you!” He let Jack seethe on that a moment before adding, “Besides, the desert will do it for me.”

It was lucky that Saxon stood between them and his men, otherwise they would have shot Jack just then.

Jack’s gun was in his hand in a instant, but even with a pistol in his face, Saxon did not relinquish his smile. Instead, that smile quickly turned into laughter, as Jack pulled the trigger of his Webley, and it gave a disappointing click.

Empty.

“Oh Jack, old boy,” he chided with a clicking tongue. “Will I have to kill you now, the way you’ve behaved?” He stepped aside, and raised a massive hand to his men.

“Wait!” Sanwar cried. He drew the Tablet from his pack.

“No,” Jack growled.

Sanwar gave him a sympathetic look, but nothing more. He surrendered the Tablet.

“That’s the idea,” Saxon grinned. “You ought to listen to your servant more often, Jack. He’s got more sense than you.”

“He’s not my servant.”

“All the same,” Saxon shrugged, and snatched away the Tablet with both hands. He then called a man over, and passed it off to him before giving orders to the others. “Shoot their camels. Take their guns, and whatever other valuables you want.”

The command was relayed back in Arabic. Sanwar hung his head as one man swiftly ended their camels with a pistol. The others rushed forward, spilling out their packs for anything of worth. There was not much. They threw the empty leather bags onto the ground, followed by what was left of Jack and Sanwar’s water.

Their swords however, were brought to Saxon for his inspection.

“Leave them,” he said, examining the broadsword’s make. He tossed the weapons in the sand at Jack’s feet. “If you’re a real man Jack, you’ll kill yourself by falling on it. I suspect you’d prefer it that way.” He smiled and nodded to both of them. “Gentlemen, it’s been a pleasure.”

And with that, Saxon and his men vanished over the dune.

Jack chased after them. From the dune’s peak, he could only watch helplessly as they loaded back onto their nearby boats, and shoved off the white sands into a calm stretch of turquoise waters to where a gigantic yacht waited for them just off the coastline.

“I’ll kill you one day, Saxon!” Jack shouted after them.

“No you won’t, Jack MacGregor!” Saxon called back, as his men rowed away.

Saxon's laughter was the very last thing Jack heard before he sank to his knees and gave a long, agonizing scream.

Soon, the boats had reached the yacht. Minutes after that, the huge white vessel blew its horn and sailed away, leaving Jack and Sanwar all alone on the North Egyptian desert.

It was two hundred miles back to Alexandria.

II

Come Forth the Dead

Monday, August 21st, 1922

Alexandria, Egyptian Protectorate

A slick, sable Dussenberg glided down the dusty streets, past tall white buildings flanked with rows of palm trees, horse drawn carriages, quiet outdoor cafes, and wide-eyed fruit sellers pushing their wares out of the speeding car's path.

In the back seat, the Brigadier lit his fourth cigarette of the day.

Independence couldn't come soon enough, he thought, sucking in a bellyful of smoke. Three more months and he would be on a boat back to London, and after that, the fastest train to Inverness, or so he hoped.

God, how a Highland gale would feel compared to this damnable heat! Nine years he had been

languishing in it, instead of leading men to victory, where he belonged. Nine years, and the army had sat him at a desk, and made him fat because of it.

Of course, in the beginning, he had applied for a field commission, but somehow His Majesty's Royal Idiots decided he would be better suited to "administrative duties" here in Alexandria. So Conall had fought their war for them in fearsome skirmishes of ink pens and paperwork while lesser men stole all the glory in Arabia or France.

So much for the Great War; the greatest struggle to ever face God's green earth, and he had missed the whole damn thing.

Now the Army had the damned nerve to say that he was "non-essential" to British interests in the Protectorate. The city garrison was to be reduced, and he replaced. Supposedly Egyptian autonomy required less British military counsel (dubious), so Conall could go home and enjoy the rest he had earned from all his years of service to the Crown.

Only, all his years of service had earned him nothing but restlessness instead. By God, he was a man of action! Three weeks hunting on Skye, and he'd be wishing his rifle was trained on deadly savages not docile bucks, he knew.

Some great end this was for the Hero of the Sudan. How had Donald not managed to die of boredom already in his retirement?

The car rounded past the Majestic Hotel, then the plaza with the fountain, finally squeaking to a halt outside the police station. Conall drew his last puff on the cigarette, then tossed it out as his driver opened the door for him.

Chief Inspector Bishoy was waiting on the steps with several men and a stiff salute.

“Bonjour, mon General,” he said. His French was painfully accented.

Damn that hook-nosed Copt and his professionalism, thought Conall. Couldn't he see that his superior's mood was soured? Conall grunted

back the correct response with a hasty salute, and followed Bishoy and his officers inside.

“Two men were found outside the city days ago,” Bishoy explained, leading Conall to Evidence. “They came from the desert. A white man. Scottish. And an Indian. No passport, no identification.”

“You told me over the damn telephone,” the General bristled. “Now what’s this got to do with me?”

“The white one mentioned you by your name, sir. And he had this.” He gestured to a nearby table.

A chill went down Conall’s spine, sapping all the heat from the August air. He took the sword from the table.

Lann Dhearg gleamed deathly sharp as he drew its blade from the scabbard. Since Culloden Moor, it had never lost its edge, had never known an inch of rust. White steel still shone before him just like he had seen when Donald carried it to war. Even as he held it now in his lesser hands, Conall could feel its

power surging through his arm. The *Red Blade* had not yet diminished.

“These men,” Conall asked at last, his eyes still running up and down the length of the blade. “You have them here in a cell?”

“Yes, sir. They were transferred here last night.” Bishoy removed his fez, and wiped his brow with a sigh. “I’m afraid we haven’t had time to fully question-”

“Just take me to them!” Conall snapped. Christ, sweat was running down his back already.

“At once, sir.”

Conall sheathed the weapon, returned it to the table, then followed the Chief Inspector down to the gloomy cells beneath the station. In the one farthest back, the prisoners lay with eyes closed, breathing weakly in the suffocating heat.

Conall approached the white man.

It was him for certain, sleeping there beside that massive Indian. He might have been sun-tanned and

dressed like a damn Arab, but those amber eyes and auburn hair were unmistakable. Once upon a time, he and Donald had looked the same.

Jack's eyes blinked open. Once adjusted to dimness, they met Conall's and a wave of recognition washed over him, as did a wide, incorrigible grin.

His hand touched his forehead in a mock salute. "Reporting for duty, Uncle."

Conall glared at Bishoy. "Get them out of there. Now."

Ice water filled his glass again as soon as Jack had drained it. Swallowing, he helped himself to thicker slice of roast beef, then washed it down once the serving girl had backed away to rejoin her fellows in standing silently by the walls. Sanwar meanwhile, contented himself with buttered rolls and the meager vegetables at his uncle's table; mashed peas and boiled potatoes.

The General ate nothing, despite the banquet spread out for just the three of them in his dining hall. Instead, he only lit himself another cigarette while he continued to stare at his nephew's wolfish appetite.

"We thought you were dead," he said at last. His voice was weak.

"Sorry to disappoint," Jack remarked between a mouthful of beef. He seared off a healthy piece of meat with a silver knife and fork before he had even swallowed the first.

"This isn't funny, Jack."

"It is a wee bit."

Conall tapped out a headful of ashes into a polished tray, next to which lay their swords. Both were under the tight guard of his uncle's pudgy hand. "Four years...four years you've been gone, and now that's all you've got to say?"

Jack said nothing now either.

“Do you know how your poor mother is going to take this when I have to tell her that you’re still alive? Jesus, she’ll have a fit! And your father? Your father...” Conall let the words trail off, and shook his head.

Ah yes, his father. Jack rolled his eyes.

“Well, that’s their problem,” he replied.

“Their problem!?” Scarlet flushed across his uncle’s face. The man’s neck strained to escape its sweat-marked collar. “Jesus wept! I’ve had enough trouble in this damned country with the Bedouins and the bureaucrats without your insolence to top it off! We had a funeral for you with full honors!” His shouting gave way to a fit of coughing, which he steadied with a long drag on his cigarette. “Now I have to explain to my brother,” Conall wheezed, angling his heavy frame back in his chair. “That his son is both alive and a liar.”

This made Jack grin. Conall glowered at him, but took a moment first to smooth out his uniform, and

dab his brow with a napkin. Collected, he continued speaking. “Will you please explain to me what this is all about? Tell me there’s a good reason, Jack. Tell me why you didn’t come back to us. Tell me what in Christ’s name were you even doing out there in the desert!”

Jack took a long drink of water, but otherwise remained willfully silent while his uncle glared at him.

“If this is about that stupid mystical rock you’ve been blithering on about since boyhood, I swear...” Conall coughed again. “Are you aware of how many international laws you’d be breaking by going out and robbing a grave?”

“Maybe you should ask John Henry Saxon.”

“Saxon?” At first, his uncle was confused, but that swiftly shifted back to his familiar irritability. “Lord Saxon had permission from the local government for a state-sanctioned archaeological expedition. Lord

Saxon is an upstanding, law-abiding gentleman. Lord Saxon is—”

“—a royal prick,” Jack finished for him.

“Enough.” Conall jammed his fuming cigarette into the ashtray. “I ought to telegraph your father this instant.”

Jack laughed bitterly. “What am I, a bloody schoolboy again?”

“You’re damn well acting like one!” The anger was rising in his uncle once again. His khaki uniform was stretching tighter across his neck than before.

“Playing at adventure in the desert, looking for buried treasure? Lying to your own kin? It’s bloody childish! God! Do you even know the amount of pain you’ve subjected on this family!?”

“Aye, they know a lot about pain, don’t they?”

Jack found his own voice rising.

“I had no idea you could be so cruel, so selfish, so cowardly—”

Conall's words were interrupted. One of the serving girls screamed despite herself. Sanwar's knife screeched against his plate. Conall flared, blood rushing to his face.

Sharply, Jack pulled his bent fork out of the table.

"You're going to let us go now," he said in a cold, measured tone.

"Don't be ridiculous."

"You're going to let us go now," Jack repeated. Then in a flash, he was on his feet, the silver knife pressed against his own throat. "Unless, of course, you'd like to explain to me dear old mummy and da how I was secretly alive and well for all these years, until the very moment you let me die in front of you."

"Jack..." Sanwar rose and tried to reach for him, but Jack brushed him aside with his free hand.

"Uncle."

The servants stifled gasps, and remained at their posts. Sanwar backed away, while Conall glowered at them both. “Stop this madness. It’s folly.”

“Sanwar and I will be leaving now,” Jack continued, that mad gleam growing in his eyes.

“With our effects, if it pleases you.”

He nodded to their swords.

His uncle made no motion towards them, so Jack made one instead, drawing a line of blood on his neck.

“Uncle, if you please...?”

Mustache twitching so hard it might fall off, Conall rose and shoved the *tulwar* over to Sanwar. His grip lingered on *Lann Dhearg*, however. Tears looked imminent as the weapon was finally relinquished. “You don’t deserve to carry that anymore.”

Jack took away the blade from him. “No Uncle, I think I’m the only one who does.” Then, in a fluid motion, he strapped on his sword, and tossed the

knife back on the table. “Thanks for the meal,” was the last thing he ever said to his uncle before walking out with Sanwar.

When his nephew was gone from his house, Conall sank back into his chair, dismissed the servants for the day, and sat alone in silence, hot beads of sweat running down his face.

From Conall’s house, Jack and Sanwar had retreated back to the main streets, melting into the crowd. In a sea of faces from a dozen lands across the Empire, theirs would surely vanish for a while, hopefully long enough to avoid the men the Brigadier would inevitably send after them. In the meantime, Jack led them down a side-street away from the busy spots filled with British folk, to the Arab neighborhoods where he knew no one would come looking, and where he and Sanwar could speak in English freely.

Twenty years later, and the narrow, shady streets had not changed a bit. Hookah smoke and the wafts of sizzling meats sent him back to the month he had spent sneaking down them on free afternoons, while his father met with old friends from the war. His father had wanted Jack to see the city where he was born before they made the final passage to his work in Smyrna, and so Jack had seen it, though maybe not the parts his father would have wanted.

Around a corner, if his memory served, would be *Café Qarwa*, and indeed it was still there, just as Jack had left it. Smoke was hazing out its open doors to a dark interior where Arab men laughed and rolled the dice at games of backgammon. The sign overhead still hung loose and faded.

Jack emptied his boot, and retrieved the few scattered coins he had been hiding; his last. “Should be enough for coffee,” he said. “Come on.”

Sanwar raised an eyebrow. “You want us to go in there?”

“Aye, I need to think.”

“Is this establishment truly the best place to do so?”

Jack scratched his mustache and went inside anyway, so Sanwar sighed and followed after, holding his breath.

They found themselves a seat at the back, away from the Friday crowd, and ordered their coffees black. An old, local newspaper lingered on a nearby table, so Jack set about to reading it.

Much was happening in the world; Mandates from the French and British were taking effect in the Levant; stirrings of new leaders and movements on the Continent; negotiations for an armistice had failed between the Ottomans and Greece, continuing the war; and there was always trouble going on in India.

Beyond that, he struggled to read another word. He wanted so much to clear his head right now, but he seemed so far away, like his mind was miles in the

distance. It was all made worse by the stinging smoke and raucous laughter of the room, and the fresh memories of his screaming uncle flooding through his thoughts. What had once been a place of local leisure to him as a boy, was suddenly boiling his blood.

Of course, Jack had only scanned the headlines when Sanwar gave a disapproving cough. He lowered the pages to face an equally disapproving look.

“Are we not to discuss what has just transpired?” his partner asked.

“What’s there to discuss?” Jack tried to go back to reading. “We needed to escape jail, then my uncle’s house, and we needed our swords back. I did what I had to. I improvised.”

“Why is it that every time you improvise, your life is always put in jeopardy?”

“Sort of comes with the pursuit of an almighty object, doesn’t it?”

“Neither of us is a stranger to occupational hazards, Jack,” Sanwar sighed. “But reckless endangerment, I cannot abide.”

“Look, it’s the bloody world that’s endangering us!” This afternoon was proving more than difficult. Was he going to have to fight Sanwar today as well as Conall? “For the love of Christ, I’m surprised we’re not dead already. God knows we would be, if we’d waited for Conall to bring my father down here. I took the only way out I could.”

“And what of Saxon? Was drawing your gun on him the only way out as well?” Sanwar raised one contentious eyebrow.

Shakily, Jack put the paper down. “You know what happens if Saxon gets his hands on the Stone.”

“Yet the world is here today, and so are we, Jack.”

“Aye, but for how much longer?” There was heat rising within him. “How much longer before he solves the Tablet’s code, and learns how to make a Philosopher’s Stone for himself?”

“How much longer indeed?” Sanwar mused. “That is ever the question, regardless. However, need I remind you that he had command of the scenario? Had I not surrendered it, we would most certainly be dead, and Saxon would have taken the Tablet just as facilely. Our circumstances would be admittedly worse then, would they not? You know this.”

“So help me,” pleaded Jack. “Help me figure out a plan to go after him. We haven’t got long—”

“We haven’t money either.”

“That’s never stopped us before. We’ve got to get out of Alexandria. Conall’s telegraphed my father by now, I know. That gives us what? A month? That’s long enough to find a ship. Or stowaway. Or steal one...”

“You cannot be serious, Jack.”

“I am serious, damn it! If it’s what I’ve got to do.”

“But it isn’t, neither is hurting yourself.”

Jack squeezed his shaking hand into a fist. His face was steaming hot. He hated this café, and that

Sanwar still had not raised his voice. Thank God, it was so loud in here or otherwise they all would hear him growling. “If risking my damn life for the Stone is what it takes, then by Christ, I’m going to have to risk it-”

“Jack, please-”

“-do what it takes-”

“You don’t-”

“I do-”

“You are not the only one at risk!”

Their words were interrupted by the jangling of cups.

“*Shukran,*” they said together, as the waiter laid their coffees on the table.

“Shall I fetch another chair, *effendi?*” he asked.

“I beg your pardon?” said Sanwar.

“Shall I fetch another chair? For your guest?”

They turned to see where the waiter was gesturing. Through the smoky room, a man had appeared. He was dressed in black, high collared

robes despite the heat, and wore dark glasses that hid his eyes completely. Besides his dress, he was otherwise nondescript, being of average height and slender build, with short dark hair and olive skin. He shook his head as the waiter tried to bring another chair to the table, and waved it away. The waiter nodded and retreated from view, as the man crossed over to their table. “Misters MacGregor and Dhamija, I presume?”

Jack leaned back to catch his breath. This man’s accent was difficult to place. English he spoke well enough, though Jack recognized a tinge of Greek or perhaps Italian intonation underneath now that he was listening for it.

“That’s a possibility,” Jack allowed after a moment’s hesitation.

The man gave a thin smile, and pushed back his glasses. “Come now, Mister MacGregor. Two men looking as you do are quickly noticed in Alexandria.”

A gleam flashed across his dark lenses. “I assure you that I mean you no harm.”

Sanwar shifted in his seat. “May I enquire what business you have with us?”

“My ‘employer’, let us call him, requires your expertise.”

“Regarding?”

“I am afraid that matter must be discussed in private.” He spoke the words with cool demeanor.

“Seems a wee bit odd to have us trust a man whose name we don’t even know,” Jack remarked, throwing a look askance to Sanwar.

The man bowed his head with one hand over his heart. “My most humble apologies. Allow me to introduce myself. You may call me, ‘Nero’.”

Jack scratched his mustache. “You any good with a fiddle?”

“I am sorry?”

“Forget it.” Jack flipped the newspaper back over his face. His heart was still racing, but he had to give

the impression of calm. “Whatever you want from us Mister Nero, we’re not interested. Got more pressing matters right now, you see. Sorry.”

“You will be paid most handsomely, I can assure you,” Nero countered. “And if I am not mistaken, you may require transportation as well. I have a ship waiting-”

“We can handle that ourselves, thank you.”

Sanwar hesitated. “Jack, perhaps we should-”

“Sorry, not interested,” Jack said once more with finality. He took a long slurp of coffee for additional effect.

Yet, Nero did not move away. Again, he only smiled. “And what if I were to tell you Mister MacGregor, that this matter had to do with the Philosopher’s Stone?”

That slurp became a spew as Jack nearly choked to death on his coffee.

III:

Bearing Vows They Gave

Wednesday, August 23rd, 1922

The Mediterranean Sea

Sea water kissed his face as he splashed a handful from the basin.

While Jack lay sleeping, Sanwar had stripped down to all but his *kachera*, a pair of white cotton undergarments, his *kirpan* blade held in its *gatra*, and the *kara* bracelet upon his wrist. Last of all, Sanwar had undone his *dastar*, and let his hair fall to its natural length, down below the waist.

First, he washed his face, then his hands, his hair and beard, and last of all, his feet. With *kangha* in hand, he combed his hair, his motions slow and deliberate, careful not to tug or tear. Once he had

finished, he lightly dabbed away any debris from his clothing with a damp cloth before redressing.

Finally, Sanwar sank into his meditation; into *Simran*, his flow, thankful that he, in spite of everything, was yet alive.

He then began his prayer by folding his hands and shutting his eyes. Slowly, he bowed his head to the floor, so that his heart rose above his head. When he returned to a seated position, he tucked his feet into his legs, careful not to face them forward. Here, the recitation began in proper. He uttered the five *bani*, the sacred morning prayers.

This momentary peace was the most important of his day. In this hour, he could set aside the material, and sit in counsel with God. Often, his mind would drift into that quiet place, but today, he struggled.

“*Waheguru.*” He spoke the name of God to cleanse his mind of soiled thoughts, of the five evils; ego, lust, wrath, greed, and attachment. All had been

committed in his life, but that was the error of this mortal world, and he tried not to dwell upon them.

Old memories returned however, welling up from deep inside. They came from when he had crossed this sea before. Four times he had done so.

The first was nineteen years ago. His father had deemed it time to get a proper education in England itself, and so a younger Sanwar had drifted through the Suez, seeing lands beyond India and the Punjab for the very first time. Somehow, the Mediterranean had seemed bigger than the Indian Ocean, though of course, he had always known better. His tutor had taught him tales of Odysseus and Alexander, and back then, he could almost believe that they were true; that this sea was the dominion of heroes, mermaids, serpents, wayward souls, and the savage kingdom of Poseidon. Below him had been a world that he would never fully see, just as there was above, and it was filled with life he would never know, for all the science in the world had not yet discovered it.

Perhaps there was something sad in that, some sorrow he had never known quite how to say. He still wondered if ancient sailors had felt the same way.

The second time he had made this voyage was on the troop ship, surrounded by his friends from home.

The third time was in retreat the following year. Gallipoli had failed to be the wooden horse for Churchill, so Sanwar had to sail again, this time to France. He traveled alone this time, and had gotten seasick.

The fourth time was just a few weeks ago with Jack. When they had learned at last that the Emerald Tablet lay buried in the Hidden Library of Alexandria, they had left the Continent behind. Four years they had been searching for it, in the hopes that it would teach them how to craft the Philosopher's Stone, and four years before that he had left Punjab.

Now, how much longer would it be before he could go home?

He looked down at his hands, at the scars that marred them down from finger to wrist, and let a single tear fall.

“Wahaguru.”

Sanwar chanted the truest name of God, of being, of everything; the true name of Oneness.

This word he sang again and again, until the darkness of his mind was washed away.

The sudden heave-pitch of a wave made Jack clutch the gunwales for balance. Swaying, he straightened himself, only to double over the side and vomit. Funny, he had never been seasick before.

“Aw fuck,” he groaned after a long breath. The salt smell of the sea helped to clear the acid taste from his mouth.

Eventually, Jack composed himself, and stared out at the water to clear his mind. A pod of dolphins sprang out from the distance, gayly splashing, moving

as one, without caution or care. Soon enough though, they could not outpace the ship, and vanished behind him, leaving Jack alone again.

He sufficed his time with trying to figure out his bearings. The sun was rounding towards his left shoulder, so they must be headed north, but where exactly they were going, he had no idea. No one would tell him either. Two days aboard this bloody ship, and Nero was nowhere to be found. The crew as well remained silent in Jack's presence. Alone, there was little else to do but sit and watch the waves go by.

That, and think.

Nothing good ever came from that, however.

His mind kept drifting back to Saxon. How had the bastard even found them? How did he even know they were alive? The questions churned inside him over and over again. All the while, the image of Saxon's shadowy face grinning down at him found its way back to the center of Jack's mind.

Years he had spent searching for the Tablet. Alchemy, he had loved since he could remember. Yet the moment he had finally gotten what he was looking for, that which could make the Philosopher's Stone, the Quintessence, the Elixir of Life, the Transmuter of lead into gold, Granter of Immortality, and keeper of powers unspeakable...it was gone.

Worst of all, he knew there was nothing he could have done. He only wished he had taken Saxon down with him. Maybe it would not have changed the fact that wicked hands would hold the Stone, but at least there would be one fewer pair upon this earth to wield its power. If anything, he owed it to his men.

“Beautiful, is it not?”

Jack wheeled about. Sanwar was standing behind him, staring at the sea as well. The sun was setting now, Jack realized, and a myriad of tangerines, pinks, and violets were glinting off the once cerulean waters.

“It’s bonnie,” Jack agreed. He slumped back down on the gunwales. “You’ve been below awhile.”

“Lost in meditation,” Sanwar put simply.

“Aye, me too.” Jack gave a rueful laugh. “Seems we’re a bit lost outside it, as well. Got no bloody idea where we’re going.”

“If we know not where we are going, then I would venture we could never truly be lost,” Sanwar remarked.

Damn him and his proverbial way of speaking. Jack could only crack a wane grin. “I suppose you’re right.”

“Besides, something tells me we will soon be told.”

“I suppose you’re right about that too.”

Together, they watched the sea a while.

“I am returning below,” Sanwar said at length. “Are you coming or will you be awhile?”

“I’ll be a while.”

Without another word, his friend gave a nod and took his leave. Then, Jack was alone again with nothing but his thoughts as the sunlight faded, and the night fell over a wine dark sea.

In the darkness, a familiar tune came into his head, and softly, he began to sing:

“Fhir a’bhàta, na hóro eile...”

Friday, August 25th, 1922

Rhodes, Kingdom of Italy

At dawn on the fourth day of the journey, the raucous calls of gulls heralded their arrival into port. The ship’s horn blew a long, hollow blast, drawing all to deck as they neared the harbor.

From the deck, their destination was made apparent. Though no towering colossus made of

bronze was there to greet them, the city was unmistakable beyond the landing of Mandraki Harbor.

Rhodes shone radiant before them, the rising sun glinting its brilliance off the white façades and azure domes of the city's tranquil skyline. Presiding over all of it were the familiar walls of the crumbling Hospitaller castle. Long had this city been the meeting ground of wars and wanderers. Ancient Hellenes, Arabs, Crusaders, and Turks alike had come to this island, largest of the Dodecanese, to trade the riches of east and west, and pass on with newer goods and stranger tales to other ports across the seven seas. The Ottomans had held the city last when Jack had seen it en route to Smyrna, but they had lost it almost ten years back. Now Italian flags hung from nearly every vessel, their tricolors proudly flapping in the sea breeze. That briny wind fluttered past to brush Jack's face as their own ship laid anchor.

Nero appeared to bid Jack and Sanwar follow him down the gangplank. Waiting beyond the dock was a horse-drawn carriage, accompanied by a pair of men dressed in the same black robes as their colleague. Silently, they invited Jack and Sanwar inside. Neither gave an argument about it, so the five of them loaded in, and took off down the waking streets.

As they trundled along the cobbles, fishmongers and fruit sellers were already at their peddles. Old women swept the stoops and carried firewood indoors, singing quiet songs in the lilting dialect of their islander Greek. Priests in black emerged from prayer, greeting passersby with kindly waves. Soldiers lazed against a wall, stopping their patrol for a morning cigarette, and to fan themselves with their caps. The carriage passed two orthodox churches, a synagogue, and a mosque before they reached their destination.

Passing underneath the shadow of its tattered gatehouse, the Hospitallers' castle awakened

something lost inside of Jack. Boyish wonder filled his heart. Even so diminished, these walls welled memories from deep within him, drowning out all confusion of why he and Sanwar might be there. His thoughts went back to the days he had spent across the islands, mucking about in every ruin from here to Anatolia, pretending he was off on some adventure. He would bring his books and read in the shade of columns, all to convince his father into thinking he was at his studies, but soon enough Jack's imagination would take him off the page, for who could read of history when it was all around him to be lived? He had found the company of those ruins far cozier than Cairndow. MacGregor Manor lacked their mystery, and perhaps that was because he knew all of its secrets already, but he suspected otherwise. The energy was different about somewhere like this, the places Morag's grandmother said were "thin"; places where the spirits crept in. How could his house be one of those? How could it have that sort of magic?

If someone ever came upon the ruin of his house in centuries time, he suspected no one would even remember that he had ever lived there.

Suddenly, a pang hit Jack throughout his body. That lost thing just awakened was lost again, maybe now forever. The startle of it sank in his guts. He wanted to be sick all over again, but his stomach was empty, and it felt like something had died inside him, something that could not be retched back out. His head swooned. His mind was swimming.

Yet, there was no more time to contemplate the feeling. The carriage came to a halt inside the castle ward, and Nero ordered them to exit. The two guards, bigger men than even Jack and Sanwar, then led them under the great tower of the inner keep to their quarters, where they were promptly locked inside.

That afternoon, Jack and Sanwar were given food, drink and at long last, a bath. It was their first in over a month.

The refreshments were not nearly enough to offset the many questions that they had about their captivity, but no answers would be provided. Their clothes laundered and smelling adequately, the pair of them were brought to a chamber on the highest floor of the keep. A stout knight with a thick bushy beard escorted them into a chamber, where they were left alone once more without a single word of explanation. The chamber was blessedly cool, at least. Jack wondered how the hell these knights could wander about the island without dying of heat exhaustion in their black uniforms.

A pair of chairs waited for them in front of an empty wooden desk when they entered, though either man was wary to sit just yet. Behind the desk was also a large display case flanked by two flags, one

black and the other cardinal, but each bearing the device of a white Maltese cross.

Arranged in a semi-circular fashion within case itself, were a series of swords. The leftmost was a medieval cruciform, twelfth century by Jack's guess, whose blade gleamed without a hint of rust. Beside it, was a ringed side-sword of the early Renaissance, followed by a swept-hilt rapier. Gradually, the other weapons traveled down the centuries, until they reached the rightmost; a military saber from before the War, ornamented with gold filigree in the pommel and a sharkskin grip.

The display had Jack thoroughly entranced, even after Sanwar had lost interest and drifted over to nearby bookcase. He mentioned something about various Alchemical volumes being on the shelves, but his voice seemed so far away that Jack hardly heard him. Instead, he was lost in the antique weaponry, staring past at his own warped reflection in the glass.

“Are you a collector yourself, Mister MacGregor?” came a sudden voice, accented and deep.

Both men turned to see that another had entered into the room. He was short in stature and slimly built, with salt and pepper hair balding down to the sides where it met the trimmings of a finely cropped beard. Like Nero, this man was dressed in the characteristic black robes, though his own bore the white Maltese cross upon the breast and collars. As he shut the door and crossed over to the desk, his measured countenance caused Jack to fidget for his own sword, only to realize it had not been returned to him while his clothes were being washed. Without it, he might as well have been completely naked standing in front of this man.

“Er, all I collect is dust and stories, I suppose,” Jack returned, his answer as fumbling as his hands.

“Then, perhaps I can add another story to your collection.” The man gestured to the chairs in front of the desk. “Please, seat yourselves.” Only when Jack

and Sanwar had done so, albeit with a healthy amount of trepidation, did the man take his own place across from them.

“Alright, who are you? What are we doing here? And what’s this got to do with the Philosopher’s Stone?” Jack asked outright. The questions had been simmering inside him for the past four days, and it seemed as good a time as any for some answers.

“Please forgive his hastiness,” Sanwar sighed.

The man raised a quiet hand and, when he spoke again, the cadence of his Maltese accent became more apparent. “No, no, Mister MacGregor is straight to the point. I admire that. Allow me to be the same. My name is Filippo Cassar, Grand Master of the Knights Hospitaller. I hope that you gentlemen will forgive the clandestine measures my colleagues have taken thus far.”

“A necessary precaution, I am certain,” Sanwar agreed, bowing his head to him. Jack gave only the slightest of nods.

“Indeed, for the nature of our meeting involves the utmost secrecy,” Cassar continued, pulling something out of a drawer in his desk. “Which, I believe, brings us to your other questions, Mister MacGregor. We have new evidence that the Philosopher’s Stone exists, and I will need both of you gentlemen to help me find it.”

Jack folded his arms. “Why would you need us in particular?”

“Come now,” Cassar chided. “Alchemy is your area of expertise, is it not? That was what I was told, at least.”

“Told by whom?”

A wraith of a smile flashed beneath Cassar’s dark beard. “It is my solemn duty to know things, but even still, it was not difficult to find the pair of you. Your

disappearance was not as successful as you might have hoped. There has been commotion in your wake ever since you left the Continent. If you mistrust my intentions, Mister MacGregor, you are free to leave, but you will hear no more of what I have to say about the Stone.”

Jack remained seated in obstinate silence.

“Please continue, if you would be so kind, Master Cassar,” said Sanwar on both of their behalves.

The Grandmaster obliged. “Well, as you may know, centuries ago, my Order has held the city of Smyrna against the onslaught of militant Islam,” he began. “Brave as we were, it fell to Muslim hands besides, and it was not safe for my brothers to return until three years ago, when the Greek Army retook the city. When we did, something from our old days was uncovered beneath the walls of Smyrna Castle; a tomb, bearing the effigy of our brother from the Third Crusade, Godfrey D’Amiens.”

“Should we know this name?” asked Jack.

“I hope not,” said Cassar. “For Godfrey was a man of many secrets, secrets which this Order has long fought to keep hidden.” Cassar placed a dark leather book between them on the desk. “Godfrey’s story was recorded in a diary by his fellow knights. This is a copy. Please inspect it. You may find something useful.”

In actuality, the book was only a source of more confusion. Weird symbols lined nearly every page, none that either Jack or Sanwar had ever seen before. Only the preface, the account of Sir Godfrey written in Latin, was comprehensible.

“If I may summarize,” Cassar went on. “Godfrey arrived in Smyrna in the year of our Lord, fourteen hundred, claiming that he had discovered a mysterious red stone somewhere in the Holy Land.”

“The Philosopher’s Stone,” Jack and Sanwar uttered together.

“The same,” Cassar confirmed. “And according to Sir Godfrey, he left behind a map to its location before he died, one that only ‘worthy men’ could find. I suspect that this meant an expert in the Art of Alchemy.”

“A master more like,” laughed Jack, turning the book upside down. “I can’t make heads or arse out of his Alchemical code.”

“Nor has any member of the Hospitallers in five hundred years,” said Cassar. “Though perhaps our ways of describing it were not so...pastoral. In any case-”

“Forgive me,” Sanwar interjected. “But if I am not mistaken, the Third Crusade occurred at the end of the twelfth century...which would make this fellow Godfrey upwards of two hundred years old.”

“Two hundred thirty-four actually, to be exact,” Cassar replied.

“Aye, but who’s counting really?” Jack said, blankly. He looked to Sanwar, who wore his same puzzled expression.

“God is always counting the passage of His World, Mister MacGregor,” Cassar put flatly. “Past, present, and future are but the same moment to our Lord. Sir Godfrey knew that better than any, I am sure. According to our records, he lay in bed one evening, and by the next, only a pile of dust remained. Strange, but such is the way of the Lord.”

Their puzzlement slowly changed to horror.

“In any case,” Cassar resumed. “The diary was brought to safety before Smyrna was retaken by the Muslims two years later. Since then, we have failed to understand its meaning, but perhaps we now have an opportunity.”

“You would have us decode this diary for you then?” asked Sanwar, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

“Decode the diary,” Cassar reiterated. “But also go to Smyrna, and examine Godfrey’s tomb. He knew Alchemy as you do, and it is my belief that another piece of this puzzle is hidden there, to be found only by those who know where to look. Nero will accompany you to the city, of course, where my contacts will be waiting-”

“Wait. Go to Smyrna?” The wooden chair creaked when Jack tensed in his seat. “Absolutely not.”

“Jack...” Sanwar said, placing a firm hand on his shoulder.

“Why are you resistant?” The Grandmaster cocked his head. “I would think that a man like you would have great interest in this opportunity.”

“I’m not going into a bloody war zone,” Jack growled.

“Smyrna is miles from the fighting. The city is safe for the time being. I understand that had negotiations gone a different way-”

“Negotiations failed,” Jack put flatly. “Britain, France, and Italy? Without them, Greece will lose. I’m surprised that Kemal Pasha hasn’t taken Smyrna back already.”

“Which is exactly why you must go there immediately,” The Grandmaster countered. “If the city is captured before the location of the map has been discovered, then all our chances will be lost and even worse...that knowledge may fall into the hands of the Turks.”

“Well, have I got news for you,” Jack laughed bitterly. “Because a man named Saxon’s got the Emerald Tablet already. You think the Turks are bad? Let me tell you that if Saxon’s got the bloody Tablet, then-”

Cassar raised a hand to silence him. His tone was short. “We are well aware of Lord Saxon’s presence, and you would be just as well to be aware of yours.” The Grandmaster composed himself, drawing back his shoulders and sitting more upright in his chair.

“Saxon has the Tablet, yes; the formula for the Philosopher’s Stone if legends are to be believed. But which would you rather have, Mister MacGregor? The Stone’s formula or the Stone itself?”

“I’d rather see Saxon dead,” Jack scowled.

“That is not an option that I can provide,” Cassar replied. “Unless of course, you wish to leave. Then by all means, you may go, and you can forget about my help.”

“Alright, then I’ll forget it,” said Jack, and started for the door.

“Jack, please.” Sanwar caught him by the arm.

He stopped and sighed, then looked back at his friend. “You’d go back to Anatolia? Even after everything you’ve seen there?”

“I have never been to Smyrna,” Sanwar replied. “It is a different time and different place, but even if that were untrue, still I would go. Our quest is greater than the two of us, is it not?”

Jack said nothing.

“Do you have any better options?”

Again, he had no reply.

“You know that if we have the Stone, we can defeat Saxon.”

Jack retook his seat. “Fine.”

“Then it is decided,” said Cassar, clasping his hands together as Sanwar joined him.

“So it is,” Jack grumbled. “A treasure hunt for a treasure map. Bloody ridiculous.”

Ignoring him, Cassar rose to his feet. “I will make the arrangements for you to leave tomorrow morning. Praise God!” They politely repeated back the words, as he turned to face the case behind him. Then, there was a moment’s pause, long enough to make Jack and Sanwar question if they should leave, but they were stopped when the Grandmaster suddenly spoke again in solemn tones. “I need not remind you gentlemen

what will happen should you fail...for you know what the Stone is truly, do you not?"

Neither man spoke. Instead, Jack watched Cassar's warped reflection curiously as it turned and twisted against the glass.

"It is the Power of God," Cassar said at last. "And I think you understand the consequences should it ever be wielded by impure hands?"

"Better than anyone," Jack replied. "But suppose we find the map, and Smyrna falls anyway? What's the point, then?"

"The city will fall," Cassar explained, turning back to face them. "But that is no matter. Our mission is the map, for with the power of the Stone, we can end this war and all others forever. Ten years ago, this castle was given back to us. Smyrna can be taken back just as easily."

Jack scratched his mustache. "You're awfully devoted to defending the Orthodoxy for a Catholic."

The old knight gave them a thin smile. “Once the Orthodoxy called upon its Catholic brothers for aid, and once again, they so require us to save Christendom. Now Godspeed, gentlemen. I will be waiting for the map’s return.”

Though the room had until that moment been blessedly cool, a sudden chill came drifting through the August air.

Saturday, August 26th, 1922

Early next morning, their silent escorts brought Jack and Sanwar away from the city of Rhodes to a distant cliffside overlooking the sea. Mules were waiting for them beneath its height, and under the careful guide of local herdsman, their party was led through a narrow path that snaked along the living rock, into a natural split between two bluffs. This gap

soon opened into a natural harbor, invisible from the land and easily concealed by rock from the sea.

Here, their transport lay anchored against a stone walkway. Streaked with black and white bands of camouflage akin to zebra stripes, this vessel was faster and lighter built than the hulking barge on which they had entered Rhodes. Machine guns posted at intervals along its gunwales made it more formidable too, Jack noted. From the quarter deck, Nero's outline surveyed the crewmen as they loaded stacks of crates on the deck down into the hull.

“Off one ship and onto another...” Jack muttered as they dismounted their mules, and approached the gangplank.

“Your sea legs should be well adjusted then,” Cassar said, appearing suddenly beside them on the dock. He held the diary in one hand and their swords in his other.

“Come to see us off then?”

“Indeed,” Cassar replied. “But also to warn you. It goes without saying that time is of essence on this crusade, gentlemen.”

“Kind of got that impression already,” Jack said flatly.

Cassar ignored the comment. “As long as the Greeks continue to fight, the Turks will remain occupied. This diversion is our only hope for success gentlemen, but it will not last forever. Please work quickly and meanwhile, I will pray for you.” With that, he handed them the diary, as well as their weapons. “If God is gracious, then you will not need these.”

They reslung the blades onto their hips.

“I hope you’re giving us some decent firepower too,” said Jack.

“Firearms, we may give you if deemed necessary. However, all other supplies will be provided on board,” Cassar replied.

“Great. I’m hungry.”

“Go with God, gentlemen.” Cassar gave a final bow.

“Our humble thanks,” said Sanwar, returning the gesture.

Then the Grandmaster turned away, and rode off with the herdsman back down the path.

“Right,” said Jack once they were the only two in earshot. “I don’t trust that bastard.”

“Nor I,” Sanwar concurred. “But we have scarce alternatives at present. Although, I would say Jack, that it is far more beneficial not to alert your enemies of to your mistrust by being so openly antagonistic.”

“I’m not bloody antagonistic!”

Sanwar raised an eyebrow.

“Alright, so I am. Let’s just get to the bloody reading, shall we?”

“Please, for something foretells that quite the journey lies ahead.”

Together, they boarded the ship and headed to their cabin below deck, neither noticing the lurking shadow behind the crates.

IV

Sacred Oaths Once Made

Saturday, August 26th, 1922

The Aegean Sea

When finally they stepped away from their work, they could not tell the hour, for their quarters were on the lowest level of the ship, well below the waterline. They had only been vaguely aware of the steward leaving meals by the bedside, but neither Jack nor Sanwar could recall how long it had been since he had last appeared.

With the light of their kerosene lamp waning, Sanwar checked the clock for the first time that day.

“Almost midnight,” he announced.

Jack stared at the piles of notes that lay strewn about their desk. “And not a damn thing.”

It was standard practice for Alchemists to disguise their writings into some sort of code to conceal the nature of their discoveries. Usually they had common language, but this was just ridiculous. Symbols contradicted one another. Images were described, then never shown again or even explained. Where a compound was referenced on one page, it was denied on the next, and so it went.

Frankly, it was gibberish.

“No wonder no one’s cracked this damned thing in five hundred years.” He creaked back in his chair, and rubbed his eyes. “Bloody Christ, this was useless.”

“Not entirely,” countered Sanwar. “I might have found something of use.”

Jack was suddenly awake. “Bloody brilliant then! Go on, don’t hold out me now. What is it?”

“If I may?” Taking the diary in hand, Sanwar skimmed through the pages while glancing at his

notes. “It was just a simple phrase...I had almost forgotten it truthfully...Ah, yes. Here it is.”

Underneath his finger was a single line in Latin:

Spiritibus Ducent Vos.

“‘Spirits will guide you’,” Jack translated. “Does that mean Alchemical Spirit?”

“Perhaps he means Mercury, yes,” posited Sanwar, referring to the term “The Spirit” by its traditional name. “Which could mean quicksilver or any number of other possibilities. In any case, that was the only piece of information that I could understand.”

“‘Spirits will guide you’,” whispered Jack again. “And here we are reading from the diary of a dead man.”

“Most authors are dead, Jack,” Sanwar pointed out. “Especially Alchemists, and I fear that we may sooner join them, should we persist at this pace. Come, this seems an ideal juncture to retire. We will

have fresher minds tomorrow to resume this mystery.”

“You go on ahead. I’ll only be a while longer.”

“Jack...”

Yet, he was already refilling the lamp with fuel from the bottle underneath the chair.

“If you insist.” Defeated, Sanwar exchanged “goodnights” with him, prayed, undressed for bed, and then collapsed into one of the hammocks.

Long after he had gone to sleep, Jack’s weary eyes were still running over the page.

Spirits will guide you.

The hell did that mean? He wished he knew. The only spirit he could use was a stiff glass of Glenmorangie, but alas, these Hospitaller types seemed none too keen on having any quality beverages around. So he tried to concentrate again, but the words just looked jumbled, blurrier, and more confusing.

Fuck them, Jack thought, shutting the book. Fuck them for giving him so much trouble...and fuck Cassar while he was at it. Come to think of it, fuck Saxon too. Fuck his father. Fuck her. Fuck the world for doing this to him. Yes, someone had to save it, but he wished that it could have at least been his choice. But no, they left it all in a bloody stupid mess for him to solve, didn't they?

The light went out.

Jack cursed his rotten luck a few more times while fumbling about in the darkness for the lamp. His hand had found the bottom of it, when another light turned on behind him. He recoiled from the sudden brilliance. Even with his eyes shut, he could tell that someone had entered the room, the way the shadows were dancing about the white blurs.

“Sir?” came a voice. “Are you ready, sir? The Captain says it's time.”

“Yes,” he found himself calling back. The voice did not seem his own, even though knew it was. “Yes, I know.”

Opening his eyes, he saw that he was no longer in his cabin onboard the ship, but in his dugout, staring at the pale young face of Danny McCrae. He stood in the doorway, holding back the curtain made of trench coats, sunlight streaming in behind him.

Muffled rain was beating against the tarpaulins outside. Distant thunder rumbled...or was it the guns? Had he missed it already? Were they late?

“Sir?”

“Yes, I know,” he said again. “And Danny, don’t call me ‘sir’.”

“Yes sir, sorry, sir,” Danny fumbled. “Er. I mean. Sorry.”

“Let’s go.” Jack thumbed his ring for luck, then strapped *Lann Dhearg* to his waist, and followed Danny out into the trench. His first step was straight

into a puddle. Even the tarpaulins overhead could not keep out the downpour. Dark rivulets of mud were trickling down into murky pools that swirled about their feet.

The first platoon was waiting for him; thirty men of the Black Watch leaned against the sandbags, waiting for his command. Like a ghost, Tormod MacLeod stepped out from the ranks with a smile and a mock salute.

“Lovely morning, isn’t it?” he rattled in his Aberdeen brogue. “Looks like the Army can save a bit on giving us a shower.”

That was just like Tormy, cracking jokes when he shouldn’t be.

“How’s the line today, Tormy?” asked Jack.

“It’ll hold, Iain...though I hope this bloody rain doesn’t. *Magairlean.*”

Jack did not want to smile at his Gaelic cursing, but he did. Why should he find it funny? Tormy’s

dead after all, he remembered. He watched him die, didn't he?

There was no time to think on that. He drew his sword. A time piece was in his other hand. One more minute to go...

“At the ready.”

The men unslung their rifles, and turned back the tarpaulin.

August rain battered Jack's face.

The first rank clutched the steps, waiting to go over.

The watch's hand ticked closer...

Jack wiped the rain from out of his eyes.

...and then it struck.

Somehow, he was running, already over the top, leading the men forward. He glanced down the line. Hundreds of shapes on either side of him were moving too, the whole battalion a tide of shadow

drifting in through the morning mist. Men slogged forward, mud sucking in their legs almost to the kilt. Jack plunged one foot after another. The regret was seeping in now. He had brought this to the Captain once, but he should have brought to him again. He should have made the whole battalion see this attack would fail, but no, he had done his duty and remained silent after that. Silent, just like this attack was supposed to be. Not a word was to be said, nor whistle blown, to keep the surprise as long as possible. The Germans would never expect it, Brigade had told the officers. There would be an early mist to hide their advancements. The rain would not be hard. They had called the attack this morning anyway, despite the downpour. Now, the whole battalion was wading in filth when they should have been running full speed at the enemy line. Speed was supposed to be their advantage, Brigade had said, speed and surprise. How long before they lost the latter too?

Jack looked back. He saw all his men behind him. He was at the front of the line, the front of the whole battalion. He wanted to call back to them, but knew he had to remain silent, so he waved his sword instead, hoping they would move faster, then plowed ahead with all his strength to show them an example. He had led them into this. He had led them into the mire that had become of No Man's Land, and he alone had to get them out of it. Speed. Only speed could save them. They had to move faster. He had to show them.

Strangely, he found himself thinking of his birthday, just a few months away now. He was turning twenty-six. Twenty-six. Funny, he had never lived that long before.

Then, a warm wind blew, and with it, the skies began to clear.

The mist lifted. The rain stopped.

That was when the Germans opened fired.

Blood wet Jack's face instead of rain. The men around him sank into the sludgy ground, black and crimson gore bubbling through where had fallen. There were no screams, no cries of battle, nor even tears of weeping, for every man was out of breath by the time the carnage had begun. They died without a whisper, falling in the mud, faceless and forgotten.

Bullets hissed around him, yet Jack still ran for the line. His bare legs were pounding, drenched in slime from ankle to groin. He felt so heavy, so slow, so tired and weak, yet he kept on moving.

The men had to follow. They had to follow or they all would die. Only forward. No running back. Run back, and you would die... Die a coward.

So he just kept running, running forward, running towards the line, his sword not even raised. He ran so fast, that he never saw the crater right in front of him, until he was falling into it.

The air was empty for a moment.

Then, he was sinking into endlessness, drowning in a lightless pit for what felt like an eternity. Then, suddenly it was over.

Jack.

Had someone called his name?

He emerged from the darkness. He heard the faint trickling of water, before being blinded by the sun. When he could open his eyes again, the sea stretched all around him for miles, save for a distant haze of land to the east.

He stood on a high hill ringed with ruined Ionic columns; ancient marble that had once been painted with a rainbow of color, but had since faded to its natural white.

In their center was the statue of a winged god, resplendent even for its age. It towered over Jack, looking down at him with empty, knowing eyes, and its hand outstretched. He could not gaze back at it without being unnerved inside his soul, so he cast

down his eyes to the pedestal on which this statue stood. There, a winged scepter was relieved, entwined with a pair of twisting serpents.

Jack.

The voice was nearer. Jack turned to face it.

Through an ancient archway, came a tall, dark rider atop a Cremello horse. A grassy path led him straight to Jack, and he stopped just feet away to dismount his saddle.

In full view, this man wore a black tabard with a huge white cross in its center and mail underneath. A helmet topped his lofty head, glinting golden in the sunshine. A sword hung at his side, and a shield across his back.

The knight walked straight through Jack to the foot of the god. He knelt, and moments later the earth was moving, pulling apart the grass beneath Jack's feet. Stone below it had given way to an gaping chasm leading down.

Jack floated over it, and made to descend, but he was halted by the knight, who now had turned to face him. Through the dark slits in his visor, there was a shimmer of light, as if he was looking at, no into, Jack himself.

With both hands, the knight removed his helm.

Rotted flesh still clung to bone. Putrid odors gagged Jack's throat. The skull beneath the helm was twisted in a clever grin, so satisfied at its own horrid visage. Its eyes were empty save for two faint specks of scarlet that glimmered with an awful laughter in them.

“So you're the one I'm looking for?”

Jack screamed.

He fell again, sinking inside the passageway, and was sentenced back into the darkness, his mouth filling with the taste of dirt and blood.

Jack.

The knight's called out again.

His voice was thunder, so thunderous that it shook the earth.

Jack.

Jack snapped awake. Sweat soaked his brow and had stained the pages where he had lain his head. A metallic taste was in his mouth.

Where was he?

“Jack!”

He looked back to where Sanwar was shaking in the hammock.

“Jack!” He cried out again, more weakly this time.

Jack rushed to him. His friend was gasping for air.

“Steady now,” he whispered, taking Sanwar in his arms. “Steady. Steady. I’ve got you. Breathe. Breathe.”

The words helped slow his own heart as well. He had hardly noticed it was pounding from the second

he awoke, but it was soothing gradually with each breath that he and Sanwar took together. Eventually, his friend's own breathing joined his careful rhythm. His chest stopped heaving and his heart resumed a stable beat, though troubled breaths still came now and again.

Together, they rested there for a time, waiting for the last of Sanwar's tremors to subside.

"I need air," he said at length.

"Aye," Jack agreed. "So do I."

The night was warm and moonless.

Salted air blessed their faces as they emerged from below, as they drank in its sapor for the first time since morning. Sanwar leaned heavily on the port side gunwales, next to where the ship's lifeboats swayed, letting a sea breeze cool him from the outside to within. After some while, he finally spoke.

"I have not had such a panic in two months' time."

“Nightmares again?” Jack asked, leaning on the gunwales too.

Sanwar nodded and sighed. Thankfully, they were alone, save for the guardsmen managing a gun port on the quarter deck above, though he was far from earshot.

“Aye, me too,” Jack added. In his mind, he was living through the battle of the Somme again and again...the mud, the spray, the gore; and queerly, the rotting face of the knight as well.

“I wish that I could flush them all away,” said Sanwar.

“It would be nice, wouldn’t it?” Jack turned to lean his back against the rails. “It would be nice if we could just be done with the past...but it looks like the past ain’t done with us. Got no say, now have we?”

“I do not know, Jack.”

“Well, I don’t want to see you like this,” he answered. “It’s enough for a man to live through what

we have, it's another to have him live it all over again for the rest of his life. I wouldn't want to put you through that. If it gets worse, I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to leave."

"That is kind, thank you," said Sanwar. "But we knew the hazards of our oath, and agreed to it anyway, did we not?"

"Aye, we did."

Sanwar straightened and looked Jack dead on, a brightness in his tourmaline eyes. "So I am with you to very end, Jack MacGregor, by my choice. Best you not forget it."

"I think I'll remember," Jack said with a laugh.

"Good, *mo bhrathair*."

"*Mera bhra*."

They touched their foreheads together.

A cool wind blew as they held their embrace, and the waves brushed against the ship to gently rock them.

The tranquility was cut short by a rumble beneath them.

Had they not caught each other, both men would surely have spilled overboard to a watery grave, for the ship jerked so suddenly to a halt.

They helped each other back to their feet.

“Bloody hell,” said Jack.

“Why have we stopped?” asked Sanwar, steadying himself with Jack and the railing.

“Never mind that...Look.” Jack pointed at the distance. Through the darkness, a massive shadow came looming towards them. The sheer sight of it held them both transfixed, the way it grew with every passing second.

“Jack...” breathed Sanwar. “Where’s the diary?”

Jack paled. “Down below...shit!”

Tearing away their gaze, they bolted back towards their cabin as the ship’s alarm began to blare, splitting the night with its dreadful siren call.

Machine gun fire rattled above deck, muffled every so often by the wail of the alarm.

Nero rose from bed, and grabbed the Mauser pistol by his pillow.

It was Bakir. He knew it in an instant.

He slid on his mail and his crucifix, and covered them with his robes. Lastly, he strapped his rapier to his belt and exited his cabin, into the crowded brig where the sailors were rushing all about.

Another burst of fire sounded overhead, followed by screams.

How had he found them so quickly?

Men pushed past in the narrow corridor, rushing towards the upper deck. Nero spied Captain Galazios at the armory handing rifles to every man, and made his way to him. He was Greek, stout of heart and body, a good Christian man that Nero knew he could trust enough with the task he needed.

“Engine’s blown to Hell,” the Captain shouted to him. “Don’t know how. No point in trying to fix it. It’s going to be a fight!”

“Then it shall be to the last man if needed,” Nero returned, once he was close enough. Galazios nodded solemnly to that. “I need you to find the Alchemists, and keep them under guard. Personally.”

“What about my men?”

“I shall lead them. I shall handle these pirates.”

The Captain hesitated a moment, then resolved, nodded once more. He drew a pistol from his hip, but before he went running off, Nero gripped him by the

sleeve. “Kill them if it seems they might be captured. Save a bullet for yourself. You will need it.”

The man said nothing, but the hard look in his eyes said he understood. Slapping on his hat, he went off the other way, towards the lower deck.

Nero kissed the cross around his neck, and headed toward the upper. “With me!” He shouted to any man around him. They fell in line, and he drew his sword. Hot blood was coursing through his veins, through all their veins, he could feel it. Many of them would die tonight, perhaps every single one. It made no matter, though. There was no worthier end than to die in the name of God, sword reddened in His glory. Tonight would be the night that Nero joined that glory too. He knew it in his heart. He had prayed, and made his preparations. He had cleansed his soul so that it could float easily to Heavens when his body fell.

He was ready.

The men poured out onto the deck just as the grappling hooks clawed themselves to the gunwales from out of the fog and darkness. Screaming Turks came hurtling down seconds later, a *kiliç* flashing in the hands of every man as he came landing on the deck.

“Fire!” Nero cried to his men, forming them hastily into line.

A ragged volley fired off, felling some, but not stopping the charge in time. After all, it was almost impossible to see their targets.

The Turks descended upon them, and the *melée* ensued. Sword, knife, and rifle stock clashed together in a violent crescendo.

From the rear, Nero had mere seconds before it reached him. He steeled himself for the onslaught, but then, across the way, something caught his eye.

A tall, dark shape landed weightily onto deck. The flash of a muzzle flare revealed its unmistakable face.

Weathered and grim, one-eye covered with a patch, Bakir had emerged, a cruel smile on his lips.

Nero raised his sword.

It was time to send this soul to Hell.

Deus Veult.

“Clear.” Jack peered out into the corridor, only when he was certain that the last man was up the stairs and gone from sight. He had heard the shouting and seen men coming from below with weapons in their hands, and ducked inside an empty cabin just in time. If a fight was coming, then he wanted to be as far away possible when it broke out.

Sanwar followed him into the corridor, and together, they hurried back down another set of steps to their quarters. Muffled gunfire echoed along the steel hull, until they made it to the bottom deck, where it faded to a murmur.

Eerie silence waited for them below. Eerier still, a pool of blood was leaking from the doorway of their cabin. A pair of arms dangled out, keeping the door ajar.

With gritted teeth, the two men crept forward, careful to step around the blood, though Jack almost slipped on a soggy cap as they drew closer. Thankfully, the shuffling of papers from within somewhat forgave their footfalls.

Flanking the doorway, he and Sanwar peered inside. The body was fully visible. The head lay split underneath a blood-stained dent in the steel door. Past it, standing over the desk was a man, dressed in black from head to foot. He was straightening their notes into a pile, and gathering them into his arms. Before either Jack or Sanwar could act however, he turned to face them.

His face was covered, save for a narrow eyeslit. There, a red glow burned where his eyes should have been. The papers fell to the floor.

The diary was in his hand.

A gun was in his other.

“Shit!”

Jack had only wits enough to throw himself aside.

The ricochet was deafening. The bullet spit about the corridor, bouncing off the steel walls. When finally it stopped, Jack’s head was ringing. He had barely recovered enough to see the pistol emerge from the doorway, followed by the looming man who wielded it.

That red glare met Jack’s eyes as the barrel pointed at his face.

Well, this was a fucking disappointing way to go, he thought.

The man pulled back the hammer.

Yet the gun jerked back, and a second bullet ricocheted. The man fell backwards onto the bloody

ground, Sanwar's massive arms wrapped around his neck.

The diary flopped onto the floor. Jack made to retrieve it, but he slipped on the blood, and fell down hard instead. He rose in time to witness the man's elbow collide with Sanwar's midriff, forcing his release.

He stood and tried to aim his gun at Sanwar, but Jack yanked his wrist aside and threw all his weight against the man. The gun clattered to the floor as Jack slammed his hand into the wall.

No cry of pain came from his opponent, though. Instead, he threw his own weight back, nearly shaking Jack off of him. Jack held his grip however, and the two of them locked into a grapple, all the while struggling just to keep their feet on the bloody ground.

The man caught Jack's forearm and almost had a hold, when his foot slipped. He stumbled, and lost his

grip. Using the sudden opening, Jack threw a hammer fist straight at his opponent's face.

Immediately, he recoiled, cursing and shaking his hand.

God! It was like punching brick!

That misstep had cost him. A second later, Jack was slammed against the wall, a vice-like grip around his throat.

With one hand, the man held him off the ground, crushing the life straight out of him.

Airless, Jack struggled, but his blows came uselessly down onto his killer's arms. No, all he could do was watch as a pair of red-hot eyes seared pupil-less hatred into him, reveling at his wordless and pathetic demise.

“Unhand him!”

In a perfect downward chop, Sanwar's *tulwar* severed the attacker's arm just below the elbow.

It and Jack fell to the floor.

Gasping for air, he saw that no blood had spilt from the wound, nor had the man given any sort of cry.

“The...fuck?” Jack wheezed.

The next moment, Sanwar went crashing into him. The two collapsed in a pile onto the bloody floor.

Vision coming back to focus, Jack managed to lift his head out from under Sanwar’s body.

The man, or whatever it was, was using his good arm to stash the diary inside his shirt pocket before turning away, and disappearing up the stairs.

Feeling heavy, Jack wanted to pursue, but his body fought against him. Sanwar though, was already on his feet and after him.

Halfway down the corridor however, he stopped, looking back at his fallen partner.

“Go! Go!” Jack urged. “I’m right behind you!”

Sanwar nodded, and continued on alone.

The upper deck had become a deluge, a flood of screaming men and blood. Blades clashed and fell in front of Sanwar’s eyes with striking detail. At first, he had seen none of it, blinded by the brilliance of spotlights from the moment he had exited. Yet, as he recovered, he could see that there were far more sailors’ bodies on the deck than those of their black-clad counterparts.

He hung back out of the fray, trying to avoid such carnage, and scanned the chaos for his quarry. Unfortunately, all of the attackers were dressed in black, and on a moonless night no less, but Sanwar was used to singling out the details in a horde of uniforms. He would find him, he knew it. All he needed was to breathe.

Breathe.

Stay calm.

Stay focused.

He would find his mark.

Then the one-armed man was there, clearer than the day, sneaking his way port side. He was reaching for one of the grappling hooks lashed to the gunwales, but a sailor had crossed his path and the two began a struggle.

It was the opening that Sanwar needed.

He hefted *Cadarama*, his sacred blade, and entered the melée. It was a press of carnage. Guns were no longer relevant here, so men fought with what they had; sword, knife, pistol butt, rifle stock, or even fists if they had lost their weapons. Many blows came in to challenge Sanwar, but he simply parried and gave riposte, not stopping for a moment to see if his blow had so much as struck a wound. He could not stop moving; could not cease until the diary was in his hands. He had to keep moving. Constant motion was

the only way to survive. He would not fail. He could not fail. His target would not escape.

A *kiliç* then came sweeping towards his head, so Sanwar parried overhand, and let the blow's momentum power his own cut for a response. *Cadarama* took the attacker in the throat, yet no sooner had that man fallen, when a second strike came hurtling his way. He blocked it just in time, recovered, then stepped back out of measure to regain himself.

A new enemy had appeared in Sanwar's path. This man was near in height to him and spare as a blade. His skin was lined with scars and age, and his beard was going gray, yet he when whirled his *kiliç*, it flourished with the grace and speed of a younger man. One dark eye gleamed as he shifted his guard, and moved to strike again.

Sanwar raised *Cadarama* out to meet the blow and closed in, but suddenly the *kiliç* twisted over his blade, and the cut became a thrust. If the feint had

landed, his opponent's blade would have come around, and stabbed him through the face. Yet, Sanwar was quick enough to turn and displace the thrust, then disengage. He responded with his own cut, coming for the attacker's exposed upper left side, but this man was just as quick.

Steel met and bit together as their curved blades clashed. For a few seconds more, they traded blows; deflecting, feinting, coming apart and back together in empty exchanges with neither man receiving wounds, until Sanwar caught a glimpse from the corner of his eye. The one-armed man had thrown the aggressing sailor overboard, and was moving towards the grapples unimpeded.

His glimpse was long enough to leave him open. He turned back in dread as the old man brought his sword to bear.

The *kiliç* would have killed Sanwar right then, had its wielder not staggered back so suddenly. With a

grunt of pain, he stepped away as Nero's rapier slid out from his side.

The Hospitaller had come from nowhere, and now his rapier bobbed and weaved around the other man's defenses like a stinging barb. The old man swung out in retaliation, but the rapier had the superior reach, and Nero always found a way to turn his parries back into a thrust.

With both of them locked in swordplay, Sanwar saw it opportune to run away. He reached the port side right as the one-armed had found the nearest grapple and grabbed to test its strength.

His escape however, just like the rope he held, was then cut short by *Cadarama*.

Red eyes flashed, and the one-armed man turned back to look Sanwar face to face.

"Return me that diary," Sanwar said coolly.

The man responded by snatching the fallen grappling hook in hand. Spinning it like a flail by its

severed end of rope, he sent it hurling towards Sanwar's face.

Instinctively, Sanwar raised his sword to parry. This proved a fatal error, as the hook caught around *Cadarama's* blade near the hilt and with a yank, pulled it free from hand. The *tulwar* clattered on the deck as the grapple came flying back into the man's grip.

Backpedaling, Sanwar drew his *kirpan*. It was hopelessly short against his opponent's weapon, but it was all the weaponry he had left to defend himself.

The hook came flying out again. This time, Sanwar sidestepped, and pressed himself against the gunwales to avoid the blow.

He gripped a nearby rope as he did, and genius struck.

With a slash of his dagger, a grapple of his own was free, and a second later, Sanwar was spinning it in both his hands, and sending it flying towards the other man. The man in black was retrieving his hook

when Sanwar's struck him the chest. Both he and the diary spilled over flat onto the deck.

The ship heaved. A strong wave sent the whole thing leaning port, sending all three of them with it.

Sanwar caught the rails with both hands. It was all he could do to save himself. The man in black however, reached for the diary instead, but his aim was short, and since he had no other hand to catch himself, went tumbling over the side. Sanwar watched in horror as the diary followed with him...

...only to be caught by a desperate hand before it did.

Dangling over the side, legs braced against the gunwales, Jack had both the diary and *Cadarama* fastened in his hands.

The ship pitched back the other way, sending him and Sanwar tumbling back onto the deck.

“Thought you might need these,” Jack groaned, holding up the items. Somehow, he still had a grin upon his face. “Couldn’t leave you dead in the water.”

“Your humor disgusts me,” Sanwar said, pulling his friend back to his feet. He secured the diary in his own shirt pocket and the *tulwar* in its scabbard. “But I am much beholden nonetheless.”

“Thank me when we get out of here alive,” said Jack. He readjusted a satchel he had around his shoulder, then nodded to the lifeboat. “Now are you alright with stealing us a boat?”

“Most categorically.”

“Great.”

Without another word, they scurried over, using the lifeboat as cover while the battle raged around them.

“This vessel should suffice for an escape,” Sanwar said, once they were out of sight. “Though, I daresay

we do require a distraction, if we are to lower it into the water...”

“You lower it, and I’ll provide the distraction.” Jack undid the satchel and emptied out a revolver, a scrap of torn bedsheet, some matches, and the kerosene bottle from their room onto the deck. “Way ahead of you.”

“What are you-?”

“Making our friends a little cocktail.” Jack popped the remaining bullets from the pistol into the bottle, then stuffed the bed sheet into its neck. “Should be about a quart of kerosene with couple shots of gunpowder for a little added spice.”

“This is folly, Jack! This is- Jack, what are you doing!?”

“Making a dramatic exit!” He sparked the cloth with a match, and sent the whole concoction flaming overhead.

“No!” Sanwar wanted to cry, but it was too late.

A ball of flames sent him diving into the boat for cover. Smoke was choking him a second later, and stinging his eyes.

When he raised his head, he was moving. Jack stood over him, guiding the lifeboat over the water. He struggled to do it alone, fighting with the hand brake.

“Quick!” he shouted. “Help me lower it down!”

Sanwar was about to aid him, when he heard orders barked in Turkish above the crackling inferno. The flames parted suddenly and the tall, one-eyed man appeared across the deck, a dozen men with rifles right behind him.

With the drop of his sword, they fired.

Wood splintered through the air. The lifeboat lurched, and the ropes above him snapped.

Sanwar screamed as he went crashing down, and Jack came leaping after him. Together, they went plunging straight into the watery darkness below.

V

With Stone in Hand

He was drowning.

Water flushed his nostrils, choked at him while he sank. His kilt, his greatcoat, his sword, and his gun were dragging him down. Their wetness had made them even heavier, and Jack was pulled deeper and deeper towards the bottomlessness beneath him.

Around him, corpses floated. Bodies of men in steel helmets or kilted Scots were all about him, his new companions in this underwater graveyard. Some had been his friends before, some had been his enemies, but did it matter now? In the end, all of them were going to the same place.

Straight down.

Maybe it would end this war for him. Yes, an end to fighting for always and forever. No more fighting meant that he should not fight back. No, all he could

do was look to the sky as he sank and sank, and the water filled his lungs.

Above him was the blinding, streaming light of day.

Below was empty darkness, without an end.

Jack allowed himself to sink. Death was waiting there for him with warm and open arms...

...only a different pair of arms had grabbed him instead.

They were pulling him, lifting Jack from high above, straight into that blinding sun stream.

He burst forth from the water, air choking at his throat.

Tormy had him in his arms. He was pulling him out from the pool and up the slopes of the crater where he had fallen.

“Iain!” He shouted. Rain was streaming down his face while bombs and bullets whizzed all about the air above. “I’ve got you, Iain! I’ve got you!”

Let me go, Jack wanted to scream at him, but he did not have the strength. All he could do was cough out water as Tormy dragged him through the mud.

Why? Why had he brought him back into all of this?

“Come on Iain!” Tormy was still shouting. “Come on!” Then Jack realized that he was dragging him back towards the line; the British lines.

No, you fool, he tried to say. The enemy’s the other way. The other way! If they did not press the attack, then what would have been the point?

Tormy seemed not to notice, though. Instead he was bent on saving Jack, though Jack for the life of him could not tell why. Tormy should have left him there if he wanted to live. He could run faster without the added weight.

As they neared the top, that weight proved too much, even for a man as strong as Tormy. He laid Jack down to catch his breath. Tears were running down his cheeks.

“Don’t die...Please, Iain...please. I need you...Please.” He sobbed. It was the first time Jack had ever seen Sergeant Tormod MacLeod cry in front of him.

It was also the last.

As Tormy raised his head to try and carry Jack again, a bullet exploded through his face, and Jack was blinded, for his best friend’s blood had splattered in his eyes.

Then, the world went black.

Sanwar gasped, and dragged Jack’s soaking body onto shore. Once they were out of the tide, he collapsed beside his friend.

The sand was scorching hot against his cheek, but he did not care. He squeezed its warmth between his fingers, and let the sun beat down to dry him. Quiet waves lapped at his feet as he lay there, followed by the clunk of shattered wood.

He remembered the diary. Wet and wrinkled, he drew it from his shirt pocket. The pages were stained, and the ink had run in places, but otherwise it was legible still.

If that not been miracle enough, when Sanwar pressed his head to Jack's chest, he heard him breathing.

They were alive.

Sanwar was about to rejoice in the mercies of God, when he heard a heavy click.

In utter fear, he raised his head.

He was staring down the barrel of another gun.

Sunday, August 27th, 1922

*Bodrum, Territory Held by the Turkish Nationalist
Movement*

Screams echoed through the gloom. To Lieutenant Colonel Aksham Suyun, it was a welcome sound as he limped down the hallway, the scrape, clatter, click of his cane against stone making echoes of its own.

Muffled machinery whirred somewhere behind one of the many steel doors as he passed. Hopefully these sounds meant progress, though he suspected otherwise. Their attempts had proven fruitless even before he had left for Ankara, and if the past year was any indication, they would still prove fruitless now that he had returned. Every experiment thus far had failed despite the Empire's, and now the new Republic's, most devoted efforts... and resources.

Yet Suyun would not cease them, come Hell or high water. To abandon the project now would be to render useless all that they had spent already. Should they succeed however, that heavy cost would be totally forgotten. Such was the way of history, of humanity. The end was all that anyone ever saw. After great men and the civilizations that they made were gone, what would be remembered but the lasting deeds they left upon the world? And what greater deed was there than to finally create the very first Philosopher's Stone? When that day came, Suyun's page in history would begin. For now, he would have to endure his failures.

Still, this operation had not been wholly without success. Suyun glanced at the massive guards on either side of him, their red eyes loyally forward, unblinking as they led him down the long, dim corridor. Most men overtopped the Colonel by at least a head, but these two outright dwarfed him. They were stronger, hardier, and more efficient than

the average soldier, but most importantly, their loyalty was never questioned. For Suyun though, their best quality was that they never spoke. The only people he wanted speaking were the ones who knew something he did not already know himself, and many did not meet that criterion.

Command had been impressed with them enough to at least continue funding for the remainder of the war. They were hopeful, mostly out of courtesy to the Colonel's closeness to Kemal, that the project would soon yield them grander results. After all, Kemal Pasha and the burgeoning State did not just expect results, but continued growth. The Ministry of Special Affairs would have to give to them.

To deny them would be disappointing.

Suyun's cane clapped to a halt outside the hallway's final door, as did his silent guardians. The Colonel paused here a moment, sensing a tremor in his throat. Reaching into his coat, he produced a handkerchief in time to receive a horrid fit of

coughing. Once subsided, he folded the bloody cloth, and put it back inside his pocket. Composing himself, he nodded to one of his guards, who swung the heavy door open.

Instantly, the room went silent. The castle's officers had ceased their frenzy of directing men about, checking lists, and last minute adjustments. Now, they paled and froze.

Major Atalay, the commandant, was the one to step forward on their behalf. He threw a hasty salute.

“Eh-Welcome back from Ankara, sir,” he stumbled. “We thought you might have wanted to refresh yourself before-”

“No.”

“Ah-eh, in that case, since you are early, sir-”

“I am on time,” Suyun said, and crossed over to the room's only table. In truth, he was almost late; five minutes before the hour he had expected. He laid his cane down on the table, and groaned as he took his

seat. In twenty-five years, his injury had never been more stiff and aggravating than it was this morning.

“Of course, sir. I always prefer to do things on time myself,” the Major agreed. He nodded furiously to a few aides. “The experiment is ready for your inspection, and may I say sir, we are close. We are very close.”

Doubtful.

“Commence, Major,” Suyun said, anyway.

Atalay gave another nod, and took the chair beside Suyun. Before them was a one-way mirror that peered into another room. This room was nearly empty, save for the monstrosity that was the Machine, and a second table that held a substantial block of lead on top of it.

A door swung open and two men entered, adorned from head to foot in the charred attire of leaden x-ray suits. Suyun leaned back as these two dragged in the Armenian prisoner. She was a pale, scrawny thing.

Placidly she complied as they dragged her over to the Machine, and strapped her into the seat. The leather straps were barely tight enough to fit around her ankles and wrists, though eventually, they secured her and crossed to a two-man lever beside the huge mechanical device. They turned to Suyun, awaiting the order. He gave the nod, and the lever was pulled.

Her screams could not be heard above the roaring gears.

The officers watched in both horror and amazement.

Once the woman's writhing had ceased, the lever was pushed back, and her smoking body was removed from the chair. Suyun hobbled to his feet then, and approached the door beside the mirror.

"Colonel Suyun," Major Atalay protested. "Colonel, the radiation of the room has not been tested-"

Suyun ignored him, and entered anyway. He approached the Machine, and flicked open one of its hollow tubes. Just like he had hoped, a glowing crimson light shined within; bright, brilliant, beautiful. He could not help but smile.

Taking the Stone between his fingertips, Suyun crossed to the table. The mirror was completely blank, but he could tell that the others were all watching him. He knew they wanted to see as much as he. They simply lacked the courage to come and test it for themselves.

He hovered the Stone above the leaden block, and shut his eyes. He prayed to Allah that this time it would succeed.

There was a muffled gasp from the two men beneath their heavy x-ray suits. Suyun's eyes snapped open, and even he was taken aback by the sight before him. A pool of steaming lead was dripping off the table's edge, collecting in silvery puddle upon the floor.

Impressive, thought Suyun, the furthest they had come yet.

Then he let the Stone fall into his palm, and squeezed with all his malcontent. Oozing liquid dribbled out between his fingers. His whole body shook from effort and from rage.

He released his grip and the rest of the Stone spilled onto the floor, where it mixed together with the cooling lead, its red color dissolving in tiny puffs of smoke.

Impressive maybe, Suyun thought, but it was not gold.

He flicked away the residue in disgust, and exited the room. Of course, all the men were staring at him when he rejoined them. A soldier offered him a cloth, but he waved the man away, choosing to wipe his hand on the cleaner side of his own handkerchief.

“Run another test,” he wheezed, stuffing the folded cloth inside his pocket.

There was hesitation. “Sir...” Atalay came forward. “That was the last of our prisoners. My understanding was that more prisoners would not be arriving from Ankara until next week-”

“Find more.”

Atalay swallowed hard, but remembered to salute. “Yes, sir.”

Suyun looked him up and down, then the rest of them.

“Disappointing,” was all that he could manage.

With that remark, his guard swung open the door, and Suyun left the fools to sort it out for themselves. He no longer had time for their incompetence.

Scraping his cane against the stone, he made his way back down the corridor, his guards in tow. This time, the screams were grating on his ears, however muffled they might be. He needed silence and space to think.

Damn these constant failures and inconveniences! They had vexed him from the very beginning. In spite of everything, all that he had put into this! How much longer would he have to strive for even the slightest answer? How much had he strived since even before the War began? Since he had chased those pitiful spies from Foça to that lonely little island just southwest of here eight years past? He had let the irregulars burn down the entire town just to find them. They had fled away on boats, but he had caught them soon enough. He remembered how pathetic they were when he had found them hiding amongst the ruins on that night, how pathetic they were once he was done with them. They gave away their secrets just like anybody else; the secrets of the Stone. Some heroes those Hospitallers had pretended themselves to be.

That night had given him direction, blessed and sweet. Now it was for what? Nothing? To be squandered by his subordinates? Damn them all. Not

enough prisoners? Pathetic excuses! He would quell every drop of impure blood from Corfu to the Caucasus if he could have his way. Damn them. Damn them all!

This anger spurred a coughing fit from Suyun. He settled himself with a rasping breath, and let it pass.

No. No, he had to be close. This had to be the end. This kind of frustration only came when victory was just within grasp, he knew.

A young faced lieutenant was waiting for the Colonel at the other end of the hall, a set of papers held tight in his hands. Suyun recalled that this was one of his liaison officers, though he had quite forgotten his name. Whatever it was, Suyun disliked the expectant look he wore.

“Report,” Suyun growled.

“Urgent telegraph from Captain Bakir, sir,” said the Lieutenant, falling into step. He stole a glance at

his papers. “The Hospitaller ship was captured. He took no prisoners.”

“Not even the Scotsman and the Sikh?”

“No, sir. He said they jumped overboard and drowned.”

Damn them. He had wanted Bakir to take them alive, if possible. It was a minor setback in the grander scheme, but a setback nonetheless, so damn them anyway.

“And Siyah?” Suyun asked next. “Was the diary recovered?”

A nervous glance was all the Colonel need to know, but the young fool spoke anyway. “I’m afraid not, sir. Siyah went overboard as well. The diary was lost.”

Suyun smoldered. Any hope that he had at the beginning of this report was drowned out once more with rage. Even Bakir had failed him. It was wise that he had not abandoned operations here to put all his

faith in finding this map. The Stone could be made, if not found. That knowledge was small comfort to Suyun however, when he remembered the incompetent display his staff had shown him just minutes prior.

“We will have to craft another Siyah,” Suyun remarked, trying to formulate an adjustment to his plans.

The Lieutenant made a note of the order, then shifted his papers. “There’s more, sir.”

“Tell it then.”

“Did Major Atalay inform you that a shipment of medical supplies was stolen from the harbor before you had arrived?”

“He failed to mention that...”

The man looked as if his blood had frozen. He stumbled over his words. “Then, I’m sorry to inform you, sir. They came in the night, we weren’t prepared-”

Suyun silenced him with the raise of a hand. “It appears everyone is disappointing me today. How much was taken?”

The young Lieutenant faltered. “Two tons, sir. Morphine, gauze, syrettes, and more.”

The Colonel darkened. This was hardly the biggest insult of the day, but by far it pained him the greatest; the final barb twisting in his side, for there could only be one culprit.

“Eleni.”

When Jack came to, his head was swimming. Like a drunk, he struggled to see straight, and the whole damned world looked like it had been upended. Christ, reality was worse than he remembered.

Eventually it subsided, and although his head hurt something awful, Jack ventured a look around. His new location was in a tiny shed filled with grain sacks and hanging sprigs of peppers, garlic, and onions. A

sliver of light shined through the shutters of its only window down onto Sanwar, who leaned against a few hefty sacks with his eyes shut.

Memories of how they had gotten here swirled about inside Jack's mind in incoherent waves, until suddenly, it all came rushing back. He had been falling, crashing into dark water. Men were shooting...Turks. There was fire.

Then, he had been drowning. Drowning in the sea...

Had he been? His clothes were dry.

Why was he still alive?

Where were they? Whose storehouse was this? Had they been captured? The questions kept on streaming. His heart pounded faster the more he thought about them. The rest of his body screamed out in pain, finally realizing the extent of physical exhaustion it had just endured.

Jack sank back against a sack of grain, and groaned. The sensations subsided again, but he resolved that he was just going to lie where he was, and fall back asleep until he had more strength about him.

That plan was short lived, however. A minute later, the door swung open, blinding Jack with the brilliance of daylight, but not before he caught a blurry glimpse of several silhouettes entering the room. Strong arms yanked him to his feet, and forced him out into the light, where instantly the midday heat came beating down. Jack stumbled on rocky ground, and nearly fell. He tried to squint to see where he was going, but the sheer brightness of the sun's reflection off the earth forced him to recoil. He chose to keep them shut instead.

Masculine voices spoke in Greek, and moved him along, leading him by the arm so he would not fall. After a while, Jack managed to open his eyes again. Judging from the sun, it must have been some time in

the late afternoon, when unfortunately, the sun was highest and brightest. There was not an ounce of shade to spare them either, as they were walking on the high, bare hilltops of some remote Greek island whose steep, rugged tracks were already unforgiving.

The voices had come from several men, dark-haired and olive skinned, who led him and Sanwar away from a group of little drystone buildings towards a large, white villa in the distance. Each man wore the loose shirts, navy trousers, and black caps typical of fisherfolk from the islands of the Dodecanese. Knives and pistols hung at their belts, ready to use.

Their leader was a burly man with a short-gray beard and a weathered face, doubtless made so by many years out in the sun and spray. He held a gun on Jack, a big Colt Navy pistol that looked about as old as he was, all the while puffing on a pipe as if this were a Sunday stroll. Smiling, he encouraged Jack to walk a little faster.

Sweat had fully doused Jack's formerly dry shirt by the time they reached their destination. From its vantage on the hill crest, the villa overlooked the entire island, which Jack saw was little more than several miles at its widest. Around them, the azure sea seemed to stretch forever without another speck of land in sight.

The villa was a two-story building with a veranda, white-washed and fitted with blue doors and shutters. The dusty path turned into a flagstone courtyard in front of the house, where there was a flower garden and a marble fountain in its center. Decorated with spouts carved like dolphins and shapely goddesses, the fountain's crystal waters made Jack's parched mouth sympathize with the plight of Tantalus as he went past.

"Niko!" A woman's voice called out in Greek. "What have you caught for me today?"

The old man laughed, and shouted back. "Just a couple little fishes for you, Captain!"

With a rough hand, he urged Jack and Sanwar forward.

There were people sitting underneath the shade of a veranda, playing cards and sipping glasses filled with ice cold drinks. As Jack drew near to them, the speaker became visible.

One long leg draped over the side of her chair, she lazed at the table handing cards to several fishermen. She was dressed just like them, in the white shirt and navy trousers, with her matching navy coat hanging loosely off the chair. Where the men wore plain black caps however, hers was lined with a wreath of golden piping above the bill. The cap helped to hold back the cascade of her long, dark hair from her brilliant eyes of zircon blue.

Among her men, she laughed the loudest, and cursed even more as cards were drawn and tossed between them. When she threw the Ace of Spades the table groaned good naturedly. As she took the entire pot, Jack noticed that the pile strangely was

not money at all, but an odd assortment of shells, colored rocks, and shiny bits of sea glass.

“Found them on the beach?” the woman asked, raking in the “winnings”.

“Washed ashore,” their captor, Nikos apparently, confirmed. “Along with a broken lifeboat. Italian made. Oh, and they carried these.” He nodded to a man who placed their swords on the table in front of her. “And this.”

Nikos drew out the battered diary from his coat pocket, and laid it down as well.

The woman toyed with their swords a moment, examining their make, but let the weapons drop in favor of the diary. Her long fingers swam through the pages, while the others leaned forward in their seats to see its writing better. As she read, a puzzled look spread across her face. Finally, she merely shrugged, and let the diary fall beside their swords.

“Funny. They don’t look Italian to me,” she said, and got to her feet. She was taller than Jack expected, just a few inches shorter than himself. Her intense gaze examined him and Sanwar as if assessing the movements of a battle. A wicked grin flashed across her dagger sharp cheeks. “And they don’t look like Turkish spies to me either. I wonder who they are.”

“Maybe they’re British spies!” offered another voice. A second woman had risen from the table to join the other’s side. Next to one another, they were near reflections, although this other one was slightly shorter than the first, her were eyes darker, and her hair was a honeyed blonde.

“British?” The first woman put a pensive finger to her chin. “You may be right, Kyriaki...”

The second beamed. “What do you think we should do with them, Eleni?”

“I think that you should let us go,” Jack answered back in Greek. “And actually, I’m Scottish. Not British.”

Eleni’s eyes went from smiling to deadly in an instant. Anyone who had kept their seat until now, stood, throwing deadly glances of their own towards Jack and Sanwar.

“Oh, now you have spoiled everything,” Sanwar muttered to him in English.

“Relax,” Jack whispered back. “We’ll find a way out of this.”

Only, now they were surrounded. The Greeks had gathered in around them, tightening their ranks into a circle. There must have been about a dozen of them staring him and Sanwar down, each waiting for the word from Eleni to end this conversation before it started.

Yet, Eleni made no motion right away. Instead she held her ground, and studied Jack and Sanwar.

“So you want me to let you go? Is that it?”

Jack hesitated. “Aye. That’s about it.”

Silence.

Then Eleni threw back her head, and laughed.

The crew joined in.

“Little fishy wants us to throw him back!” She bellowed, and the lot of them laughed even louder, heaving boozy breaths in Jack and Sanwar’s faces. Eventually, the uproar subsided. Sobered, Eleni considered her two captives more carefully. “First, tell me who you are, what you’re doing here, and where you learned my language...then maybe I’ll consider it.”

“We’re not spies, if that’s what you’re asking,” Jack returned.

“Jack...” Sanwar sighed.

“Oh really?” Eleni put her incredulous hands on her hips. “If you aren’t spies, then why have you got a

book of secret codes?” The diary was swiftly passed into her hand, and there was no shyness in the way she lorded it over both of them.

Jack remained obstinately silent.

“Jack,” Sanwar urged to him in English. “If you do not tell them, then I will be forced to do so.”

“Sanwar, we can’t!”

“Can’t tell me, what?” Eleni asked with a grin. “I can speak English too, you see.”

Now, Jack’s silence became more sheepish than obstinate.

Either way, Eleni rolled her eyes, and stuck her pistol in his face.

“You are boring me. Please tell me now.”

“You going to shoot me if I don’t?”

“No,” Eleni said. She turned the gun on Sanwar instead, and clicked back the hammer. “But I will shoot him.”

Sanwar sighed. “Jack, please.”

“Sanwar, we bloody can’t-”

“If I comply, would you holster your sidearm first, *kyria?*” Sanwar interjected. His Greek was far more formal than Jack’s, but what wasn’t about Sanwar, really? Formal or not however, the whole group nearly took a step back the second he had opened his mouth. Jack tried not to laugh. These folks had probably never seen a Punjabi man in their life, and now one was speaking Greek in front of them. Oh, how their world must have been shattering.

“You can start by just calling me, ‘Captain’,” Eleni commanded, but lowered her weapon anyway. The others continued to stare. “Skip the formalities, and tell the rest.”

“Very well, Captain,” Sanwar complied. “To answer your questions in turn; my name is Sanwar Singh Dhamija, and this is my partner, Mister Jack MacGregor.”

“Enchanted,” Jack said with a curtsey.

Ignoring him, Sanwar continued. “We are mere civilians, and were traveling to Smyrna when-”

“Civilians!?” Eleni snorted. “With swords?”

“Family heirlooms.”

“They look like weapons to me, but go on.” The Greeks all eyed him and Jack more suspiciously.

“In any event,” Sanwar said, trying to maintain his composure. “We were en route to Smyrna when we were waylaid by a Turkish ambush. The engine was dismantled and we were overwhelmed. Jack and I, alas, were forced to abandon the vessel. Though Jack was rendered unconscious during our flight, I was able to drift among the wreckage of our lifeboat until...well, until we were carried to wherever it is we are now.”

“Well, you are on the island of Delfini now,” Eleni told him.

“Greatest island in all of Greece!” shouted the other woman, Kyriaki. The others cheered at that.

Eleni grinned and waited for them to settle. “We saw a fire on the horizon last night. That must have been you, yes?”

“Our escape,” Jack confirmed.

Eleni nodded. “I see. And these men who attacked you...who was their leader? Tell me what he looked like.”

“I believe the man in question was an older fellow,” Sanwar answered. “Deadly with a blade, fairly tall in stature, and as I recall, he had but a single eye.”

That description gave Eleni pause.

After a moment, she spoke again. “Niko?”

“Yes, Captain?” The old man straightened.

“Would you fetch some water, please? These gentlemen willing be staying here a while.”

Jack and Sanwar exchanged a look.

“At once, Captain.” Nikos nodded to another man, who went off with him inside. The others dispersed, taking seats at tables beneath the veranda, though they never took their eyes off Jack and Sanwar.

“Please, have a seat,” Eleni said, gesturing to a pair of empty chairs beside her table. “I have so many questions to ask you.”

They made no motion to sit just yet, however.

“It’s a bit of a long and complicated story,” Jack replied.

“Oh, that is no problem,” Eleni smiled. “You are not going anywhere.” She laid her gun down on the table, then leaned back into a chair with her feet propped up beside it.

They took that as their cue to sit.

As they did, Jack noticed a strange shadow growing in Eleni’s eyes, one he had not seen before.

“Now that you are comfortable,” she said. “Start over from the beginning, and tell me everything.”

VI

Their Words Were Read

“So that’s everything?”

Eleni leaned back in her chair. In the dying light, everyone was silent, just as they had been for hours, but now all their eyes were turned on her. For a good long while she sat without a word, until at last, she turned to Kyriaki beside her and let out a bellowing laugh. “Knights and magic stones!?” She cried. “It sounds like one of *papou’s* stories, doesn’t it?”

Her sister did not share the same amusement. “It does...but I’m still confused.”

“About what?” Jack asked. He was not about to go over the entire story again in detail.

“Alchemy. This is like chemistry, no? Could you explain it one more time?”

If anything, they had explained too much already in Jack's opinion, but of course Sanwar could not help himself. "Chemistry in our modern parlance yes, but in practice, Alchemy is so much more. It is the study of matter's transformation and three aspects of a physical being; the body, the mind or spirit as we call it, and the soul. Their respective Alchemical names are Salt, Mercury, and Sulfur—"

"Mercury?" asked Kyriaki. "You mean Hermes?"

"No, not like the God," Sanwar smiled. "And not quicksilver either. This is not an element like in chemistry, but an aspect; something innate in all life; the mind. Anyhow, these aspects directly correspond with the three areas of Alchemy's study as well; Science, Philosophy, and Magic—"

"Like the Magic Stone!"

"The Philosopher' Stone, yes!" Sanwar corrected. "It is the noblest creation an Alchemist can

transmute. It can grant immortal life and the free transmutation of matter itself!”

Kyriaki gasped. “Then we definitely don’t want that falling into the hands of the Turks!”

“Kyriaki!” Eleni scoffed. “You don’t seriously believe them? The Knights Hospitaller haven’t ruled these islands in four hundred years! There is no such thing as a Magic Stone-”

“Philosopher’s Stone,” Sanwar corrected again.

“Whatever you call it, it does not exist!”

“But Eleni,” Kyriaki said. “They have the diary. They know about Bakir.”

“Aye, and don’t you think this story’s a wee specific?” Jack chimed in. “I mean, if I wanted to convince you that I wasn’t actually a spy, wouldn’t I tell you something a little more...I don’t know...believable?”

“You’re right,” Eleni said. “I don’t believe you.”

Jack let out a sigh of frustration. “You saw the bloody explosion last night, didn’t you!?”

The Captain shrugged, and waved a lazy hand at him. “Oh, I believe you that you were going to Smyrna and that Bakir attacked you, but I also believe you made this story to hide that both of you are British spies.”

“We’re not spies, and we’re not British!” The exasperation was rising in Jack’s voice. Hours of over-explanation and somehow, they had still gotten nowhere.

Casually, Eleni removed a flask from inside her jacket and took a long swig. “Then if you’re not British, which country do you serve?”

“We serve no country.”

“Come now,” she said. “We all serve a country.”

“Not us.”

“Then you are not someone that I would ever trust,” Eleni declared, crossing her arms.

“Well, that’s bloody helpful, isn’t it?” Jack said, doing the same.

The two stared daggers at each other.

Sanwar cleared his throat. “Regardless of our allegiances, it would appear that all parties share an enemy in Captain Bakir, yes?”

“Bakir is just a pirate,” Eleni said. “The man who commands him is worse.”

“Only more to my point then, I believe,” Sanwar continued. “If I may be so bold, some amount of cooperation between us would provide a mutual benefit.”

“Possibly,” allowed Eleni.

“Now, I do concur that our story teeters on incredibility,” he conceded. “And I in no way, shape, or form fault you for your disbelief-”

“What are you getting at?” Eleni yawned.

“Would you at least be inclined to believe that our intentions are only to seek passage to Smyrna? And not, by any means, to bring any harm unto Greek efforts in the war?”

This gave Eleni pause a moment. She put a pensive finger on her lip, considering them both.

“Maybe...”

Sanwar was practically giddy. “Then, all we are asking is to be along our way. Isn’t that right, Jack?”

“Right...” His voice was dripping with reluctance.

“Right,” Sanwar echoed, his head nodding along. “And the Turks and the Hospitallers most likely think we are dead anyway, so it would be as if you never even saw us at all.”

Again, Eleni took pause.

Finally, she rose to her feet.

“I will take you to Smyrna,” she announced.

Jack and Sanwar exchanged a grin. Suddenly, all the animosity of the past few hours was forgotten. She would take them herself!?

Sanwar bowed his head. “Splendid! Splendid! You are most kind! Thank you, Captain!”

“I will take you to Smyrna,” Eleni repeated. “And then the Army can figure out what the hell to do with you.”

They froze.

Eleni only grinned. “Now come on you two. We are going to be late to the party.”

Nikos and a pair of men stepped in behind them, and helped them out of their chairs.

“Wait. What?” was all that Sanwar could manage to say.

“A party!” Eleni laughed. “Surely, you and the Scotsman know what one of those is.”

Without another word of explanation, the Greeks were shoving Jack and Sanwar along again, as the light finally faded into nightfall, and the festivities began.

Down the hill, nestled by the seaside, a little taverna was aglow. Lights shone from every corner, and the lively jaunt of *bouzouki* music drifted through the night, over the din of many voices laughing, singing, or sharing company. Tables had been laid out around the edges of a flagstone patio to make room for dancing. As Eleni led them across the beach and onto the floor, they maneuvered around a snaking line of dancers locked arm in arm with one another. At the sight of her though, a shout went up throughout the whole taverna, and everybody, even the band, stopped all activity for a lengthy round of applause.

Eleni smiled, bowed, and was immediately handed a bottle of *ouzo*, which she upended just as

quickly. With a cheer, she placed it atop her head, and the music resumed once more, livelier than before. The Captain stepped out onto the dance floor, keeping the bottle in perfect balance as she moved.

While Eleni danced, a waiter led the rest of them to set of tables nearest to the sea and the stage where the band was playing. Jack and Sanwar found themselves seated between Nikos and Kyriaki, with an easy view of the dance floor. Food was soon brought over to their table in a fleet of platters.

“What exactly are we celebrating?” Sanwar asked, as a plate was laid down in front of him.

“Another successful raid upon the Turks!” Kyriaki cried, and the other tables joined in. “We stole a load of medical supplies from Bodrum not too long ago,” she explained, cracking open a ripe and juicy pomegranate to share with Nikos.

“Tomorrow, we will trade them all for guns to take to Smyrna!”

Nikos gently touched Kyriaki's arm, and muttered something, but she brushed it aside. "What can they do about it, Niko? They are prisoners now! Who else will they tell?"

She laughed it off, and resumed eating. Even still, the old man continued eyeing both him and Jack suspiciously.

Sanwar tried to avoid his gaze by busying himself with his food, though looking down at his plate, his hopes were quickly shattered. Sprawled out before him was a spread of grilled octopus arms, swimming in lemon juice and olive oil. Hiding his grimace, Sanwar looked for the nearest salad.

Jack also ate little. Instead he sat in silence, as he was wont to do sometimes, surveying the dance floor. With little else to do, Sanwar decided to humor him a while.

There must have been several hundred in attendance, which he estimated to be the total

population of an island as small as this. Beyond Eleni's company however, hardly a man between the age of fifteen and fifty was present. Eleni herself was the center of attention, and having finished dancing, visited at every table, if only just for a moment's conversation. She laughed with the womenfolk, out-cursed the old sailors, played with the children, and even rebuffed more than one drunken marriage proposal. Either way, her elderly suitors returned to their tables smiling in ecstasy, as if the rejection were an even better outcome.

At their own table however, the conversations had shifted to old sea stories and tales of other raids from the past year as the bottles of *raki*, wine, and *ouzo* were all passed around. Apparently, Eleni's crew had burgled much more than just medical supplies. Money, ammunition, food, and oil had all been swiped from Turkish supply ships, and traded back to the Greek Army, though the Captain was able to keep a little for herself.

“And she gives it all back to us!” Kyriaki said, sweeping her hands out towards the party. She took another sip of *ouzo*. “My sister provides for us! She is the greatest man on all Delfini! In all of Greece! *Yia mas!*”

The table cheered “*Yia mas!*” in agreement, and everybody drank. The toast was followed by another to Venizelos, the former prime minister, and then another to the unified Greek nation, and many more after that.

“Do you not fear the Turks will bring their retribution here?” Sanwar asked when they had finished. Such a place as minuscule as this seemed particularly vulnerable.

“Ha!” Kyriaki scoffed. “Delfini may be small, but that makes it easier to defend! We have lookouts all around. See?” She pointed to the rugged hills all across the island and the faint little watchfires dotting each of them. “We Greeks were made to

fight in the hills. Not even Bakir would dare set foot on this island!”

“Bakir,” echoed Sanwar. “In spite of my experience, it seems I know next to nothing of him.”

“A hard man,” Nikos said. The old man’s voice was grim. “In the same way that fishermen have been in my blood, pirates have been in his. Even back when I was still a crewman, his line was terrorizing the Mediterranean. Another ship, another captain maybe, but still the name of Bakir. Been like that for centuries.” Nikos struck his pipe, and blew a wraith of smoke into the air. “He strikes fast and disappears just as quick, before the Navy has any time to catch him. He takes what he wants from the dead, and leaves little more than blood behind. He’s hunted us before, though it seems like you were an easier catch.”

“So we’ll be laying low a while,” said Kyriaki, drink in hand. “Until we’re sure he’s sailed far away from here.”

“How long’s a while?” asked Jack. It was the first time he had spoken since they had arrived.

She shrugged. “A few days, or maybe a few weeks. Whenever Eleni says is time.”

Jack blanched. “We need to get off this island,” he whispered to Sanwar in English.

“Have you got a plan then?” Sanwar whispered back.

“Working on it.”

“Oh no...”

“*Malaka!*” This shout came from Eleni, who approached the table, a grin upon her flushed face and a fresh bottle in her hand. Everybody cheered as she passed it off to give Kyriaki a hug, then took the nearest seat, with her boots characteristically resting on the table.

“Tired yet, my little Captain?” Nikos laughed.

“Are you? It’s past your bedtime, old man,” she lovingly returned. They shared a laugh with the rest of the table. Suddenly, Eleni’s eyes caught glimpse of Sanwar’s untouched plate. “You! What is wrong with your octopus?”

He bowed his head. “I am afraid that I abstain from consuming animal flesh.”

The table looked at him strangely.

Eleni however, just laughed. “Alright, then I eat it for you!” She said, and took a generous helping from his plate. She washed it down with some *raki*, before offering the bottle to him. “Do you drink any *raki*, my friend?”

“Sadly, no,” he replied. “My faith forbids me from the ingestion of alcoholic spirits.”

Again, Eleni laughed. “That’s alright! Then I drink it for you too!” And with that, she helped herself to another glass.

For a time, Eleni sat a while with her men, listening to them and laughing at their stories, even if she had heard them all a thousand times before. It was always a welcome time coming back to Delfini, no matter what was said at the table.

Unsurprisingly, her prisoners were silent through the whole conversation, though she was sure they were listening. How did they know Greek? They hadn't told her yet.

For a moment, Eleni wondered what she would do with these two strange men. Could she even believe a word they said? Maybe. Or maybe not. Either way, she would decide on that tomorrow, because tonight? Tonight, she could revel in her victory, and the allure of the dance floor was calling once again.

"I am going dancing!" She announced, and the table cheered. Bottle in hand, she hurried off towards the open floor, when a voice called out from behind.

“Captain!”

She turned to see that Jack had followed after her alone.

“Hello, Scotsman,” she hiccuped. “Are you enjoying being my prisoner? Not so bad, is it?”

“Better than some,” he admitted. “I wanted to talk to you.”

“Well, here I am,” she said. “Talk.”

“I have a proposal.”

She waved a hand in his face. “No, no, no! I’ve turned down three men tonight already. Save it Scotsman-”

He smiled. “Not that kind of proposal.”

“Then what kind?”

“A bet.”

“A bet?”

“Yes,” he said. “If I win, you-”

“Ha!” Eleni snorted. “Just tell me what happens if *I* win.”

“If I win,” Jack continued. “You take me and Sanwar to Smyrna, and you let us go with the diary. No questions asked and no more trouble from us.”

“Seems like you are getting more from this than me...”

“Well, if you win, then I show you exactly where the map is hidden. Then, you and the Army can take the Stone for yourself.”

“I thought I already said I don’t believe you,” Eleni yawned. “This bet is stupid.”

“In Smyrna, I can prove it though.”

“How?”

“The diary. Only an Alchemist can translate it. Sanwar and I have already found an important clue to where the map is hidden.” Thankfully, they had neglected to mention this much when recounting their story to Eleni earlier. Of course, all of it was

resting on the fact that the one line they had translated was of any use at all. Eleni remained looking rightfully skeptical at him. “Come on Eleni,” he urged. “You know what kind of power this Stone has? It could win the war...”

“So if it is real, then how about I just torture you for the information? Or just make you translate the book for me? Eh?”

“I know you’re not like that,” said Jack.

“How do you know what I am like!?” she flared.

“I know you take your risks,” he returned.

“Otherwise, you wouldn’t have robbed that ship in Bodrum.”

“I don’t take stupid risks.” She took a deep swallow from the bottle. “And this bet is stupid-”

“I also know you that you’re afraid,” Jack interrupted. “Afraid you’ll lose-”

“I am afraid of nothing!” Eleni downed the rest of her bottle, and tossed it aside. She jammed her

hand out in front of him before the glass had even broken. “Name the challenge, and we have a bet.”

He grinned. “I bet that I can dance longer with a bottle on my head than you.”

There was a pause. Then Eleni roared with laughter. “This is a stupid bet! Alright then Scotsman, you have a deal!”

Jack accepted her iron grip, and shook. “So we do.”

“Good!” She moved out onto the dance floor, and raised her arms at the bandstand. The music came to a sporadic halt.

All eyes turned to Eleni as she faced the crowd.

“Everyone! Everybody!” She called to them. “This *malaka* thinks that he can dance longer than me with a bottle on his head!”

The crowd erupted with instant laughter. Jack stood quiet while it passed.

“So let’s let him try it, yes?” Eleni shouted. “Let’s see what is braver, his balls or his feet!”

More laughter.

Someone stepped out, and handed *ouzo* bottles to Eleni and Jack.

“Alright, Taki!” Eleni called to a *bouzouki* player on the stage. “Make it sing! *Opa!*”

Takis strummed a high note, and a hush washed over the crowd.

Jack and Eleni squared off on either end of the dance floor.

Lazily, the Captain tossed her hat aside, and had it caught immediately by a someone in the crowd. Then, with her other hand, she placed the bottle on her head in a single, fluid movement.

Jack tried to do the same, but the bottle slipped, much to everyone’s amusement. After several tries however, he did steady it like Eleni’s, and the dance began in proper.

Takis started low and deliberate. Arms crossed, foot over foot, leg crossing leg, Eleni moved in perfect synchronicity with his tempo.

And so did Jack.

A murmur shuddered throughout the taverna. Suddenly, all eyes were on this wild Scotsman and his flawless moves.

Eleni frowned, and reversed her step without skipping a beat. The rouse failed however, as Jack mirrored the change exactly.

Takis quickened the pace, and the whole band joined in.

As he did, Eleni dropped lower, sinking deeper into her knees. Her steps became longer, one leg kicking out at a time while she balanced herself on the other knee.

Jack did likewise, but dragged himself forward with every step, as if he was sweeping the dance floor with his legs. Still, his bottle did not teeter.

Some in the crowd stuffed their fingers in their mouths. Sanwar just raised an eyebrow.

Eleni huffed at her obstinate opponent. Clearly, this was not enough. She threw her arms out, moving them up and down in converse with her feet. She shimmied herself back on to her feet, heart pounding with the music.

Jack frowned, and tried to do the same. His bottle wobbled however, where hers was straight. She had him now.

With an unbridled flourish, Eleni spun about. If Jack even tried, he would fail. No other Greek could do this, and he was no Greek at all! He would surely drop his bottle.

Or so she thought.

As she tried to plant her foot and face him once again, the floor seemed not to touch her feet. Instead, her legs went right out from under her.

Halfway to the ground, Eleni put together that she was no longer dancing actually, but falling.

It was funny how the world moved slowly, she thought, but the lights above her all were spinning fast. Funny, how she had lost to this obnoxious Scotman.

Glass shattered. The crowd gasped, and the music stopped. Then something caught her right before she hit the flagstones...or someone rather.

When the spinning world had stopped and the taverna returned to focus, she saw that Jack was lifting her back onto her feet.

“Careful, Captain,” he cautioned. “Mind the glass.”

He moved her around the broken shards and slippery ouzo around his feet.

“I’ve lost,” Eleni said in sudden realization.

“Actually,” said Jack, hoisting her back to her feet. “Mine broke first, so you won.” She looked

down. He was holding a bottle in his other hand; her bottle. With a shrug, he handed it back to her.

“Fair’s fair.”

There were murmurs throughout the crowd. Then Eleni’s mind finally came back to speed. Jack’s bottle had fallen first, yes, but he had let it fall so that he could catch her.

A strange one, this Scotsman.

“No,” she said, lowering the bottle. “No, you have won.”

Jack made to protest, but Eleni snatched his hand in hers. Before he knew it, she had raised it overhead, and called out to the crowd.

“My friends! He has beaten me! *Opa!*”

“*Opa!!!*” Shouted back the crowd.

“Now, how about a drink, Scotsman?” Eleni asked, pulling out the cork with her teeth. At least, she attempted to. Her movements were awkward and jerky all of a sudden.

“I think you’ve had enough,” Jack laughed.

“Just one more,” she insisted, turning the bottle back to him. “For a formidable opponent.”

“Aye, I can do that,” he allowed, and accepted the bottle with a hearty swig. Then, he raised his arms to the crowd. “*Opa!*”

Everybody cheered.

The party ended at some ungodly hour of the morning, and when it was finally over, so began the long trek back up the hill to Eleni’s house; a trek made slower by the fact that everyone was swaying from either drunkenness, exhaustion, or some combination of the two. Nikos was practically carrying Kyriaki, and even Jack had to lean on Sanwar for support. Almost two days without good sleep, and the little he had drunk was causing him to sway. He giggled as he stumbled, and was caught yet again by his friend.

“Someone’s been enjoying himself tonight,” Sanwar remarked, allowing Jack to rest his head upon his shoulder. “Need I remind you that we will be prisoners on the morrow?”

“Not anymore.” Jack giggled like an imp.

Sanwar raised an eyebrow. “Then, I gather that was what the bet between you and the Captain was regarding?”

Jack just nodded emptily.

Sanwar sighed. “Next time, please give more forewarning when you concoct these plans.”

“Sort of a...spur of the...moment kind of thing.” Jack giggled again. “Anyway...I’ll explain it all tomorrow.”

“Yes, you had best not attempt any explanation at the moment.”

Together, they walked along in silence until at last, they arrived at the house. Expecting to be taken elsewhere, Jack and Sanwar were actually led by

Eleni herself around to the back, where a guest room was waiting. Flicking on a lamp, they saw that fresh sheets had been prepared, and the floor had been neatly swept.

“You sleep here tonight,” Eleni said.

They thanked for the accommodations, but she waved them away. “Quiet you two. Now go to sleep. Oh wait, Scotsman. A moment.”

Curious, he followed her outside.

Here in the darkness, her face was bathed in shadow, and he could see little more than the glint of her zircon eyes.

Immediately, she jammed a long finger into his chest. “You never told me where you learned to speak my language.”

“Oh,” he laughed. “Well you see, Sanwar learned at Oxford.”

“Alright, but what about you?”

“Oh me?” He giggled, then tried to sober. “Same place as you. Here, in the islands.”

“Really...?”

“Aye, but that’s a long story.”

“Tell it to me later then,” she said.

“If you’d like.”

“I would. Goodnight, Scotsman.”

“Goodnight, Captain.”

He watched her go. Once she had disappeared inside her house, he turned his gaze upwards.

Where some saw darkness, Jack could see naught but deep blue beauty high above him. Stars glinted in the thousands, the constellation Lyra shining brighter than the rest. The crescent moon was waxing and aglow, and distant planets beamed their endless light. Across it all, swept the azure wave that was the Milk Way like a giant serpent twining in the sky. Here, far from city lights or falling mortar

shells, every detail shone so clear and unmistakable. There was order to the shape of it, patterns painted by a knowing brush.

Or perhaps he was simply seeing things where there were none.

Jack gave a wane smile.

He had no answers tonight, he supposed. All he knew was that he was alive, and that was good enough for today.

And so, for the first time in a long time, he went to bed hoping for tomorrow.

VII

For Souls to Lave

Monday, August 28th, 1922

Delfini, Kingdom of Greece

For once, Jack awoke from a calm and dreamless sleep. Refreshed, he arose in the wee hours of the morning, and stepped outside into its cool, blue light. The sea breeze played with his hair as he walked out into the garden, and surveyed the dawn.

On a clear day like this, he could just make out the shadows of islands far on the horizon. Northwards, past a small crescent-shaped islet, lay the familiar form of Kos. Directly east, was the large outline of what could only be Rhodes, from where he had just come. South and slightly west, was the length of Crete well away in the distance. It was by far the largest island in the whole Kingdom, and through it,

many ancient mariners would have likely passed from Egypt and other lands far beyond.

From these bearings, Jack knew they must be on the outer edges of the Dodecanese, the “Twelve Islands” of the east Aegean, just before one landed on the shores of Anatolia. Geography had been one habit that his father had approved of at least, thinking it a strong way to reinforce discipline in Jack’s young brain. In reality, he had used it as an excuse for daydreaming about sailing past those islands aboard the Argo alongside Jason and his crew of heroes in search of the Golden Fleece.

Jack turned his gaze northwards one last time.

There, Smyrna waited.

It was his best hope of finding the Stone, no matter what lay in wait ahead of him. Fear struck his heart a moment later, as the thought that perhaps it was a falsehood crossed his mind. What if there really was nothing there at all, and Godfrey’s story had

merely been some tall tale, like so many others who had written of the Stone before?

He put the thought out of mind. Slim as it was, this was still the best chance he had; and he would take the best chance, even a false one, over none at all, no matter what the cost.

For another moment, Saxon crossed his mind as well. This thought was harder to put away. Seeping at the back of his mind, Jack still wondered where that bastard was, and when and where the two of them would meet again. He smiled at the thought of that encounter, of having the Stone in hand before Saxon. The bastard would know the error of his ways that day, and the world would be a better place on the morrow.

Hunger eventually guided Jack back inside the villa. Through the veranda, he entered a parlor, where new sounds and smells awaited him. Echoes of a thunking knife against a cutting board drifted from

an open door at the far end of the room, followed by the aroma of onions sizzling in salt and olive oil.

Jack peered inside the kitchen to see Nikos busy with his knife. Already on the table was a fresh chopped salad of cheese and vegetables and empty cups waiting to be filled with coffee boiling on the stove. He returned to the parlor to let Nikos work, and busied himself instead with inspecting his new surroundings.

It was quite a comfortable interior; a velvet cushioned sofa, a Cretan rug upon the floor, and a coffee table crafted from Venetian glass. Yet, it was the fireplace that caught Jack's attention the most.

Naturally, the blue and white stripes of the Greek flag were hung there above the mantle, and just above it, a silver cross. On one side of these two items was a fishing spear, its head blackened with oil and age. On the other was a shotgun, one of the old, double-barreled boxlocks. They were formidable pieces both, but Jack settled his gaze on the mantle beneath them,

where a trio of photographs were framed in exquisite silver.

The first was a portrait of a family; a husband, wife, and four little children. At a glance, Jack thought the woman was Eleni, but upon closer inspection, he noticed subtle differences in the face. The eyes were darker and the lips slightly narrower, but besides that, their sharp features were nearly identical. The man had Eleni's eyes, or rather she had his; large, bright, and piercing. He had smoother features than his wife, and altogether they made a lovely couple, especially with the children arranged across their laps; two sons and two daughters, pleasant and perfect, or at least giving that impression for the photographer.

The second picture was of a handsome man in army dress with a rifle leaned against his hip. Tall and spare, he had smiling eyes and a cocksure grin beneath his long, waxed mustache. In the corner of the photograph, the year was marked as "1911".

Finally, between the two others was a photograph of a building strangely familiar to Jack. It took a moment for him to search his memory, and remember what it was. He recalled that he had passed it by so many times on the Smyrna quayside many years ago, though funnily enough, not once had he bothered to stop and learn what it had been. Only now did he look at its marquis, which read: "*Raissi Company Shipping.*"

A schooner sat in the harbor outside the building's doors, christened with the name, "*Gorgona*". Three men wearing hats and tailored suits stood in a line on the docks above it. Jack recognized two of them instantly, as the father from the first picture and the handsome soldier. The last, however, was a mystery. Dark-haired and barreled chested, he stood solemnly to the right, and looked to be of an age with the older man. He too seemed strangely familiar, as if Jack had seen him before-

"What are you doing?"

Jack nearly jumped.

Nikos had appeared just behind him. He was greasing the inside of a cast iron skillet with oil, all the while wearing a disapproving look upon his face.

“Just having a look around,” said Jack.

“Breakfast’s almost ready.”

“Grand, thank you.” Jack stood in awkward silence a moment, before looking back to the photographs. “So is this Eleni’s family?”

“Yes.”

“Then that must be her father?” He pointed to the bright-eyed man next to the woman.

“It is.”

“And who is the soldier?” asked Jack, pointing to the handsome man in the second photograph.

Nikos hesitated.

“That’s Spyros,” he said at last.

“Eleni’s husband?”

Nikos turned away. "You should come and sit."

That seemed less like an invitation than a threat, but it did not stop Jack from asking one more question as he followed Nikos back to the kitchen. "Who's the third man in that photograph?"

"Which one?"

"The older one," Jack clarified. "Next to Eleni's father."

"That?" Nikos snorted. "That used to be me."

The sea was cool against his skin as he stepped into the placid waters of the tide. Where it was deep enough, Sanwar let himself lay back adrift, his hair a dark sea itself around him.

The first time he had seen an ocean was when his father had taken him to Bombay as a boy. The city was so busy, so packed with factories, and workers, and white men that Sanwar feared he would be swept away and lost forever if he ever left his father's side.

One day, his family had gone to the beach. A white family had invited them, friends of his father's. While they had sat beneath their parasols onboard their yacht, sipping iced lemonade, Sanwar had watched the people swimming near the shore. Most of them were factory workers from *Shudra* families, he imagined, probably spending their one day off together.

From how their laughter carried all the way across the bay, he could tell that they were happy, even just for the day. Maybe even, they were happier than he had ever been.

It was strange how small they looked, compared to the vastness of the ocean; how they hugged the shallows, never venturing further into deeper waters. From what he had read, a whole world existed just beneath them, filled with life that he had never seen, nor ever would...unless of course, he dared to look.

Sanwar had dived in headfirst. He hoped to find the bottom, to see for himself that something waited for him down there, and indeed something had been.

What he found was a shark.

Eight feet long, it was circling what felt like miles beneath the surface; one small patch of black cresting the tip of its dorsal fin. Its body twisted back and forth as it patrolled the water. There was a silent grace to its every movement, a knowingness in the fluidity of its very motion.

The shark had taken one look at Sanwar before swimming away.

His father had jumped in after him seconds later, and when they returned back home to Punjab, had given Sanwar a swift caning for nearly getting both them injured, or maybe killed.

Yet strangely, for all the while he had been underneath the waves, Sanwar had not once felt afraid.

Once he had finished cleansing himself and his prayers were said, Sanwar combed his hair, redressed, prayed, and began making the climb back to the Eleni's villa. The midmorning sun was rising, but his seawater bath had kept him cool, even as he ascended. Surely, the others would be awake by now, and breakfast soon forthcoming. Hopefully while they ate, Jack could explain last night as well.

Halfway up the hill however, the path diverged, and curiosity got the better of Sanwar's hunger. He would detour, he decided, if only for a moment. Besides, the island was small enough that becoming lost was nigh an impossibility.

The side path was overgrown, and led into a grove of trees; some of the little shade he had seen around Delfini. It led on a while, until it opened into a clearing lined with the stumps of marble columns.

In their center, in among the shady boughs, stood Lord Poseidon, God of the Seas. The Romans would have known him by the name of Neptune. A fearsome god he had been ages ago, vengeful and mighty. Yet, all might seemed to have escaped him now. Lichen sprouted across his marble body. Ivy twined around his feet. A prong of his trident had snapped off, as well as his nose. Smoothed down by centuries, his face was void of feature beyond the vague shape of a beard and two blank orbs for eyes, where once they would have all been painted in a riot of colors.

Surrounded by the fallen columns, it appeared that Poseidon's kingdom was all but diminished.

“So Nikos was right,” came a voice from behind. There was a rustling in the brush, and Eleni emerged into the clearing a moment later. “He said he saw you go this way.” She joined his side, considering the statue. “Old Poseidon wears a faded crown, no?”

In truth, there was not much of a crown left on the Lord of Seas, only a few blunted spikes protruding from his head like little horns.

“I would profess there is still some beauty in it,” Sanwar replied, reconsidering the statue. “The islands no longer worship the old gods, do they?”

“No,” Eleni smiled. “Not like that. We are God-fearing people here Mister Sanwar, but these were our traditions.” She brushed away some of the vines around Poseidon’s feet. “There are shrines like this all over the islands, old, holy places, but they are not our god. To us, they are more like spirits; angels, you could say. Our history. They are always watching. They are old stories that we cannot forget. Every island has one god that is special to them, and keeps a temple or a shrine at least. Here on Delfini, Poseidon is our protector. My father used to pray to him for every fisherman’s dream; good winds and a good catch.”

“I see,” he said. “There are many old and ancient places like this in my home as well.”

“Home in...India?”

“In Punjab, yes,” he replied.

“Do you miss it?” She asked. “You are very far away from there.”

“I do.”

“Tell me about Punjab,” she said with a sly smile, walking back towards the path. She nodded for him follow.

“Well, currently it is the rainy season there,” he began, joining her side. Together, they re-entered the blaze of the morning sun, and made their climb back up the hill. “With any luck, the monsoons will bring good harvests when they conclude, and the farmers will be happy. It is warm there now too, perhaps a little more so than this.”

Eleni smiled, removed her hat, and wiped her brow from the exertion. “And your family?”

“My parents, two sisters, and a brother,” he said, then added, “And my sister’s husband, soon to be.”

“A large family, like a Greek one. That’s good. Why aren’t you with them though?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why are you here? Why not go back to them?”

“The Stone.”

“Ah yes,” she laughed. “How could I forget the Magic Rock?”

“It is real, Eleni,” he said, stopping in his tracks. She stopped too, and faced him. “We cannot return home until the Stone is ours. We made that vow, Jack and I.”

“But why?” she asked. “Isn’t your family more important?”

“Would you say the same if we were choosing to go to war instead?”

“I would say you are fighting to protect your home,” she returned, indignant. “And that is worth being far away.”

“This is the same,” he told her. “This is a war, Eleni, greater than the Great War itself. It is a battle for the soul of life itself.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Nor do I, not fully.” He resumed walking. “But I would say, what is the point of going home, if it will not be there when you return?” He grimaced. “The forces of darkness are gathering about the Stone, Eleni. To that, I cannot abide.”

“And what about the Scotsman?” she asked, following after. “How does he feel about leaving his family behind?”

Sanwar shrugged. “The idea was his. Although, if you want to press the issue of his family, you will have to ask him yourself.”

Eleni shook her head, and again wiped away her sweat. “You and the Scotsman both,” she laughed. “You are so strange. I mean, you are the first man I’ve met who doesn’t eat octopus!”

“Ignoring my own spiritual observances,” Sanwar replied. “Octopi are highly intelligent beings that can freely change their color and shape in accordance to their environs, or when that fails, excrete an ink jet to imitate their own. Fascinating creatures where my opinion is concerned. I would refuse to eat them for that alone.”

Eleni watched him dumbfounded. “Like I said, strange.”

He smiled. “I see nothing unusual about it.”

“Well, breakfast is almost done, anyway,” Eleni remarked.

Indeed, Sanwar’s own hunger was a ready reminder of that fact. “Is it octopus?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll eat yours if you’re too slow!”
With that, she laughed, and bolted off towards the house, running the final length of the hill.

Sanwar however, was in no hurry to give chase.

“If it’s octopus, you can have it!” he called after her.

Before noon, the entire crew was at the docks, unloading hoards of crates from the tarry hull of an old three masted ship laid at anchor there. “*Karkinos*” was written on its side in bright, golden paint, probably the newest thing about the vessel.

Eleni supervised as the cargo was craned down. There was an anxious nature to the otherwise laid back Greeks this morning, so Jack and Sanwar mostly just tried to stay out of their way.

“Ship!” came a shout from the crow’s nest. All eyes turned to where he pointed, and sure enough, the

thin outline of a second ship had appeared on the horizon.

“Just like the British, no?” Kyriaki remarked, joining them on the docks. “Always on time.”

“Scottish,” Eleni corrected, with a look askance to Jack. “Our ‘friend’ is a Scotsman too.”

Another Scotsman? Jack tensed. He hoped it wasn't anyone from home, however unlikely the odds.

The crew finished unloading in time for the other ship to dock, its massive steel frame filling nearly twice the space of the “*Karkinos*”. Nikos and several other men stepped in behind Eleni, rifles slung upon their shoulders.

“Just a precaution,” she said to Jack and Sanwar, noticing their obvious unease. The words were not much comfort either way, especially as a group of men disembarked from the opposite ship with weapons of their own, and approached. They looked to be a motley crew of Arabs, Greeks, Turks, and sun-

burned Brits, along with various other Europeans, each one more hard-eyed than the last.

Their leader however, was armed only with a cigarette as he stepped forward. He was smartly dressed in a tan suit, black tie, and a bunnet. His mustache was freshly waxed, although it did little to improve his overall appearance. Scars streaked his weathered face, one stretching from the corner of his mouth to just below his right cheek like a grizzly smile. Piece of his ear was missing, and his nose was crooked in several places too, but Jack was most stricken by his eyes. Pale and lingering, they scanned the lot of them, searching every face as he approached.

He stopped to light his cigarette, the scent of Turkish tobacco wafting downwind, before he finally spoke in a guttural Glaswegian brogue.

“Cap’n Raissi.” He gave the tip of his cap.

“Good morning, Mister Taggart,” Eleni switched into English, and responded with the touch of her own. “Shall we go straight into business?”

“I’m fine without the foreplay if you are, lass,” he grinned.

“Please,” Eleni returned with cool formality.

Taggart nodded to a pair of his men, who brought forth an oblong-shaped crate. “Got five hundred small arms, six machine guns, eight hundred grenades, and two tons of ammunition in the hold. All like I promised.”

Two of Eleni’s men did the same. “And we have got the two tons of medicine. Like we promised.”

“Grand. Mind if I inspect the merchandise?”

“As long as I may do the same.”

“Aye, show me yours lass, and I’ll show you mine.”

The respective crews pried open the boxes with crowbars, allowing Taggart and Eleni to examine the other's holdings.

Cigarette in mouth, Taggart peered down at the trove before him, lines of morphine bottles tightly packed. He removed one, admiring the dark-colored glass by raising it up to the sunlight.

“Those Turks really make the good stuff, don't they?” he said, blowing smoke into the air.

“So do you, it would seem,” Eleni replied. She removed an unmarked rifle from Taggart's crate, and with practiced speed, shouldered it, pulled back the bolt, and let it ease into her hands. She gazed down the iron sights as if training on some distant enemy.

“It's the latest model,” Taggart told her.

“And it should do nicely. I am satisfied.” She returned the weapon to its place beside the others in the box.

“So am I,” said Taggart. “But I’m curious. Where’d you find yourself this wee bit of cargo?”

His gaze fell suddenly on Jack and Sanwar.

“Them?” Eleni shrugged. “Well, even the best fisherman hauls in a little garbage from time to time.”

Her words came with a wink towards the two of them.

Taggart was not so amused, however. Instead, his pale eyes focused on Jack with a strange wash of recognition.

“*Ciamar a tha sibh?*” Jack asked, before it became too awkward.

Taggart cocked his head. “Sorry mate, don’t speak no Gaelic.” Promptly, he turned back to Eleni without another word to Jack. “S’pose we’re done here then, Cap’n.”

“Well, there’s one more thing,” she said.

“And what’s that exactly?”

“Any news of the front?”

He grinned. “That’ll cost you extra.”

Rolling her eyes, she drew some *drachma* out of her shirt pocket, and stuffed them into his outstretched hand.

“Well, last I heard in Athens,” Taggart began. “Was that the Turks were marching on Dumlupinar, or some such place. Whatever it’s called, reckon you lot will have a battle on your hands soon.”

“Or a victory.”

“Aye, I s’pose someone’s got to win.” He took one last drag on his cigarette. “So’s that everything then, lass?”

“It is.”

“Grand.” With a nod from their superior, Taggart’s men hoisted the crate of medical supplies, and followed him down the dock. Once again, he tipped his cap to Eleni, though his gaze stayed fixed on Jack. “Been a pleasure, Cap’n.”

“Until next time.”

He shrugged. “Maybe.”

With that remark, Taggart flicked the smoldering stub of his cigarette into the sea, and followed after his men.

Only when his ship was sailing away, did Eleni turn and speak to them again. “Niko, prepare the *Karkinos*. We’re leaving for Smyrna tomorrow.”

The old man balked. “But Captain, Bakir is still out there! We should wait at least another week-”

“And what good will the guns be if they come too late?” She snapped. “The Army needs them. Now. We leave tomorrow.”

That was her one and final order.

VIII

And Through Darkness Wade

Wednesday, August 30th, 1922

The Aegean Sea

They had left before first light, sailing north into the open sea. Eleni said the voyage would be three days if the wind held in their sails. The way she spoke however, even that sounded like too many. The same frantic energy had bled into the crew the first day. Every man was furious at the sail, scrambling rigging like crabs on a carcass, and running about the waist as Eleni presided from the helm. She had only relinquished her post once dusk had finally fallen, though the night shift almost had to pull her away from the wheel.

Jack could sense the same anxiety coursing through his veins as well. Should the Army fail, should

Smyrna be attacked, then his chances at the Stone would be nullified; or worse yet, he would arrive in the city and find the map, only to have Kemal Pasha descended upon them, kill him and Sanwar, and take their precious knowledge for himself.

These thoughts played over and over again inside his head, until at last, Jack snapped awake in bed, his heart pounding and his breath short. For a moment, he had forgotten that he was aboard the *Karkinos* and had nearly cried out, thinking he was alone in the darkness, but the sound of Sanwar's gentle breath reminded him of the truth. It took several long minutes for him to slow his breathing. Eventually he recovered, although now he was wide awake, and could not go back to sleep. Instead, he rose from his hammock, and walked out onto the deck.

Cool morning wind swept his face. Glimmers of sunlight were cresting over the horizon, and soon the dawn would follow. Some men worked lazily at the sails, but it would be another hour or so before the

day shift began. Until then, Jack had peace enough to lean against the gunwales, and let his mind drift. Thinking straight was no simple task, though. His mind kept retracing the same thoughts as before, and even if he pushed them aside, his whole body ached to remind them of their pain.

Only singing seemed to soothe him. The words of that old song crept back into his head like some half-forgotten memory, and took a life their own:

*Thug mi gaol dbut 's chan fhaod mi àicheadh
Cha ghaol bliadhna 's cha ghaol ràithe,
Ach gaol thòisich nuair bha mi 'm phàiste,
'S nach searg a chaidh gus an claidh am bàs mi.*

Fhir a'bhàta, na hóro eile...

“That’s a pretty song.”

He nearly jumped.

Eleni was standing there behind him. She raised her hands defensively. “Sorry to frighten you.”

“Not your fault, Captain,” said Jack, catching his breath.

Warily, she crossed to him and joined his side, leaning on the gunwales. “No trouble at all, Scotsman. You’re awake early.”

“Aye,” he said. “Couldn’t sleep much. Just came out here...found myself singing that’s all.”

“What song was it?”

“An old one. An old Gaelic tune.”

“What’s it about?”

“It’s called ‘*Fear a’bhàta*’; ‘The Boatman’. It’s about a young lass waiting for her love to come home while he’s away at sea.”

“It’s pretty,” she said again.

“It’s sad.”

“Sometimes those are the same thing.”

“Aye.”

For a long while, nothing was said between them. The only sound was the brush of waves against the ship until at last, Eleni broke the silence.

“How about a drink, Scotsman? I’ve got something special in my cabin, and you have not told me the story of how you learned to dance yet.”

“A drink? It’s what? Five in the morning?”

She shrugged. “A drink is a drink. Who cares about the time? Anyway, it’s an order.”

Sighing, he followed her down to her cabin, and sat down at her desk. Eleni came around to the other side of it, opened a secret compartment, and produced a bottle. Jack straightened when he saw what she was hiding in there.

“Glenmorangie, single-malt Highland Scotch,” she said, and kissed the bottle. “Eighteen-ninety.”

“Christ,” Jack murmured. “That damn bottle’s as old as I am.”

Eleni produced a pair of Venetian glasses, placed them carefully on the desk, and poured. Even with the swaying of the ship, not a drop was spilled.

“My father stole it, unopened from the Turks, and saved it for when I’d be old enough to drink it,” she explained. “You like the glasses? He stole them too.”

Jack could barely hear her. The aroma of the whiskey was filling his nostrils with stinging notes of vanilla, fruit, and spices. It was singing to him, and he had to answer back.

“He was a smart man,” Eleni continued, swirling the amber liquid around in the crystalline glass. “Now with this Prohibition nonsense, American whiskey is hard to come by. Good thing I like Scotch much better. My father had good taste.”

“Aye, smart man, him,” Jack agreed. “But I thought he owned a shipping company.”

Eleni laughed. “He did, but first he was a smuggler. He and Nikos smuggled guns to Crete back in ninety-seven when I was just a little girl. They wanted us to be free from the Turks even then. They knew every island in the Aegean, and where to hide the guns. Then, they’d sneak them off to the Greek Army.”

“I see you’re keeping in the family business.”

“We need smugglers now more than ever,” Eleni retorted. “Now that you British and your allies have refused to help us-”

“I’m not British, remember?” He kept his reminder gentle.

“Ah yes,” she diminished, then laughed a little, looking down at the liquid in her glass. “How could I forget, Scotsman? Anyway, shall we?”

They raised their glasses together.

“*Yia mas!*” Eleni cried.

“*Slàinte mbath!*” Jack answered.

They drank.

“You know what ‘whiskey’ means, don’t you?” he asked, once they had finished their first sip, and were letting the flavor linger into its aftertastes.

“It is a Scottish word, no?”

“Aye. Comes from the Gaelic ‘*uisge-beatha*’. Means ‘water of life’.”

“Ah...so we are drinking to life then, yes?”

“Aye,” Jack grinned. “Good company and good Scotch? That’s life enough for me.”

They clanged glasses, and drank again.

“You never told me that long story,” Eleni said, putting her feet on the desk.

“Which one?”

“How you learned our dancing. How you’ve seen the islands.”

“Oh right,” said Jack, remembering. How to begin? His face was feeling a little warmer now,

especially with Eleni looking at him so expectantly. “My father was Consul to the Empire in Smyrna, many, many years ago,” he said simply.

“That explains so much.”

“Like what?”

She grinned. “Like how you think you are so clever.”

“Hardly. Almost got myself captured, didn’t I? Twice.”

Eleni waved a hand at him. “Whatever. Your father. Continue.”

“Well, we traveled around the Empire quite a bit, and the neighboring countries. I saw the islands while he worked. I spent a lot of time with Greeks. Learned their language, their lives, their ways-”

“Their dances.”

“Aye, and those,” he grinned. “And in a way, I learned to love them, too.”

“You are full of tricks, Scotsman,” Eleni said, taking another sip. “I hope that you haven’t tricked me into believing you are not a spy.”

“Either way, you still lost the bet.” He hid his smile with the glass as he took another drink himself.

“You tricked me into that bet,” she returned.

“You let yourself get tricked,” he countered.

She only shook her head at him. “You must have been in Smyrna a long time to have learned so much.”

“Just four years. After that, I went back to Scotland. That was what...fourteen years ago? You think your father was smart? Mine thought we should have stayed for all the wars that broke out after we left. Libya. The Balkans. Bloody fool.”

“Yes...Yes, I remember those.”

“Aye,” said Jack, rueful. “Then, I got stuck in biggest one of them all. *Magairlean*.”

“Fourteen years ago, you said?” Eleni repeated. A realization was dawning on her. “Yes, we would have been in Smyrna around the same time.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” she smiled. “Papa opened there in Oh-Two. Right there on the quayside. You remember the ice cream parlor that used to be there!? Right by the Italian restaurant?”

“I do!” The memories were flooding back to him, not just their sights, but their smells as well; salty air, wafts of warm bread baking in the ovens, and the lingering ghosts of creamers and candy-sellers’ wares teasing at his adolescent nose, mixing with the perfumes and colognes of wealthy patrons at the marina. Those were sickly, expensive smells.

Eleni’s zircon eyes were all aglow however, as she turned to stare out the tiny porthole windows. Pinkish light was streaming through as the dawn rose, bathing her face in soft, easy light. “He took us there

on a hot summer day, and bought us ice cream mixed with rosewater. Kyriaki was so busy teasing Antonis that hers all melted, and it ran down her fingers.” She paused to laugh. “We ate them on the beach, and when it got dark, she fell asleep right there on the sand. I wanted to stay there forever, but Papa carried her home while we went home. My brother wiped the ice cream from her face with his handkerchief...”

Her words trailed away.

A strong look washed over her, and there were shadows in her eyes. She placed down the glass and stood, then turned to look out the window at the coming day. Her voice was suddenly serious.

“You told me that you do not fight for any country,” she said.

Jack hesitated from the sudden shift. “That’s right.”

“So what do you fight for, Scotsman?”

“The Philosopher’s Stone.”

She faced him to give an incredulous smile. “You are still trying to convince me of this lie?”

He stood as well. “It’s the truth.”

“Why then? Why fight for a magic rock?”

“Because it can end this war, Eleni,” he said. “It can end this war and every war. Forever. The power it has...no more sickness. No more hunger. No more need for fighting. This is *the* War, Eleni. When it’s over...no one will suffer needlessly again.”

The Captain considered him.

“You know what will win this war?” she asked. “And every war?” She did not wait for an answer. “Guns and strong men to wield them. This is what will send the Turks running back to their apple trees. Believe me, Scotsman. I would know.”

He sighed. “But you still don’t believe me about the Stone?”

“It is a nice dream,” she admitted. “But not reality.”

Jack had something to say to that, but the door swung open just then. A sailor poked his head into the room.

“Captain,” he panted. “Bakir’s been sighted.”

Eleni downed the last of her drink.

“All hands on deck.”

The order ran throughout the ship. In minutes, the crew had assembled in the waist. Sanwar was with them, still bare-chested. Jack took his side and together, the two of them used their height to see over the others as they gathered about the stern.

The dark outline of a ship was growing behind them. Eleni produced a spyglass, and surveyed its movements for a time.

“Yes, it’s Bakir,” she said finally. Her voice was quiet, her tone even. “All hands to stations. Full sail. Kyriaki, change course. Get us between those straits.”

Her sister nodded, and set about the relaying the commands. If the crew had been furious before, they were outright frantic now.

Jack turned forrad to see where Eleni was taking them. Just ahead lay a narrow strait with Kos on the portside and a small, crescent-shaped island on the starboard. Between those islands, the only possible direction was forward, and there was no hope of the *Karkinos* out-pacing Bakir's steam-powered leviathan. It was folly! Were they really sailing between them?

Yet, the sails dropped, and the wind took hold, veering the *Karkinos* straight towards them.

“Captain!” Jack cried. “Captain!”

Eleni seemed unconcerned with him as she mounted the quarter deck, and took the helm. Jack followed after her, and a sighing Sanwar followed after him.

“Captain,” Jack repeated.

“Yes, that is how you should address me,” Eleni said, unfazed.

“Captain, tell me you’ve got a plan.”

Sanwar raised an eyebrow to that.

“We can’t outrun Bakir,” Eleni admitted. “We never have before. But we can outsmart him. That we always have done.”

“By losing line of sight?” Sanwar asked.

“Exactly,” she grinned and winked at him. “Very clever, you.” She pointed to the islands ahead. “With Kos on our port and Agiotopos on our starboard, we guard our flanks. Beyond them, dozens of islands, and I know them all. We move and weave between them, and he won’t see us anymore. Then we sneak away.”

There was an insidious wisdom to it, Jack saw. If they turned north and vanished behind Kos, they could use the natural geography to hide their movements, and then it wouldn’t matter how fast Bakir could go. He wouldn’t know *where* to go. All

those islands, and the *Karkinos* could be hiding behind anyone of them. Only, they had to clear the straits first.

“Spoken like a true smuggler,” Sanwar said.

Eleni laughed. “My father said the Raissis were pirates long ago. Maybe it’s just in our blood, Mister Sanwar.”

Whatever was in her blood, there was fire in Jack’s. He knew that they would make it through the strait in time. He knew their lead was strong enough, and the wind was fair. Yet, when he turned to face the dark ship behind them, his heart still sunk with dread.

Bakir was gaining.

He stood on the quarter deck, watching him, letting the world drown out around him, until a shout from above brought him jumping back into awareness.

“Captain! Captain!” A sailor cried from the crow’s nest.

Jack wheeled about.

“Aw, fuck.”

At the far mouth of the strait, rounding around the curve of the crescent-island, came an all too familiar sight.

Camouflaged in black and white, the Hospitaller ship had been waiting there all along among the rocks. As they neared, it turned broadside, its machine guns angled straight towards them. Black clad pirates lined its deck.

“Hold on *malakes!*” Eleni shouted.

Somehow, the crew knew exactly what that meant.

Sails were reefed, and the anchor dropped. Eleni yanked the wheel. The result was that the *Karkinos* came spinning completely around, nearly capsizing as it leaned hard to port. Jack caught the railings of the

quarter deck in time, and braced Sanwar against them, so neither would go plunging into the sea.

When they had made their swing, the anchor was hoisted and the sails loosed again, only this time, they were facing down Bakir's ship as it gained.

What was more; now they were sailing into the wind.

Eleni bellowed the order, and the *Karkinos* veered away from the strait. Their best hope was to bank starboard, sail around Kos, and try to block the sight of the other ships.

Machine gun fire rattled from aft. The range was far, but not by much, and the steel of the Hospitaller ship gleamed brighter as it too, closed in behind them. With his ships acting like a set of pincers, Bakir was tightening his grip on the *Karkinos*.

Eleni wheeled starboard in time to avoid the next fusillade. Bullets slapped into the rocky cliffs as their ship rounded the shores of Kos.

Bakir mirrored the movement, turning northwards, ever gaining. The Hospitaller ship rounded the corner moments later, even closer to the stern of the *Karkinos* than its mate. The three of them were all in open water now, and Eleni was racing for their lives.

Jack scanned the deck of the nearest ship. He recognized the dark dress of Bakir's pirates as they reloaded their forward gun. How had they salvaged the Hospitaller ship so quickly? Hadn't the engine been blown to hell just nights before?

"Niko!" Eleni's shout broke his thoughts.

The old man was there.

"Rifles to every man," she ordered. "Prepare to be boarded."

"I hate to be such a bother," said Sanwar. "But is that order extended to Jack and myself?"

Nikos gave Eleni an uncertain glance.

"Every man," she repeated.

Suddenly, Jack had an idea.

“Wait!” He cried before Nikos had reached the stairs. The old man stopped in his tracks. “Get the grenades too. All of them!”

Again, Nikos looked to Eleni.

“What is it, Scotsman?”

“We need the grenades. And a lifeboat. And a shitload of rope.”

“What the Hell are you thinking?”

He told them.

Eleni cursed.

Sanwar sighed.

Nikos protested. “Captain, you can’t! Our deal was-”

“Fuck! What good is your bloody arms deal if we never make it to Smyrna in the first place!?” Jack shouted at him.

Eleni looked the old sailor dead in the eye.

“Niko. Do it.”

The old man grumbled, but he obeyed.

“Scotsman,” Eleni said. She pointed to some dark shapes straight ahead on the horizon. “See those islands? Just give me enough time to get us there, alright?”

“Aye, Captain.”

Rifles were passed to every man. The Hospitaller ship drew near. It was maybe minutes away from unleashing a full broadside into them. Jack slung his weapon, and scrambled down to the main deck.

“This had better work, Scotsman!” Eleni shouted after him.

He hoped the same. They would not last a boarding from two of Bakir’s ships, let alone just one.

He passed Sanwar on his way to the lifeboat.

The two exchanged a look.

“Don’t miss,” said Jack.

Sanwar raised an eyebrow before slinging his rifle, and climbing the rigging towards the crow's nest.

Jack went to starboard, and lent his hand in loading the crates onto the lifeboat. Once completed, the lot of them were then fastened in place by weighted ropes.

“Line's secured to the stern,” said Kyriaki, joining them. Under her arm was the end of that same rope. It trailed aft, and was held with six men at the ready. Nikos secured the end to the bow of the lifeboat himself, and gave the order.

With a shudder, the lifeboat was hoisted, then lowered carefully into the water. As the *Eleni* veered course, now moving with the wind, the boat was dragged along behind the *Karkinos* like a long tail. Kyriaki's men helped guide it, so it would not bounce and spill its cargo, while she and Jack rushed back to the helm. The boat was moving behind them, just as planned. However, even with their newfound speed, Bakir's ships still gained.

“Why doesn’t Sanwar take the shot?” Kyriaki asked Jack. “Why not now?”

“They’re not in range,” Jack warned her. “Not yet.”

Sanwar was right to hold the shot. The Hospitaller ship was not close enough to the lifeboat to justify it. If anything, they were shifting course now, actively trying to avoid the vessel.

“God damn them,” Jack cursed between his teeth. They still needed to be closer!

“Do it!” Kyriaki shouted. “Take the-”

“Get down!”

Jack shoved her to the deck.

Bullets rattled overhead.

The spray lasted what felt like hours, but eventually the rush of air subsided, and Jack sprung back to his feet.

Eleni had ducked as well, but assumed the helm again, once the firing had ceased. “Kyriaki! Kyriaki! Are you hit!?” She called from over her shoulder.

“I’m fine!” Her sister said, dusting herself off.

“Keep your head down next time, *malaka!*”

That opportunity came just seconds later.

The Hospitaller ship was nearing from port, coming in at a slight angle. Another blast of machine gun fire sent them ducking for cover once more.

“Can you get the life boat closer!?” Jack shouted over the cacophony.

“Like Hell I can!” Eleni shouted back.

From halfway on the floor, she yanked the wheel starboard.

Jack risked standing. As the *Karkinos* swung about, the lifeboat dragged along with it, and came right alongside the Hospitaller ship.

Sanwar’s timing could not have been better.

The flutter of his shot sailed through the air above Jack's head, as the bullet came flying from the crow's nest. It pierced the nearest crate aboard the lifeboat, and that was the last thing Jack saw before he was blinded and thrown straight onto his back.

The world erupted into fire, and shook.

Sound disappeared from reality for a long, long while, and when it finally returned, all Jack could hear was the crackling of flames. All he could see was thick, black smoke.

A cheer went up throughout the ship. Jack hardly felt Kyriaki slap him on the back, nor did he hear Eleni laugh and sing. All he felt was as if he was very far away.

Then, Eleni was shouting; shouting that they were almost there. Slowly, he turned. Through the smoke, she was pointing to the islands. Yes, they were close now, and the ruin of the Hospitaller ship was

shrinking farther and farther behind them. They were almost there. They were almost to safety.

Almost.

That horrible, sinking feeling returned.

He looked back.

Crashing through the blackness of the smoke, Bakir's flagship came hurtling forward.

Eleni saw it too. She shouted an order to the men in the rigging, but it was met with challenge. The sails, they cried. The main sails had been shot to pieces. The rigging had been torn apart.

Bakir gained.

With a cry of rage, Eleni spun the wheel starboard.

The *Karkinos* swerved into shadow. They were drifting into another strait, Jack realized, this one far narrower than the other. It was little more than just a space between two islets, barely wide enough to fit the *Karkinos* with all its rigging. For a moment, they

lost sight of Bakir's ship, and Eleni called for them to raise sails and lay anchor here.

As the *Karkinos* shuddered to halt, Bakir reappeared straight ahead of them. He had circled around the islets to cut them off. His ship was too large to follow into the strait, but it lazed to a halt as well some distance away, and kept all its portside machine guns trained on the narrow opening.

Eleni sank forward onto the wheel and swore, and that was when the sickening reality of the situation came flushing back. Jack wanted to vomit the second that it did.

They were trapped between these straits, and now, all Bakir had to do was wait.

“What if we wait until nightfall to sneak away?”

It was Kyriaki's umpteenth suggestion. The trouble was that midday was only just beginning, and even that span of time had felt like an eternity. Yet,

Kyriaki was still as impassioned now as she had been hours earlier. The rest of them were less so.

“He will expect it.” Eleni was quick to put the idea down. She dabbed away the sweat from her brow. They were quickly losing shade as the hours wore on inside the strait, but the Captain had refused to go below, out fear of losing sight of Bakir. Nikos and her sister had remained on the quarter deck as well, and Jack and Sanwar by extension.

“What if we sneak away on the lifeboats-”

“Lifeboat,” Nikos growled in correction. “Good luck fitting us all on the one that we have left.”

His eyes fell on Jack with that remark, but Jack did not retort. In fact, he had been sitting against the deck rails in total silence, for quite some time. Sanwar had watched him all the while, staring off at nowhere in particular.

“We could back out-”

“Too slow,” Nikos cut Kyraki off again. “He’ll come around as soon as we’ve made it out.”

Considering the state of the *Karkinos*’ bullet-ridden sails and rigging, Sanwar was inclined to agree. Eleni had no chance of swift movement, even a mad dash to the safety of another island. Bakir would catch them dead in the water. The pirates had done their work well, at the cost of half their own men and four of Eleni’s.

“But we can’t stay here!” Kyriaki cried.

“I know!” Eleni snapped. “I am thinking!”

No one said anything for a long while.

Sanwar used the time to shut his eyes, and sink into his mind. He felt the heat, but was not hot. He felt inside him fear, but was not afraid. He was calm. He needed to be, if they were to survive. He took a deep breath, and felt the salty air pass into his lungs.

“Captain,” he said, finally breaking the silence.

Eleni looked up from staring at the distance.
“Yes?”

“You have got a radio aboard this vessel, have you not?”

“We tried radioing for help!” Eleni began exasperated. “But the Navy’s busy. I don’t know why! And Bakir will just shoot down any civilian ships that get too close-”

Sanwar raised a gentle hand. “We have no need to radio anyone. I merely require a source of electricity. That, and a blowtorch.”

Everyone looked at him, bewildered.

Everyone, except Jack, who raised his head. That mad gleam returned to his eyes.

“We might have exhausted our grenades,” Sanwar continued. “But that does not mean we cannot synthesize another sort of explosive.”

“How?” Eleni demanded.

“Sodium metal,” Jack said before Sanwar could finish the idea. He rose to his feet, grinning wildly.

“Exactly,” Sanwar said, sharing the excitement. “Sodium metal is extremely reactive when dropped into the water. Should we use enough of it, and well...that will drop our good friend Bakir into the water as well.”

Jack let out a howl of laughter.

Still, the others were confused.

“This is true?” Eleni asked.

“Yes, it is Alchemy,” Sanwar replied.

“But we have no Sodium metal.”

“On the contrary, Captain,” Sawnar said. “It is all around us.”

They began the process by having the crew draw buckets full of seawater, and pour the contents into any available pot or saucepan in the *Karkinos*' kitchen.

Each was left uncovered, and brought to a boil. Once all of the water had evaporated, only the sparkling white salt crystals remained inside the pan. Those were then emptied into the largest stew pot onboard, which Sanwar had specifically set aside.

“Once we obtain an adequate amount of Sodium Chloride, we can begin electrolysis,” he explained while sailors scurried past to fill another pot with seawater.

“Electrolysis?” Eleni asked.

“Indeed,” said Sanwar, dabbing his brow with a cloth. The air below deck was getting steamier by the second. “We will convey an electrical current through a conductor. The resultant charge will separate the atoms within the compound.”

“I am so confused...” Kyriaki scratched her head.

“Let us see how Jack is getting along, and I will explain,” Sanwar conceded. He led the two sisters

back above deck while their men continued with their work.

Jack was waiting for them in the waist, where he had already rigged a set of wires from the radio into a line, then clamped them to set of rolled copper sheets taken from the hold. They had once been pieces of spare sheathing used to guard the bottom of the *Karkinos'* hull, but had now been reappropriated as part of their scientific endeavors. Jack sat back on the deck, and grinned when he saw the others coming.

“My sister wants to know exactly how this will work,” Eleni demanded, then added. “And I am curious myself.”

“Sanwar explained electrolysis?” he asked.

“I assayed,” said Sanwar.

“Show me!” Kyriaki cried, crouching down beside Jack.

“Right,” he began. “Sodium Chloride, or salt, is made from positive Sodium and negative Chlorine

ions. Er, 'charged atoms'." He took the copper rolls in either hand. "If electricity is just the flow of electrons, then one of these bars will become positively charged, and the other negatively. Negatively charged Chlorine gas will go to one end—"

"And positive Sodium metal to other," Eleni finished. "I see."

"Of course, our collection of salt will have to be brought to a molten state before we attempt the electrolysis," Sanwar added.

"Of course," Eleni said, as if that was somehow a given.

"Afterwards, we shall require a sufficient quantity of kerosene in which to store it. We cannot risk the metal being exposed to water, and detonating prematurely."

"Then how do we get it near enough to Bakir?" Turning her gaze to the mouth of the strait, Eleni scanned the dark, metallic ship looming in the

distance. It had sat with indomitable patience all day, never once changing its position. Should it draw any closer, it would have a better chance of hitting the *Karkinos*, but Bakir had wisely kept himself just out of range; likely from his newfound appreciation of Sanwar's marksmanship. This was at the cost of his own accuracy, of course; the mouth of the strait was too narrow a target, even if Bakir had partial vision of their ship. However, the moment they exited its safety, he would be poised to annihilate them all with heavy machine gun fire. No, it was much more advantageous for him to wait; to exhaust them until they broke.

Eleni must have thought the same.

“He knows we're in a hurry,” she said to herself. “He must know about the battle. He wants to outlast us.”

The *Karkinos*, Sanwar knew, was at least supplied for the three day journey they had anticipated, and perhaps a few additional days for safety's sake. Yet,

Bakir was a pirate. His excursions into enemy territory were longer, and his holds were likely bettered stocked, given his lack of precious cargo. Eleni's assessment was likely correct. He would indeed outlast them.

“All the more reason to enact drastic action,” Sanwar replied. “I have a possible solution. We can place gunpowder into the final lifeboat alongside the Sodium, and send it off towards him with a long fuse; long enough to allow us adequate time to escape. When the gunpowder is set off, the boat will rupture, and all the Sodium will be dumped into the water, thus triggering the main explosion.”

A long, incredulous moment passed.

Eleni was the first to speak again. “Send it off alone? It will drift off course.”

“No matter,” said Sanwar. “The explosion will be distraction enough for Bakir, and quite a lot of smoke will be generated to conceal our getaway.”

“He is more clever than that,” Eleni said.

“Aye, and what happened to sending Bakir to the bottom of the sea?” asked Jack.

“Yes, we have to destroy him!” Kyriaki chimed in.

“That was...an exaggeration on my behalf,” admitted Sanwar. “Such energy was necessary to convince you all.”

“If we don’t blow him straight to Hell, then he’ll just come after us another day,” Eleni said. “Believe me, I would know.”

“You’ll need someone to row the boat out to meet him,” Jack agreed.

Sanwar raised an eyebrow. “And who would volunteer for such a preposterous-”

“I would.”

“Jack!”

“What?” His friend shrugged. “Someone’s got to do it.”

“No! Nobody has got to do anything! We could just-”

“You heard Eleni! Someone needs to row it-”

“And how are you going to get back!?”

“I am the Captain,” Eleni butted in. “In case anyone forgot. The decision is mine to make.”

Sanwar sighed. “I suppose it is.”

“It is,” she put bluntly. “And I will decide if the Scotsman will kill himself trying to save us all.”

Everyone quieted as she took a moment to consider each of them, individually. She looked to her sister with concern, and to Jack, with vague amusement.

To Sanwar, she winked.

“I have decided,” she said at last. “The Scotsman will not be rowing himself out there.”

Jack smoldered, but Sanwar’s heart was lifted. He could have kissed her then.

“Thank you, Captain,” he murmured. “Thank you-”

She smiled. “I will go instead of him.”

No amount of protesting from Sanwar, Jack, or even Kyriaki could have stopped that from happening, though try they did with every fiber of their beings.

It was all in vain, however.

Eleni had made her choice, and the order was final.

Electrolysis went mostly without incident.

Nikos had a team of men heating the stewpot with every blowtorch they had on hand, melting the salt it contained into a shimmering, silvery-white liquid. The copper rolls were placed inside, and the current run through them. In time, the Sodium began to appear as pools of silver liquid around the negative charge, while greenish bubbles of gaseous Chlorine

formed around the positive. Cooled to a solid state afterwards, the Sodium was removed with tongs, and packed together into bricks. It was soft to the touch and easily deformed into the shape, so the men set about meshing it together. Under Sanwar's strict supervision, each man had fully dried their hands and brows of sweat before they even so much as stepped within ten feet of the metal.

By evening, they had accrued enough Sodium to nearly fill the boat, and had it stored in every barrel, box, or bottle they could fill with kerosene; and when they had run out of kerosene, mineral oil sufficed instead. Powder was taken from their weapons stores, and laid at the bow, with a long primer trail leading back to stern.

Sanwar berated Nikos for smoking his pipe so liberally around the explosives, but the bosun huffed and waved him away, praising himself for having the steadiest hands in the Aegean. That remark had not made Sanwar feel any better.

Still, the payload was secured before dark without an issue. Eleni oversaw its loading. She was not afraid of what could come next, for why should she be? At worst, she would die here tonight, but her soul had been ready for that long ago. She had made her peace with God, and there was nothing more to do.

She drank a swig of *raki* to calm her nerves.

Kyriaki joined her side. “You can’t Eleni...You can’t...”

She quieted her sister with a raised hand. There were only so many hours she could take hearing the same thing repeated, even from her beloved little sister.

“I must.”

“What if you die?”

“Then I die. That is the price we knew that we might pay fighting for our country. That is the price we need to pay, if we must, for Greece.”

“But-” Kyriaki began, but trembled with her words. How young she looked tonight, Eleni thought. “But what will I do? How will I lead? I don’t know how-”

“Every leader asks the same right before their time,” Eleni said. “So will you. You are strong. You have made it this far. You will be strong too, if I am gone. You must be. You are a Raissi.”

The words had been meant to be encouraging, but Kyriaki simply collapsed onto Eleni’s shoulder, and began sobbing uncontrollably.

“Come now, *agapi mou*,” Eleni whispered. “You have to show these men that a woman can be tough. Tears are for little girls. Be strong. Show them you are not afraid.”

Kyriaki drew herself straighter. Still, the tears were in her sapphire eyes. Eleni tried not to look at them too long. They looked just liked Spyros’ and

their father's. Instead, Eleni removed her hat, and placed it on her sister's head.

“You are the Captain now, little sister,” she said. “Get them all to safety if I cannot.”

They exchanged a salute. Kyriaki swallowed, and nodded. She knew what she had to do.

With that, Eleni was lowered down with the boat into the water. She was untying the rope when she heard a call from above.

“Captain! Captain! Wait!”

The Scotsman was scrambling down the ladder after her.

“Only room for one on this ship,” she told him as he jumped down the last few steps into the boat.

“I know,” he said. “I just wanted to wish you luck before you go...and to give you something.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.”

“And what is that, Jack?”

She asked, but she already knew.

He was leaning in closer to her by the time she said the words. His lips drew close to hers. The heat of his body was aflame beside hers, so blazing hot, she feared it would set alight the gunpowder charges far too early.

She shut her eyes, and let it him give her exactly what he wanted:

A hard shove into the water.

Brine filled her open mouth and nostrils. Her arms flailed about as she sunk beneath the gloomy sea. For a moment, she was blinded, not from the darkness of water, but the stinging salt that flushed her eyes. She thrashed about, and swam back to the surface.

“Scotsman! Scotsman! You bastard!” She sputtered, bursting from the waves. “I’ll kill you for this!”

Yet, he had already rowed himself far beyond her reach. “Sorry Captain!” He called back. “This will probably kill me first!”

“Niko! Niko!”

The crew was gawking over the rails at all the sudden commotion.

“Niko!!!” Eleni screamed.

The old man was there, shining his torch on her.

“Raise anchor and go after him!”

“What!?”

“DO IT NOW!”

The mass of the *Karkinos* lurching after him was not lost on Jack, even in this half moonlight, as he rowed full force towards the silhouette of Bakir’s ship. He just had not been expecting it to have mobilized so soon.

Apparently, it was not lost on Bakir either. When Jack glanced back, his ship was moving forward as well. Spotlights snapped alive, and nearly blinded him, but Jack kept his focus.

He's coming to me, he thought. The bastard's doing half the work for me. Let him bloody choke on it.

Indeed, Bakir was drawing nearer, and quickly at that, but so too was Eleni. Jack was soon to be sandwiched between them. Eleni was going to be too close. They were all going to be too close together.

"Aw fuck," he realized, right as the match was already lit, and falling from his hand.

The powder sparked, but there was no time to snuff it out, because the spotlight suddenly shifted straight on him. Turkish voices were shouting, but Jack did not bother to hear what they were saying.

"Aw fuck," he simply said again, and dove straight into the water. Jack was sure to keep his body

completely under. Muffled bullets slapped the water, and spiraled uselessly to the sea floor, all their momentum dead upon impact. He paused a moment, then with lungs screaming, Jack braved the surface for air.

Gasping, he caught a glimpse of Turks redirecting their fire as the *Karkinos* came closing in.

Then the powder struck.

Jack quickly filled his lungs, and went down again.

He kept swimming; swimming until he heard the first explosion.

He spun about.

The blast had only been strong enough to break the timbers of the boat and its containers, but now all that Sodium was dropping straight into the water. Seconds later, the sea was filled with fire.

Jack swam for his life.

He was far, so far away; but how far was far enough?

He just kept swimming.

Just kept swimming.

Hoping to get as far away as-

A shockwave burst throughout the water. It threw him back. He didn't know how far. The sea was dark, and he was spinning, that was all he did know.

He tried to swim back for air, but realized, perhaps too late, that the water was growing colder, murkier. He had been flipped upside down, and he was swimming deeper by mistake. He turned himself around, and raced towards the surface. All the while, his lungs were shrieking.

Am I really going to die now? Well, there were worse ways to go about the business, he thought.

Then Jack hit his head on something hard.

Whatever it was, it wasn't rock...no it was metal!
Copper!

Was he underneath the *Karkinos*...?

He darted aside, and shoved himself to the surface.

He gasped for air as he rose, and wanted to spill his guts right then and there, they were so filled with salt. When his wits and his breath returned to him, Jack realized he was right alongside the *Karkinos*; right on its starboard side.

Ahead of him was nothing before him but a film of pale white smoke. A burning, acrid odor hung upon the air.

If this were Heaven, it was disappointing; and if it were Hell, then Jack had gotten off easy.

He spat out water, and choked on the stench. Suddenly, the pain of his endeavors finally struck him, a reminder that no, he was indeed alive.

The *Karkinos* drifted past, and Jack caught the its side ladder as it did. One bruised and wretched arm after another, he pulled himself back on deck.

The ship was in an uproar, though he could barely hear any of it. His ears were ringing and filled with swishing water.

“What about the Scotsman?” somebody was shouting.

“Leave him!”

“We can’t...” someone else protested. Was it Sanwar?

“He’s gone!” Eleni barked. “We have to leave now!”

“Where are we going?” Jack found himself asking, as he stumbled into the middle of them all. He was the only one who laughed at his little joke. Everybody else just turned to him in horror.

“Jack...” Sanwar could barely speak his name.

If Jack had indeed survived the whole ordeal, then his friend had nearly killed him with his hug. Over Sanwar's shoulder, Jack could see that a smile was forming on Eleni's lips. Her clothes were sopping wet, but her tone was dry as it had ever been.

"You tricked me," she told him.

"You let yourself be tricked," Jack rasped beneath Sanwar's massive, crushing grip.

"You are a damn fool, Jack MacGregor" Sanwar whispered.

"I know..."

Strange, the world was feeling a whole lot lighter.

Jack slumped from Sanwar's arms, and fell onto the deck.

He shut his eyes, and let the darkness wash over him.

IX

As the Serpent's Band

Friday, September 1st, 1922

Smyrna, Greek Occupied Zone

They came limping into harbor two days later with torn sails and slashes in the rigging.

Jack had spent the majority of the remaining journey below deck, recovering from the thankfully minor concussion he had sustained when striking his head against the hull of the *Karkinos*. With only the other wounded for company much of the time, it had seemed like a far longer voyage, especially given how sluggish the ship had become after their encounter with Bakir. Sanwar had used the time however, to air his grievances about Jack's handling of that scenario.

“You are a sullen, stubborn, foolhardy nincompoop, Jack MacGregor,” he had chastised during his frequent visits. “Who is a wastrel with his own life!”

“Somebody had to do it,” Jack repeated every time.

His friend had never replied to that, though he eventually subsided with his berating, saying nothing of the matter as Jack came aboard that afternoon. Instead, his focus and the entire crew’s was on the city, which had just now drifted into view.

Smyrna was just as Jack had remembered it from boyhood; shining like white diamond in the sun stream. Ships lined every space at the marina. Along the quayside, carriages and street-cars clangored past, and crowds of people bustled by. It had to be past midday, which meant the city’s Greek population was out enjoying their *mesimeri*, their late afternoon break from work. Until they resumed again in the early evening, none of them could be bothered to lift a

finger. Jack smiled at the thought. Memories returned to him of those gaps in the day he had spent exploring every corner of the city; how he used to watch smiling families going past, or couples lounging at cafés together, or pretty girls that passed him by without a second glance. Sometimes, he would just sit on the quayside, and watch the ships sail off into the distance, and wonder where they were going or if they were ever coming back again. Oh, the stories he would spin about them, and how the hours passed so slowly in those days! It seemed like the people of Smyrna were stopping time today as well, for who could blame them? On a cloudless day like this, in a city so beautiful as theirs, who wouldn't be out to enjoy a quiet Friday afternoon? From Alexander to the Ottomans, it could be said that Smyrna had ever been the jewel of an empire. Without the enjoyment of such beauty, there seemed like no other purpose.

Disrupting the calm however, was a line of warships laying their blockade across the bay.

“Strange,” Eleni said, watching them.

“What is?” asked Jack.

“They weren’t there six months ago.”

Eleni circumvented them by turning their ship northwards. The *Karkinos* creaked towards the little town of Foça that rested on a small peninsula nearby, instead of the city.

“You promised to take us to Smyrna.”

“And I will keep my promise,” she told him. “But first, the guns. This is ‘strictly off the books’, you would say, no?”

“I believe ‘illegal’ is the desired word,” Sanwar posited.

“That is only if you get caught!” Eleni laughed. “And I never get caught. There is a cove here, an old Raissi secret. No one will find us there, unless we want to be found. That is where we meet with Mavros.”

“Mavros...?” asked Jack.

“Yes,” Eleni said. “A colonel. The governor-general’s second-in-command. From him, the weapons go straight to the Army.”

“I see...”

The ship pulled into a split in the coastline half an hour later. Here, a curving passageway had formed in the sheer rock, with a natural archway large enough for the *Karkinos* to pass through. Beyond it, they entered an immense cavern with an open roof where sunlight streamed in from overhead. An enormous entrance opened on the righthand side of the cavern’s rocky shore just ahead of the ship. There, a line of men in uniform were waiting. Eleni laid her anchor in the cove, and disembarked to greet them.

“*Kali mera*, Colonel!” she called, coming down the gangplank with Jack, Sanwar, and her officers in tow.

“*Kali mera*, Captain Raissi,” came the stiff reply of the leading man. He glared at his men, who until now

had been lounging against the cave wall, and tacitly ordered them to put out their cigarettes and look alive. Jack could hardly blame them for wanting to enjoy the cool darkness of the cave. Today was especially fiery, a fact made worse by the tight khaki uniforms these men wore, no doubt.

Still, they fumbled with their buttons at their commander's behest. He wore his own set straight to the collar, adding extra rigidity to his posture. Brown knee-high boots fitted to his jodhpurs clicked together as he stood back on his heels in a firm salute. This was Colonel Theodoros Mavros, dressed from head to foot in a tussock-colored uniform that may have been darkened with sweat around the armpits, but was otherwise spotless.

Eleni returned the gesture lazily to the Colonel, and he stood back at ease, or rather as much ease as he could muster.

“You're late, Captain. Do you have the guns, at least?”

“I do,” she said.

The crates were being lowered as they spoke. The Colonel’s interest lay elsewhere, however. He crossed to Jack and Sanwar, staring deep into them with his hard, sloe eyes.

They were given a good look at him as well, and up close, he became more apparent that Mavros was not a young man. Though his mustache was glazed with pitch, the hair beneath his cap had all gone gray. Unlike his uniform, his face was weathered, especially around his searching eyes; eyes that held no sympathy as he scanned the two men intently.

“Who are these ruffians?” he asked Eleni at length.

“The men who helped me kill Captain Bakir.”

Mavros was taken aback. “You encountered Bakir?”

“This wasn’t because I like the way it looks,” Eleni said, nodding to the sorry state of the *Karkinos*.

“But who are they?” the Colonel demanded again.

Eleni scanned Jack and Sanwar carefully. Jack was painfully aware of his clammy palms all of a sudden. The Colonel waited expectantly, but still Eleni hesitated.

“Captain?” Impatience was rising in his tone.

“Bakir attacked their ship,” Eleni said, quickly. “They escaped, and washed ashore my island.”

Jack hung his head. So, she would tell the Colonel everything.

Yet, Eleni winked at them instead.

“They were traveling from Rhodes back to the mainland on a merchant vessel,” she continued. “I offered them my protection, and guaranteed their safe passage to Smyrna. They speak Greek.”

“Such Christian goodness of you, Captain,” said Mavros, acidly. “Yet, now you have jeopardized State secrets by inviting them to this meeting. That, I cannot abide.”

“I trust them,” Eleni vouched. “Just as you should for any man who has faced down Captain Bakir. And besides, I have made them swear a vow of secrecy in exchange for their safe passage.”

“That will not suffice for me,” stated the Colonel. “And, they sound very resourceful for a pair of merchants, I should say.”

“We fought at Gallipoli,” Sanwar replied. It was only half true. Sanwar had been at the battle on the shores not far north of here, but not Jack. Either way, he said nothing else to correct it.

The light in Mavros’ eyes changed a little. He straightened himself even further, and nodded curtly to them both. “Thank you for your services. I wish I had been there, myself. My nation was too late in joining the Great War, and so we’re having to fight it now. Pity that we’d missed so much of it.”

No it’s not, Jack wanted to say, but again, he held his tongue.

Strangely, Mavros faced him anyway, as if he had heard the thought. The man searched for his words a moment, before outright asking, “Do I...know you?”

“Afraid not, sir,” Jack lied. “I’m no one really.”

The Colonel hesitated. “I see.”

If he was at all satisfied with that answer, he did not show it. Instead, he turned abruptly on his heels to where his men were handling the crates. He spent the next ten minutes examining them each personally.

“No grenades,” he remarked, once he had finished. His men carried the hardware out of the cave.

“Bakir,” Eleni explained in a word.

“That is disappointing.”

“I seem to remember that you did not have five hundred rifles, six machines gun, and two tons of ammunition yesterday,” she said. “No thanks to the Navy. We radioed for them when the Turks attacked, and yet nobody came.”

Mavros darkened. “I tolerate your insolence because of your father’s patriotism, Eleni. Do not wear thin that respect. I should explain to you that the situation is more desperate it appears.”

“I don’t need anything explained.”

The Colonel’s mustache twitched. “Perhaps you do, because the Navy was occupied here with forming the blockade. They’re preparing for evacuation.”

“No...”

“Yes. The Army was defeated. Yesterday.”

Eleni clenched her fist. Nikos and Kyriaki shuddered with sudden tension. Jack and Sanwar exchanged a worried look.

“Kemal Pasha has them on the run,” Mavros continued. “I don’t know how long, but they will be here soon, and the Turks won’t be very far behind.”

“Then, we make our last stand here,” she declared.

“One can hope. We’re waiting for our orders.”

Jack took a hard breath. A sickly familiar feeling sloshed inside him at the thought of what was yet to come.

With Mavros' order, the soldiers hauled the crates outside. The entrance poured out onto a steamy beach, shadowed by a steep hill. The men slogged their way to its crest where a line of trucks sat waiting, and loaded the crates into their beds.

“Thank you for another shipment, Captain Raissi.” Mavros' words were stiff and formal again, as they followed him into the blinding, blistering heat. He stopped to face Eleni. “I will have a supply ship sent to Delfini as soon as possible with the food and other items that you requested.”

“Thank you, Colonel.”

“You have done a service to your country.”

He nodded curtly, and was about to stride up the hill when she called out to him. “Colonel Mavros!”

“Yes, what is it?”

Eleni nodded to Jack and Sanwar. “Would you have any room to spare for my friends? They will need a ride into town.”

Mavros’ mustache twitched. “I suppose they could ride in the back of my car...if they are quiet about it.”

“Thank you, Colonel. Just a moment, please.”

The Colonel merely huffed, and proceeded up the hill.

“I do not believe I follow,” Sanwar said. He and Jack both faced Eleni sharing the same perplexed expression. “I assumed that you would be traveling into Smyrna yourself.”

“Later,” she said. “I have to stay here at least a little while, and make certain that the ship is repaired. Then after that, we start preparing.”

“Preparing...?” Sanwar’s words trailed off, realizing what she meant right as he had spoken them.

“Besides,” Eleni continued. “You haven’t got the time to wait around for me.” She gave a wane smile.

“Go and find your magic rock, before somebody else does.”

Jack took the hint. “Thank you for everything. Truly.”

She waved a hand at him. “Forget it, Scotsman. I still think you are spies.”

The three of them shared a hollow laugh at that.

“One more thing.” Eleni nodded to Nikos. He handed them back the diary and their swords. Meanwhile, she rummaged in her pockets, and produced some *lira*, which she stuffed into Sanwar’s palm. “Take this too. You’ll need it. Use it to look after this one. He’s crazy.”

That last remark was aimed at Jack, and meant to be humorous, but there was little joy shown on Eleni’s face.

“I will look after him,” Sanwar promised her.

“Good. Now don’t keep the Colonel waiting.”

They gave their awkward thanks again, strapped on their swords, and turned to go, when the Captain called out one last time.

“Oh, Jack?”

He turned back to face her. “Aye, Captain?”

Eleni slid a flask out of her coat pocket, and tossed it to him. “The last of Glenmorangie. It’s yours.”

Jack cradled the warm metal, and placed it in his pocket.

“Thank you, Captain.”

She simply gave them both a curt nod, and tipped her cap. “Scotsman. Mister Sanwar. I suppose this is *Good-bye.*”

That last word she said in English.

“Good-bye, Captain,” they replied, yet she was already walking away without another word, Nikos and Kyriaki following silently in tow.

They watched her go.

“Gentlemen, are you coming or not?” Mavros shouted from the top of the hill.

As much as they disliked his tone, the two men hurried to the crest. There was no more time to waste.

An hour later, the convoy had reached the eastern edge of Smyrna, near the city’s Greek and French quarters. They passed beneath the looming height that was Mount Pagos, bathed in shadow from the ruins of Smyrna Castle at its peak. Almost twenty years it had been since Jack had seen it last, and still it looked unchanged; still a crumbling ruin atop a lonely hill. Love and dread steeped inside his guts at the thought of what lay in wait within.

Upon entering the city proper, Mavros stopped his car, bringing the entire convoy to a halt.

“Welcome to Smyrna,” he said. “You can get out here.”

Jack and Sanwar obliged.

“I had better not hear any trouble from you,” the Colonel warned, as they exited the backseat. “This city is my jurisdiction. If you try anything, I will know. Understood?”

Not waiting for a reply, he let the words linger in the air as his assistant spurred the car away with the line of trucks following close behind.

“We should wait until nightfall then,” said Jack, glancing back towards the castle. “Wait until the city sleeps before we go.”

“Where do you propose that we refresh ourselves during the interrum?” asked Sanwar. “I believe some rest is in order, speaking solely for myself of course.”

“I know a place,” Jack said, and led them off into the streets.

With the *mesimeri* ending, Smyrna was coming back to life. Cafés and restaurants were laying out

their tablecloths and dinner menus, while jazz musicians prepared their evening sets.

Faces of all sorts filled these streets. There were white Europeans in their three-piece suits and evening gowns, Turkish men that smoked the hookah and proudly wore a *fez*, Arabs walking camels as if they were toy dogs, Armenian women with covered heads, and Greeks sharing rounds of *ouzo* with their cigarettes. In just a few short blocks, they had passed two churches and a synagogue, and heard a dozen languages. Whispers of tobacco smoke and roasting *shwarma* filled the air. They spent a couple *lira* on some sweet dried figs from a passing fruit vendor, savoring the richness as they flowed between the streets. There were too many sights, too many sounds, too many smells for Sanwar to enjoy so fully; but perhaps what he loved most of all about the progressive cities of the Mediterranean such as this one, was that nobody was staring at him.

“Let us stop here a moment,” he said, going over to a little alleyside café, whose patio was lined with apple trees. His halt was so sudden that Jack had to sidestep him, but still collided with the heavy frame of a passing Orthodox priest. The stout, bushily bearded man exchanged apologies, adjusted his dark robes, then quickly carried on his way.

“Say again,” said Jack, massaging his ribcage.

Sanwar pointed to the café. It was mostly empty this early, but Jack was looking elsewhere, so Sanwar repeated, “Let us stop.”

Jack shook his head. “We should to get to Shaban’s soon.”

“Shaban?”

“A friend of mine in town. He’ll let us stay the night, I know.”

“Jack.”

“We don’t have time-”

“Jack...”

“...Fine.”

Reluctantly, he took a seat across from Sanwar. The waitress came over a moment later, a heavy-set Smyrniot, and laid down bread and water at the table.

“Greek? English? French?” she asked, reaching for some menus.

“Greek is just fine, thank you,” Sanwar replied. Since their time with Eleni, he and Jack had spoken it almost exclusively, even with each other. It seemed strange to abandon it now. “May we just have some coffee please? We shan’t be long, I am afraid.”

“Of course,” the waitress said, putting aside the menus. She nodded to the two of them. “Far from home, yes?”

“Yes, the both of us.”

“Well, welcome to Smyrna!” She smiled, and hurried off to fetch their coffees.

“What are we doing?” Jack asked when she had walked away.

“Stopping to enjoy each other’s company.”

Jack looked incredulous at first, but his expression softened when he saw that Sanwar’s response was genuine. He leaned back to stretch his legs.

“Aye, we’ve been moving fast for quite a while,” he admitted.

“Four years more like,” Sanwar remarked.

They shared a quiet laugh.

“In all that time, never thought I’d find myself back here.”

“In Smyrna?”

Jack nodded.

“It’s bringing back old memories, isn’t it?”

“Unfortunately...What about for you?”

Sanwar pondered the question. For a moment, he glimpsed a flash of being waist deep in the bloody

surf, surrounded by his countrymen while the water ran red.

But it was only a moment.

After all, that was a different time and a different place, he had said it himself. Now, it was a different country altogether.

“In truth,” Sanwar said at length. “I think I like it here.”

“Aye, Smyrna’s something special.”

The waitress returned with the coffee. They thanked her, and shared the first drink together.

“Jack?” Sanwar asked, eventually. “What will you do when all of this is over?”

“The war with the Turks?”

“No, no, when you have the Stone. When the world is saved.”

“You even sure we’ll make it that far?”

“Well, what if we do?”

Jack shrugged. “Don’t know. Kind of reckoned I’d either die trying, or it’d take the rest of my damn life to do all that.”

“Life is long.”

“But death is longer,” Jack laughed.

Sanwar raised an eyebrow. “Maybe.”

“Well,” Jack said, after downing the rest of his coffee. “I suppose I don’t care how long it takes, or even what it takes, so long as someone knows my name at the end of it. After that, I haven’t got a damn clue. All that really matters then is that the world is safe, and Saxon’s rotting six feet under.”

“And what if you cannot kill him, but the world is saved regardless? Then what happens, I wonder?”

“So long as Saxon lives, the world will never be safe,” Jack growled. “Don’t really see it going any other way.”

“Yet, Saxon is beyond our reach,” said Sanwar. “Which means we will have to find an alternative, at least for the time being.”

“So, I should just accept that I can’t do a damn thing about him then?” The irritation was rising in Jack’s voice.

Sanwar countered it with cool intonation. “People tend to think that they can change what has already come to pass while what lies ahead is assuredly fixed, when in reality, the inverse of this is true. Accept that what you have done today was the most that you could. Tomorrow, we can solve the rest, once we actually have more information. So until then, let us train our efforts on the present.”

“What are trying to tell me then? Just to forget what’s happened? What he’s done?”

“I do not think there is a way to truly forget,” Sanwar replied. “But I should remind you what the Art teaches us; we cannot know the answers until we

experiment, and that change is inevitable. Circumstances will change, Jack, for good or ill.”

Jack hung his head. “But always too quickly, it would seem.”

“Then let us at least enjoy the evening and our company” said Sanwar. “While we have it.”

His friend nodded. “Aye, we can do that.”

They sat in silence for another fifteen minutes while Sanwar finished his coffee. When finally they made to leave, Jack gave one last look to all the lights, the restaurants, and the people going past. A young couple walked by him with a little girl, who smiled as she twirled a poppy flower in her tiny hand.

“I wonder if they even know there’s a war going on,” he said, stroking his mustache.

“They will.” Sanwar counted out the right amount of bills, then left a couple extra. “Best we leave now, however.”

After all, dusk was falling, and their respite was at its end.

Evening in the Turkish Quarter was a crowded affair. Men were gathering at *tavernas* to smoke and begin a long and thirsty night of drinking, now that the sun had set and prayers were over. After all, this was the city known as “Infidel Smyrna”, where the Muslims drank, the women were immodest, and the tales of debauchery spread wide across the Empire. For Jack, living here had been an educative experience, and things were beginning to feel like home again. As he and Sanwar passed, the men tipped their hats to them, and were surprised when both of them responded back Turkish.

Eventually, they found themselves in among the residences; shoddy, narrow houses clustered around a well or hand pump in the crowded, cobbled streets. Near a quiet corner beside the local mosque, Jack stopped at a rough hewn door, and knocked.

Moments later, it opened, and a small old woman stood there, more than a little puzzled at the sight of them.

“Hello, can I help you?”

“Meryem?” said Jack, switching instantly to Turkish. A tear was running down his cheek. He hadn’t expected that. “Meryem, it’s me. It’s Jack!”

The recognition flooded over her. Immediately, she grabbed him in her arms, and squeezed him tight, pressing her head against his chest.

“Little Jack MacGregor!” she cried, staring up at him. “Look how tall you are! Esmeray! Come see who’s here! It’s Jack!” She turned to Sanwar. “And who is this man?”

“Meryem, this is my dear friend Sanwar,” Jack said.

“Wondrous to meet you, *hanim*,” Sanwar replied with a bow.

“And he speaks Turkish too!” Meryem cried. “Well, any friend of Jack’s is welcome in my house.”

There was a commotion from inside, and Esmeray appeared in the doorway a moment later. She had grown into an image much like her father; slender, plain-faced with the same dark, and gentle eyes that knew Jack right at once.

“What is this surprise?!” She gasped. “What are you doing here?!”

Jack was laughing like a fool as he was nearly tackled with another hug.

“It’s a long, long story,” he explained. “But I promise I’ll tell you what I can. Is Shaban here though? What about Barish? I’d love to see them!”

Suddenly, Esmeray looked away, and Meryem froze right where she was. Jack caught her just in time as she fell straight into him, and burst into a sea of tears.

“My deepest sorrows,” Sanwar consoled.

“You are most kind.”

The ax came down with a heavy thunk. Esmeray cleared the split logs away, tossing them into a pile with the others, then placed another hunk of wood onto the chopping block. She had but a single arm, yet even still, her work was deftly done. Sanwar had offered his help out of courtesy, but she refused, and clearly did not need it. Now, he watched her as she worked in the tiny yard behind the house.

“My brother Barish died years ago, fighting at Gallipoli,” Esmeray explained. The ax came down again.

“Those were sad days indeed,” said Sanwar. “I was there.”

“Then I am sorry for you too.”

He nodded, and looked towards the window. Meryem had needed a few moments alone with Jack, so it had seemed the perfect time for him and

Esmeray to collect some extra fuel for cooking dinner on the woodstove.

“My father though,” Esmeray said, preparing another log. “He died the day the Greeks landed. When they came there was a big parade...and then a fight broke out. A stray bullet killed him. That was three years ago.”

She split a final piece of wood, and left the ax buried in the chopping block.

“I am sorry,” was all Sanwar could say.

Esmeray shrugged. “Worse things have happened since. We’re just happy to see Jack again. You know, the first time we met him, he was just a boy trying to find his way home. He looked so lost with that big sketchbook in his hand. My parents saw him, and took pity, so he stayed for dinner, and then they showed him which way to go.” She smiled to herself. “My father promised he was always welcome in our

home from that day on. Jack kept coming back for years.”

Sanwar raised an eyebrow. “Curious...did Jack ever mention that his father was the Consul?”

She paused, and shook her head. “Was he? Jack only said that he worked in the city...Is that why you are here? Official business?”

“Not quite. I am afraid that we only make our soujourn here for this night alone,” he replied. “The matter is complicated, but we have to leave somewhere at dark. I am doubtful of our return.”

“Is Jack in danger?”

Sanwar weighed his words. “For the time being, all of us are safe. That aside, some less than savory individuals are involved, who do mean harm to both Jack and myself. That is partially why we cannot linger. We would never wish to place you and your mother in danger. However...”

“Yes?” Esmeray collected the wood pile underneath her arm.

“However,” Sanwar continued, gathering himself. “We learned but hours prior that the Greek Army has been defeated. Kemal Pasha is descending on the city, and I fear that the worst is yet to come.”

Esmeray snorted a little. “If the Greeks have lost, then I have nothing to fear. Kemal Pasha will liberate this city.”

“Liberate?”

“Yes,” she said plainly. “When he retakes our city, mother says he will bring about a new age for Turkish people. We will have a nation of our own. Secularism. Education. Rights for women. A true republic.”

Sanwar sighed. “And how many will die for that, I wonder?”

“What other choice do we have?” Esmeray walked past him. “Since the Great War ended, we’ve had to fight invasions every day. Britain, France, Italy,

Greece, Armenia? They all want our land. Do you think a one-armed Muslim girl has any chance at a future under the any of them?" She headed towards the house. "Come on, it's time for dinner."

Dinner was a silent affair; a simple meal of bread and fish. Meryem asked a few polite questions to either man, but nothing else. Sanwar noticed that there were small red splotches around her eyes, and her gaze was vacant all the while. Jack looked similarly, and spoke little himself.

When they had finished, she and Esmeray laid down some pillows and blankets next to the woodstove. She would have offered them her bed she said, but it was barely large enough for her and Esmeray, let alone one man of their stature. They thanked her for it all the same, and lied down to sleep.

It was a long while however, before Jack found any rest. He lay there, alone in the darkness, for what

could have been hours or maybe only minutes. His mind an empty void that could not find peace. Somewhere, water dripped from an old hand pump. At first, the sound was disquieting, each plip of water ringing in his ears, but eventually it turned into a euphony, a rhythmic heartbeat that lulled him softly into sleep.

That night, he dreamed that he was a boy again, not yet fourteen. He was sitting by the quayside, just as he had spent many an afternoon at that age. He stared out at the water, gazing at the wide open sea that lay beyond Smyrna's harbor.

It was one of his first days in the city since they had made their passage from Alexandria, he knew it. Six months ago, his father had been appointed Consul to the Ottomans here in the city; his first employment since retiring from the Army.

So, the family had accompanied him there as was customary, and left their estate behind, taking new residence in the Greek Quarter. Also, as was custom, Jack was to be a shadow in all his father's affairs, in addition to his daily lessons, of course. His father said that it was time that he received "a proper education", believing that he had been too soft on him previously.

That meant morning military drills from a retired army sergeant, followed by afternoons of sitting silently in his father's meetings, listening to all the boring talks. Evenings were filled with the usual school subjects by his tutor; history, mathematics, poetry, French, and science. Jack could feel the sheer exhaustion from those days all over again.

Yet, none of that could be bothered with at present, for in this dream, they had only just arrived, and none of those dreadful activities had started. He had escaped his parents' clutches and those of their servants as well, to scamper off and see the city on his

own. Today was one of the last few fleeting days of summer, and he was going to make the most of it. Anatolia may have stayed warm well into its autumn, but the days would soon grow shorter, and Jack would have scant time to enjoy them after lectures.

No, this day was meant to be savored, he remembered, even if he had no friends to share it with. So there he sat, underneath the shady fronds of a tall date palm beside the ice cream parlor, staring out at the countless ships that filled the quayside. Charcoal in his hand, he flipped open to a fresh page in his sketch book, and began making his first strokes.

“Jack?”

He thought he heard somebody call his name.

Nobody seemed to be about however, until Jack looked round again, and saw a man sitting at table near him. He was dressed in a cream white suit, with a black tie and a wide brimmed hat to shade his eyes,

and wore a ruby ring upon his finger. Even seated, he gave the appearance of being tall, and he leaned heavily on a long cane, which matched the length of his legs. At his table were two glasses, a carafe of water, a plate of bread, and a thick book made from old dark leather.

“Excuse me, sir?” Jack asked. Though he was trying to be as polite as possible, his voice quavered a little. “Was it me you called?”

“I did not speak a word,” he replied in a voice that was as deep as a well.

“My pardons then,” Jack returned more confidently. It must have been the wind. This man was clearly minding his own business, and he should not to disturb him further.

Yet, the man surprised him when he continued the conversation.

“You have an excellent eye,” he remarked, nodding at Jack’s sketching. “I think you’ll make a fine artist some day.”

Instinctively, Jack hid the page away.

“Oh no, not me,” he stammered. At first, he was embarrassed by the compliment, but then he found the truth slip out of him. “Besides, I’m to be a soldier anyway.”

“Your father’s insistence, no doubt?”

“Yes...How did you know?”

“I was a soldier once. My brother and I both.” He spoke in a way that sounded sad, and smiled wanly. “Tell me, friend, do you know the history of this city?”

It was a curious question, one that Jack could not answer, so the man in white answered it himself.

“Smyrna is an ancient city,” he explained. “One of the greatest in all of Anatolia before it was destroyed. Then Alexander came and captured it again. He

rebuilt the city, vowing that it would be greater than it ever was before. It would be the greatest city in all of Greece, if not the world, and all the streets would be filled with wine, and songs, and music. Tell me, my friend. Do you know the tale of Alexander?”

Jack laughed a little. The man had to have been fooling, even though it did not sound that way. “Of course, I do. Everyone remembers Alexander the Great.”

Again, the man gave a sad smile, and turned his head to stare at the high and distant figure of Smyrna’s castle.

“No,” he said at last. “No, it seems that they have all but forgotten Alexander.”

Silence hung on the air. The man was quiet for so long that Jack felt compelled to speak.

“What’s that book there?” he asked.

The man reached down to the old leather tome. “This? What do you know of Alchemy, my friend?”

“My tutors said it was the precursor to science,” Jack said. “A lot of charlatans and silly madmen thinking they could somehow turn lead into gold.”

A laugh escaped the man’s lips. “There’s more to it than that. Look for yourself.”

Jack accepted it with trepidation, but all uncertainty was lost when he threw open the pages. There, inscribed in ancient cinnabar, were lines of Latin text, penned by knowing hands. Imagery both vibrant and bizarre filled the paper with colors magnificent. It was all so beautiful to behold, this simple object in his hands, yet one thing stood out to him above all others:

A crimson stone shining bright.

Lapis Philosophorum.

“I’ve seen this stone before,” Jack murmured.

“You have? Where?”

“In my dreams.”

The man cocked his head, and smiled. “Then you were meant to have it. This book belongs to you now.”

“What?”

“It’s yours.” The man rose from the table, as if to take his leave, but Jack protested.

“Please, sir,” he begged. “I couldn’t accept such a gift!”

“A warrior may have more need of a pen than a sword,” the man warned him, then he gave a shrug. “Besides, I was already going to give it away.”

“Could I at least give you something in return?”

“An equal exchange, you say? Very well. What you can give me is a promise.”

“A promise?”

“Promise me that one day, when we meet again, you’ll know the true power of the Philosopher’s Stone.”

Jack gave him a solemn nod. "I swear it."

"Good, and now we seal our promise with a pact." He poured them each a cup of wine from the carafe. Blood red liquid filled each glass. "It is a great sin to go back on a vow you've made someone, once you've shared their wine and bread. So now we break the bread, and drink."

They each took a piece of bread, and ate it, then drank a sip from their glasses.

"Now the pact is sealed," the man told him. "And if you'll excuse me, I have some business to attend. I will see you someday soon, Jack MacGregor."

Jack stood frozen, marveling at how this stranger knew his name, while the man merely touched his hat and left without another word. As he turned to leave, Jack saw in detail, the craftsmanship of his cane; a fine piece of ebony, crowned with a silver handle shaped like a serpent. When metal caught the sunlight, Jack saw the glimmer of two larimar gems

inset into its eyes. Then, the man vanished into the passing crowd, as if he had never been there at all.

Only when the man in white was gone, did Jack realize that he had never seen his face.

X

Makes Gold from Lead

Saturday, September 2nd, 1922

“Jack?”

Sanwar was stirring him awake.

Groggy, Jack rose from his dream with an awful thirst.

“Jack? It is time.”

Sanwar helped him off the floor. Moonlight shimmered through the house’s only window.

Quietly as they could, the two men strapped on their swords. Then, when they were ready, they left the last of their *lira* on the table, and walked out the door and into the night without a sound. Under the light of the waxing quarter-moon, they made their

way along the rugged slopes of Mount Pagos to where the shadow of Smyrna Castle loomed.

They passed beneath the battlements into the empty ward, where once the castle would have kept its smithy and stables, and all other wooden buildings now lost to the decay of time. Only a well in the center of the ward remained from then, the rest was lifeless stone. Scarred towers lined the parapet beside the ruins of the old Roman cisterns, each marked with the Hospitaller cross. Lonely winds blew here, a ghostly cool in the warm night air.

Jack remembered the stories he had read in history books about this place; of how the Knights had taken the city in their Smyrniot Crusades decades after the Holy Land had fallen. This castle lay within their hands until the Muslims recaptured it after a long and bloody siege. That not been the end of the Holy Wars, however.

Sanwar flicked on the torch that Meryem had given him, and Jack did likewise with his own, making a mental note of just another debt he owed that family. He shined his light about the place, and the two set about looking for the tomb.

There were no entrances along the walls, nor inside the towers when he inspected them. Running his hands along the stone yielded no secret doorways either, nor did any trapdoors reveal themselves underfoot. Nearly an hour of searching the castle high and low had yielded nothing, until Jack suddenly heard Sanwar whispering his name from the ward.

He exited the tower that he had just combed over for the third time, to see his partner standing by the old cisterns. Sanwar nodded his head, and illuminated the ranks of Roman archways within. No water flowed along those ancient sluices, which now were caked in dust. The two exchanged a nod, and proceeded down the arcade. Even the slightest

footfall had an echo here, so they took special care treading over every loose stone that had fallen in their path.

Soon, they reached the end of it. They were deep under the mountain now. The arcade opened into the cistern's final chamber, where the roof curved into a dome and torchlight gleamed upon the walls. In the center of the chamber was the distinctive oblong of a stone sarcophagus. On the far wall was the relief of a great serpent, its tail in its own mouth forming a circle; the ouroboros.

“Strange honor to be buried where you drank,” Jack muttered to himself.

Sanwar hushed him.

Shadows moved within, and murky voices murmured in hushed tones.

The two men pressed themselves into an alcove. Peering around its corner, Jack could manage a glance of a dark, slim man stepping into view beside

the sarcophagus. In true Hospitaller fashion, he wore black robes with the distinct white crosses on the collar.

“You are late,” the man said in Greek. There was the sound of approaching footsteps. Others were coming down a side passage that Jack could not fully see.

“You had best forgive me,” a gruff voice returned. “We have been scouring the city for hours. MacGregor is alive.”

Sanwar exchanged a look with Jack.

“Alive?” the first man exclaimed. “How has he made it here?”

“If I knew, I would have certainly told you. I saw him on the waterfront not long after I had arrived.”

“And the other?”

“I did not see him.”

An idea crept across Jack's mind just then. He stroked his mustache and turned to Sanwar.

"Follow my lead," he whispered, handing Sanwar his sword.

Before Sanwar could protest, Jack stepped out into the chamber.

"He's dead."

The Hospitallers wheeled about, pistols drawn. They holstered them in amazement only when they realized who was standing there before them.

"What's the matter? Seen a ghost?" asked Jack with a smile.

"How good of you to rejoin our company, Mister MacGregor," the slim man said, speaking with the pleasant lilt of the Smyrniot dialect. He was of a similar age to Cassar it appeared, though more of his hair was going gray. Aside from that, he had the same measured bearing as the Grandmaster.

Jack shrugged. "I know you've missed me dearly."

“I was told that there was a fire aboard our ship. Praytell, how did you survive?”

“By God’s mercy alone,” Jack began. He moved his hands about to articulate his tale with dramatic gesture. “The explosion cast me from the ship into the raging sea. For days I was adrift, until by divine providence, I found myself ashore on the strand just south of here. God had spared my life so that I could complete my tasks with his good servants, it would seem. Anyhow, I thought it best to complete this noble quest and such, so I continued on my way here, heard the voices...and well, you know the rest.”

All throughout his story, Jack had been weighing the Hospitallers’ strength. There were four of them in total. Each had a revolver handy, and rapier upon their belts. The slim man seemed to be the leader, and he was flanked by two huge guards dressed like priests of the Orthodoxy. The last man was dressed in the same fashion, though he was far shorter and his beard much bushier. Jack remembered him as

the stout fellow who escorted them to Cassar's chamber back in Rhodes.

“You seem so suddenly devout, Mister MacGregor,” he said. “Cassar never mentioned you as God-fearing before.”

“I found my faith amidst the sea,” Jack lied. “For how could I be anything but a true believer after such an episode?”

“Just so,” the slim man responded, carefully. “And indeed our Lord is merciful. I thank his providence for restoring you to us. Come and join us then, Mister MacGregor. You may call me Vasilis...Please tell me, what of the diary?”

“At the bottom of the Aegean, I'm afraid.”

The four Knights exchanged uneasy glances.

“In any case,” Vasilis said. “Your skills may prove useful enough alone. Sir Godfrey's tomb requires your attention.”

“Of course.”

They showed Jack over to the sarcophagus. Its lid was decorated within an effigy of a Hospitaller knight, as evidenced by the distinctive crosses that lined his tabard. A sword he held in one hand, adorned with a serpent pommel. In the other was a shield, which had been made from steel and not from stone. Curiously, the metal shined the lights' reflections when Jack wiped away its dust.

As he looked further, he found in minute writing etched around the pommel of the sword, a familiar phrase in Latin:

Spirits will guide you.

“So this is Godfrey D’Amiens then?” he asked.

“Indeed,” Vasilis replied. “We are unsure of how to proceed, but we suspect a chemical solution may be necessary.”

“I would agree.”

Vasilis nodded to one of the guards, who brought forth a heavy chest. The man clicked it open,

displaying a vast array of vials for Jack to choose from. *Vitriol*, *Cinnabar*, *Antimony*, and *Aqua Regia*; each was labeled in draconian symbols that were intimate only to practitioners of the Art.

Jack's eyes went wide. There were so many choices, so many compounds he could play with, that he felt a boy again. Perhaps there were too many choices. He did not know where to begin.

"Spirits," he said to himself. His first thought was to reach for a vial of Mercury, which shared the name of the Alchemical Spirit, but he stayed his hand. He gave the chest another scan. "How many of these have you tested?"

"Each individually," Vasilis told him. "Though to no result. Perhaps there is something we have missed—"

"I'll say," Jack interrupted. He traced his hand along the shield, feeling the smoothness of the metal. "That's because you're missing something."

“Oh?”

Jack reached inside his pocket, and removed Eleni’s flask.

“Yes, spirits,” he laughed. “Spirits in the plural. Alcoholic Spirits more specifically, that is. You know the term was coined by Alchemists when they discovered distillation?”

“Fascinating, truly. Now what happens?”

“Well,” said Jack, searching through the chest once more. His mind was streaming now, the answers clicking in his head. “Ethanol won’t do much to steel all by its lonesome, but if you mix it with something...”

He found exactly what he wanted.

Placing an empty vial on the ground, Jack filled it with the contents of the flask. Then, he withdrew a bottle of *Spirit of Niter* from the chest. He only needed to add a few careful drops into the vial, and give a gentle stir.

“One spirit with another.” Jack grinned. “Very clever of you, Monsieur Godfrey.”

Vasilis frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“Look.”

Together they watched the vial change. While the solution had begun almost clear, now it was citrinnating; turning into a regal shade of gold. Caustic fumes spouted from the glass just moments later, and the bubbling solution morphed from gold to a startling shade of crimson.

“Spirit of Niter, also known as Nitric Acid, is highly reactive to Ethanol,” explained Jack, lifting the vial by a set of tongs he had found in the chest. “The result of their mixture is Nital, and a whole lot of heat. Excuse me, gentlemen.”

The Knights stepped aside as Jack came forward, and trickled the fuming liquid onto the steel of Godfrey’s shield. The shining metal clouded, then quickly smirched to black. The five of them kept

their distance until the vapors had dissipated, before they approached again.

There, silver-white against the black, a name was written in Greek characters upon the shield.

“Agiotopos?” Vasilis uttered in disbelief. “It’s on the island?”

“Our old meeting ground,” the short, bearded man conferred. “So that is where Godfrey has hidden away his map. We should have known...And where are you going, Mister MacGregor?”

The Knights had turned on Jack right as he was slinking away. One of the huge guards stepped into his path to cut off his retreat. Jack nearly fell onto his back after colliding with such a massive obstacle.

“I wasn’t going anywhere,” Jack replied, nervously massaging his now bruised chest. “Nowhere at all.”

“Good,” said Vasilis, nodding to the guard, “Because we can’t have you following us to Agiotopos, now can we?”

Jack was shoved out in front of him, and fell onto his knees.

“What if you need my skills when you get there?” he pleaded.

“God has brought us this far. He will take us the rest of the way.” Vasilis unslung his pistol, and made to aim it right at Jack’s head.

His shot fired wide as the Knight shouted out in pain. The gun fell to the floor, and he stepped back, clutching his wrist. Sanwar’s second throw caught him in the temple. Vasilis collapsed onto the floor, a hefty stone landing beside his bleeding head.

The other Knights were not surprised for long. The stout man had his pistol drawn, and fired. Sanwar ducked into the passageway, the bullets slapping into the stone beside him.

The guard nearest Jack went for his own weapon, only to realize that it was curiously absent from its holster.

“Looking for this?” asked Jack from the floor. He had the man’s own pistol aiming up at him. “Don’t mind that I borrowed it.”

The guard frowned, almost sad, as Jack put a round between his eyes. His massive body toppled over onto the stone.

“Sanwar!” Jack cried, sliding Vasilis’ pistol over to the passage. Sanwar snatched it from out of the darkness, and fired back at their two remaining foes. He and Jack unloaded the weapons with wild abandon, driving them into the passage opposite for cover. The fusilade continued until eventually, the smoke cleared, and the room lay silent.

“I’m out,” said Jack, as Sanwar joined him behind the cover of the sarcophagus.

“As am I. Here.” He handed Jack his sword.
“You are such a fool, Jack MacGregor.”

“You can chastise me when we get out of this,” Jack returned.

“If we ever do.”

“MacGregor!” The short man stepped out of the passageway, the cold steel of his rapier drawn. The other guard stood beside him in the same threatening pose. “I will send your ugly soul to Hell.”

“You first.”

Jack wrenched *Lann Dbearg* from its scabbard, and leapt over the sarcophagus.

The rapier lunged for him, but he was quick enough to parry. The stout man twirled and weaved around Jack’s following attacks, refusing to make contact with his blade.

“I will not suffer a godless man as you,” his opponent grunted. He suddenly shifted to pressing the offensive.

Jack gave ground. “This is coming from the man who just tried to murder me.”

Another thrust came in. This time, Jack beat it to the side, using the momentum to power his

backswing. *Lann Dhearg* tasted the blood as it slashed across the stout man's side.

The man staggered back out of Jack's measure, but did not fall. He merely clutched his wound, then took his guard again, where a weaker man would have been writhing on the floor.

Another attack came forth, then another, both of which Jack reposted. Again, his counterblow struck, this time to the opposite side, but still, the man only faltered.

"Jesus Christ, you're unkillable," Jack swore.

"As are you...unfortunately..." The stout man winced. Blood was leaking from his mouth onto his beard. "Die heathen—"

One step and his advance at Jack was ended by Sanwar's shot. The clangor reverberated throughout the cistern, followed by the hard slap of the body against the stone. Sanwar stepped around the corpse of the other large guard, threw the empty gun away,

and cleaned the blood off of his sword. He then began to search the area, making certain that all threats had yet been neutralized.

“Thanks,” said Jack. “That bastard was taking too long.”

“You are lucky I finished with mine in time,” Sanwar said, nodding to the body of his freshly slain foe, as he rummaged through the chest. The large Knight was lacking a face. “Elsewise, we would have been here until the authorities arrived. Speaking of which, we had best be making a hasty retreat before they do.”

“Just one minute.”

Jack crossed the room, wiping clean his sword as he stepped over every body along the way. Their business was not quite finished yet. Vasilis had roused from where he had fallen, and was stumbling for the exit. A simple push from Jack ended all his hopes for escape. The Knight crumpled on the floor.

Jack crouched over him, grasping him by the collar with both hands, and drawing him close.

“You’re going to tell me what you know, right now.”

Vasilis struggled to keep his gaze straight. He was bleeding heavily. His eyes were so dilated they were almost totally black.

Jack shook him anyway. “What’s Cassar’s plan? What does he want with the Stone? What does he want!?”

Vasilis still said nothing.

“Tell me! Damn your eyes! I swear to God I’ll-”

“Jack! He has a knife!”

Sanwar’s warning had come too late. Jack saw the weapon flash, and come to life in Vasilis’ hand. He made to spring away, but the thought had come too slowly, and he was frozen where he sat.

However, the Knight turned the blade towards his own neck, and not at Jack's. With a single deadly stroke, he plunged it into his throat up to the hilt.

Vasilis let out a bloody cough, then died half a minute later.

Jack slammed his lifeless body against the floor.

“You bloody fool! What'd you go and do that for!?”

Jack jammed his foot into the dead man's ribs, and kept kicking him repeatedly. The ribcage shattered underneath his heavy foot, and more blood sputtered from Vasilis' mouth.

Suddenly, Sanwar's arms were wrapped around Jack, restraining him. “Jack! Jack! Stop!”

He came to his senses.

There were shouts from down the passageway.

“Jack, the guard has heard the shots. We have to leave. Now.”

“Wait.”

With one quick motion, Jack yanked the bloody knife from the Hospitaller’s neck, then cut away the white cross from his collar. He pocketed the lapel, and let the blade fall onto the stone, as he and Sanwar flew out the passage on the far side of the room.

Together, they ran up the stairs and out into the night, fleeing for their lives.

Eleni unlocked the office door. Wiping away the dust from the shutters, she opened the window to let light into the room. She turned away, so as not to blind herself, and let her eyes adjust to the room’s new radiance.

Six months had been too long to leave it unattended. A fresh layer of dust coated every corner of her father’s office. Furiously, she cleansed the photographs hanging on the wall before

unhooking them. She lingered on each picture, on the ghostly faces etched in black and silvery white. It was strange to think that she was older now than Spyros had ever been; closer in age to their parents than not. To think that in another thirty years, she would outlive them.

She put the photographs into her crate, and began scouring her father's desk. Never had she touched it before, but she figured he would forgive her given the circumstances. Time was short. She had to salvage what she could.

She rummaged through the drawers. At first, it seemed like there was little more in there but old documents no longer relevant, but as she sifted through them, a letter fell out onto the floor. Eleni plucked it off the dusty ground, seeing that the sealed envelope had already been broken. Gingerly, she removed the letter tucked within, and read:

April 4th, 1914

Iannis,

This is our chance. Now that the Empire has lost the war against the Balkan League, you have a chance to escape, but you must hurry.

Leave Smyrna. Take Anna and Antonis. Go to Foça and hide among them. Remember Mikhalis from the Gorgona? He will be docked there on June 13th. Go with him. He can sneak the three of you back to Delfini.

Leave at night. Tell no one.

The girls pray for you every day. They pray for us all to live in one country again soon. Hopefully, that country will some day be Greece. I pray too.

Hurry. Special Affairs, they say, has been asking questions.

- Nikos

A tear stained the page, making the old ink run a little. Eleni shoved the letter back inside the envelope, then shoved the envelope back inside the drawer.

She straightened herself.

What a fool she was, acting like this, and on the eve of battle no less. The Turks were coming and so was a fight, yet here she was acting like she would lose.

Where was her pride? Her Raissi pride?

Father would be disappointed.

She took the photographs out of the crate, and put them all back on the wall exactly where they had been, all the while begging for his forgiveness, ashamed of how she had acted.

A knock came at the door. Hastily, she hung the last of his pictures, then paused a second longer to hold it in place so that it would not swing.

“Come in,” she said, seating herself at the desk, hands folded like she had been sitting there a good long while.

She sat straighter when Sanwar and the Scotsman came trudging through the door, followed by an angry Nikos.

“I found these two sneaking around downstairs,” he said, keeping his gun trained on them.

“Put that away,” Eleni ordered. He did so with reluctance. She turned to the two other men. “What are you even doing here?”

The Scotsman had that wild look in his eyes, that one he got sometimes when he looked at her. Yet now, he seemed even wilder with his clothes all torn and streaked with blood. He leaned heavily onto the desk.

“Eleni. We need your help. The map. It’s real. We know where it is. We need you-”

“Captain, he’s gone mad,” warned Nikos.

“I’ve *been* mad!” Jack turned, and snarled at the old man. “And with damn good reason!”

Sanwar put a hand on Jack’s shoulder. He quieted.

“Mad,” Nikos repeated, although it was underneath his breath this time.

“Why are you here?” Eleni asked them again. Not a bit of this made sense. “And why are you covered in blood!?”

This time, Sanwar spoke. “Last night, we were attacked by the Knights Hospitaller. Jack and I were forced to hide. Jack said this seemed the only possible location.”

“So, you’re the ones the soldiers are looking for?” Coming into town today, she had noticed that the patrols looked heavier than usual.

Sanwar nodded.

“I found them in the storage cabinet,” Nikos added. His tone became more pleading. “Captain,

how can you trust them? These two have only brought us into danger. Bakir has never gotten so close to us before. Now the Army is after them too, and they expect our help? After they have told us nothing but lies and fairy tales?”

“They’re not lies,” Jack growled.

He threw a bloody scrap onto the table; the Hospitaller’s Cross.

The room went silent.

Eleni leaned back in the chair, considering the two of them. A strange pair they made, perhaps too strange to be spies...and who would they spy for anyway? It seemed like everybody hated them. Yet, how could she trust them either? Nikos had to be right...

“What do you want?” she leveled. “Tell it slowly.”

Jack took a deep breath. “We found Godfrey’s tomb inside of Smyrna Castle, like we told you about, and it showed us where he hid his map. We

need you to take us there, Eleni. Please. Men attacked us at the castle. If Sanwar and I don't leave Smyrna, I know that more of them will come after us...either that or the Army will find us and have us arrested."

"Your problem," said Nikos. "Not ours."

Eleni ignored him. This was all too much for her to focus on all at once. She looked down at the bloody cross in front of her.

"I need more than a bloody cross for proof, Scotsman."

"Fine...Agiotopos."

"What?"

"Aye. What's on Agiotopos, Eleni?"

She paused. There was nothing on Agiotopos. Nothing except...

"An old temple...to Hermes. Why?"

Sanwar snapped his fingers, his eyes alight.
“That’s it!”

Eleni stared at him blankly.

“In essence,” he explained. “Hermes is the god of Alchemy. If it is his temple on the island, then we have found the proper place. Only an Alchemist would choose such a location. That must be it!”

This was all too much to manage. Eleni could not find the words.

“Please,” Jack begged her, anyway. “Believe us.”

She looked to Nikos. He shook his head. She looked to the bloody cross, and then to Jack and Sanwar.

“I believe you...I believe you!” Too many thoughts were bubbling inside her head, the least of which was if this magic rock was as real as they had said. Yet, there was a bigger question. “My ship is in repair now, though. You know this! How am I to sail you there without it?”

Jack grinned.

“The *Gorgona*!? Eleni you can’t...” Nikos crossed his arms, and sat back in his chair. With Sanwar and the the Scotsman out of the room, he felt free to raise his voice again. “We haven’t sailed that ship since Iannis and I were working for your *papou*!”

“And yet it is still in good condition.” Eleni had seen to that once she had inherited the company, continuing her father’s years of upkeep. “Good enough to sail.”

“Good enough to sail away from this fight?”

Eleni flared her nostrils at the remark. While no one doubted his loyalty onboard the *Karkinos*, behind closed doors, Nikos was a different story. Without the crew around, the old fool acted as pig-head as he liked, and thought that he could get away with it. Mother had always said that men were a

stubborn lot, but Nikos was a special breed among them. Father had lovingly agreed.

“The battle is coming, Eleni. We cannot run from it-”

“No one is running” Eleni snapped. “And if you were anyone else, I would flog you just for saying that.”

Nikos retreated into sullen silence.

“Then what are we doing?” Kyriaki asked gently. Her sister had been sitting quietly until now, and Eleni had wondered when she would speak. “Why call us here if your mind is set?”

“Because I need you. Both of you.” That line was directed towards Nikos, who said nothing. “These men talk about a magic stone and well, I believe them. If it can do what they say it can...then that kind of power can win this war.”

“But the map is on Agiotopos,” said Kyriaki.
“Not the Stone.”

“You are right,” Eleni said. “So Smyrna must hold until then. When I return with the map, we can give it to the Army, and they can find the Stone for Greece. But Smyrna must hold. That is why I will take only ten men on the *Gorgona*. The rest of you must stay here, and be ready for the fight.”

“Only ten men!” Kyriaki cried. “At least wait until the Karkinos is repaired! It will only be a few days. Let us go with you, it will be safer, Eleni-”

“No,” Eleni said. “The Turks could attack any day. You know this. I need men here to join the fight in case we do not come back in time.”

“Then let me go,” Kyriaki declared, getting to her feet. “Eleni, let me go instead. Let me take the *Gorgona* while you lead the men.”

“No, Kyriaki. It must be me.”

“Why do you not trust me!?” Tears were welling in her young, bright eyes. Eleni crossed around the desk, and brushed them away with a gentle

thumbstroke. She was always crying, this sister of hers.

“It’s because I trust you that you must stay,” Eleni told her. “A Raissi must always captain the *Karkinos*. I need you here, *agapi mou*, to lead our men. Can you do this for me?”

Kyriaki nodded, stifling the tears.

Eleni smiled. She removed her hat, and placed it on her sister’s golden hair. “Then now, you are the captain. Do not let them see you cry. Be strong for your crew. Be strong for me.”

“I will. I promise.”

Eleni turned to Nikos. “So I will go, and my sister will stay. Those are my final orders.”

The old man sighed. “Will you take the Scotsman with you?”

“I will. Him and Sanwar both. They will be useful.”

“You trust them then?”

“I said that I believe them. I never said that I trust them,” she corrected. “Which brings me to my special orders for you, Niko.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.” Eleni’s voice was grave. “After we leave, I want you to take the three men you trust most and one of our fishing boats. I want you to wait for us at the secret place. If anything goes wrong, we will meet you there. And if four days pass with nothing, then sail back to Smyrna. No longer. If I am alive, I will be there already.”

The old man gave a grim nod, then a rueful smile. “My little captain. You grow more like Iannis every day. He would be proud of you and Kyriaki both. Forgive me, if an old man like me forgets that sometimes.”

Eleni shared the smile, and put a hand on his shoulder. “I will always forgive my family, Niko. You

know that.” Then she darkened. “But there are some things we cannot forget. Or ever forgive.”

“For Smyrna,” Nikos agreed.

“For family,” added Kyriaki.

Eleni grinned, then drew her pistol. “For Greece.”

XI

Enter the Hidden Cave

Monday, September 4th, 1922

The Aegean Sea

Calm waters and strong winds brought them within sight of the island by the second day of their voyage. It lay on the horizon, a distant shadow jutting from the waves beyond Kos. The dawn struck against its rocky shores from the east, brightening the island to crimson radiance as they drew near. From the deck, Eleni, Jack, and Sanwar could not avert their eyes. A magnetic energy pulsed through the air. The crewmen crossed themselves, and reefed the sails to slacken their approach.

Jack gave the men a curious glance. “What’s got them worried?”

“It is said that Agiotopos is a cursed place,” Eleni explained. “An old Dodecanese legend, but...there is some truth in it.” She crossed herself as well, and fingered the crucifix around her neck. “Once, in ancient times, some people lived there. A small community, just a little village. One day, everybody vanished. Nobody knows they went. Some say it was an earthquake, but everyone else? They say it was demons.”

“Comforting,” Sanwar remarked.

Eleni shrugged. “Only smugglers and pirates have dared to go there ever since. Sometimes, they have used it as a hideout. No one else has been so desperate or so foolish. Except for us, of course.”

“Aye,” said Jack. “Except for us.”

They came about soon after, the narrow frame of the *Gorgona* allowing it to maneuver easily between the rocks. Eleni found a harbor to lay anchor, then set about arming every man with a rifle and pistol. For

herself, she loaded an old boxlock shotgun, strung a bandolier of cartridges across her chest, then stuffed a long revolver into her holster. In seconds, they had gone from mere sailors to an elite section of the Royal Marines.

“Aren’t you going to give us any weapons, Captain?” asked Jack, despondently. “Figured you’d want more than just a pair of swords to watch your backside.”

Eleni smirked at him. “Is that the only reason you are watching my backside, Scotsman?”

Blood rushed to Jack’s face.

She laughed again, but handed off the guns and ammunition to him and Sanwar anyway.

Sufficiently armed, they left two men aboard the ship as guards, while Eleni led the rest ashore. On this rugged island, there was nowhere to go but upwards. They trudged the steady incline through thick green foliage to the crest of a bare, grassy hill.

Resting at its peak was a ring of ruined Ionic columns; ancient marble that had once been painted with a rainbow of color, but had since faded to its natural white. In their center was the statue of a winged god, resplendent even for its age. As they came around to face it, its great figure towered over them, looking down with empty, knowing eyes, and its hand outstretched.

Jack froze upon the sight of it.

“What is it?” asked Sanwar.

“Something feels strange here,” Jack murmured.

Eleni snorted. “Cursed, you mean. Now which way to do we go? This place looks empty.”

Jack was too focused to regard the question, but she was right. There seemed to be nothing else to find, no indication of how to proceed. Around them, there was nothing but ancient wreckage and a sea that stretched for miles, with the Turkish coastline little more than a hazy outline in the distance.

Yet for some reason, Jack felt compelled to kneel. He lowered himself near to eye level with the pedestal on which Hermes stood. The others sat back on stumps of some fallen columns, and watched.

There was a relief just below Hermes' feet. Jack leaned forward, rubbing his fingers against its image, a pair of twisting serpents entwined around a winged scepter. Then, he looked upwards, towards the god himself. Those knowing eyes seemed to watch him at first, but as he looked closer, Jack saw that they gazed elsewhere; namely, towards his outstretched hand.

Hermes was pointing eastwards, through an ancient, freestanding archway behind Jack. Was he pointing towards the sea? The coast? No, Jack knew somehow. He was pointing towards someplace else.

Jack could feel the puzzled gazes of the others as he threw himself into the grass. Their shadows gathered around him, shading his neck while he moved about on hands and knees, running his fingers

through it. He nearly laughed when he had his answer.

“Here!” He cried, pushing back the grass to show the others. “There’s a path here, long overgrown.”

Indeed, only faint streaks of dirt and rock remained of the trail. The rest had been overtaken by the creep of foliage.

“To where does it lead, I wonder?” Sanwar asked with an eyebrow raised. Weapons drawn, their party followed to find out.

They had not traveled far before they stumbled across a dip in the hillside. Here, a stream poured out from inside the hill itself, and trickled down. The flow grew into a fall by the time they reached its mouth, where it collected into a sizeable basin below.

“There must be a cave there.” Eleni pointed behind the falls. “The water has to come from somewhere.”

Maneuvering along the slippery rocks, they discovered it was true. Past the mists of the cascade, cool darkness greeted them at the edges of a yawning cave. Several men struck lanterns, and they proceeded down its mouth, into the very heart of the hill itself.

“An old smuggler’s trick,” Eleni explained as they went, her voice murmuring along the walls. “Hiding something behind the falls. We must be going the right way, I think.”

Despite her self-assuredness, Eleni stopped in bemusement some minutes later, when the passage came to a blank wall of stone before them.

“It would appear that we were the ones to have been tricked,” came Sanwar’s wry remark.

Eleni hushed him, placing her hand on his. “No, that makes no sense. Why go down the cave just to lead to nothing? It makes no sense. Spread out and look for something!”

The men set about the order. As they scanned the cave walls, a glint of gold caught the light, and flickered for a moment. Jack took a lantern himself having lost it, and desperately tried to have the others help him find it again. Sanwar was the one who eventually did. Low on the cave wall, a small golden plate shone, bearing the same serpent and scepter device as above.

“It resembles something all too familiar, does it not?” asked Sanwar, shifting the light as Jack crouched closer.

“We saw this in the desert,” Jack uttered.

“What does it mean?” asked Eleni.

“It is the *caduceus*, the sigil of Hermes,” Sanwar explained. “*Hermes Trismegistus* was the founder of our Art. Generations of Alchemists have used it since to signify their practice in his tradition.”

“Aye,” Jack said. “And what I wouldn’t give for some *Aqua Regia* right now, though.”

A vial appeared in Sanwar's hand in an instant. "As it just so happens, I took the liberty of relieving a tad from Sir Godfrey's tomb. I suspected that he would have little use for it in his current state."

Jack chuckled at that, and administered a few careful drops of the acid. The gold plate quickly melted away to reveal a lever behind it. Jack returned the remaining liquid to Sanwar, then gave it a pull. There was a scrape of stone, and the wall behind them swung open.

A cold wind blew from the darkness within.

"You first Scotsman," said Eleni. "If we hear you go screaming to your death, then we will know to stay here."

He swallowed. "Suppose someone's got to be first."

It might as well have been him.

The trickling sound of water persisted down the tunnel, growing louder the deeper they went. Symbols were painted on the entire length of the walls; black figures like those on the ceramics of antiquity depicting men and beast alike, and sometimes a twisted combination of the two.

The thought crossed Jack's mind that he might have wanted to lead a dig down here in better times; that he might discover some rare brilliance aside from the Stone, and share his findings with the world. Yet, it was only for an instant. His fear would not allow the dreams to linger.

He nearly jumped when a hearty crunch sounded from behind.

Everybody turned. One of the crew stood white faced and frozen over the splintered pieces of a ribcage. He tried to step away in horror, only to incur another crunch, louder than before, that echoed down the cave when the brittle bones all snapped

away. Shaking, he staggered back, and was steadied by his fellows until they too, suddenly recoiled.

There on the ground, were littered bones as far as they could see. When Eleni shined her lantern down the tunnel, the remains only continued into the infinite darkness ahead.

“Definitely going the right way,” she mused. “Come on.”

She proceeded down the tunnel, giving them all no choice but to follow after her.

Eventually, the passage opened into a larger cavern, from which a gentle light was glowing. Its source was a shimmering array of gemstones that lined the rocky chamber. Each stone had the sky blue hues of larimar, though they far exceeded that gem in brilliance. Even Jack found himself entranced in their natural beauty, and their light was so soft upon the eye that it did not hurt to stare at them.

Sanwar, however, drew his attention from the fantasy.

“Look.”

At the far end of the room, the statue’s silhouette was unmistakable. Its rippled black sheen revealed the eldritch form of an ibis head atop a towering human body.

“*Hermes Trismegistus*,” Jack laughed beneath his breath. “Didn’t think I’d see you like this after the Library of Alexandria.”

The comment had been more to himself than anyone, but Eleni could not help but take pause.

“Didn’t the Library burn down eons ago?” she asked.

“One of them,” said Jack.

“Be wary,” Sanwar warned, pointing down at the floor just ahead. Stretching eight feet in diameter across it was a silver seal ringed in Alchemical code.

Even a cursory glance at the writing brought back a strange sense of familiarity to Jack.

“It’s the same as Godfrey’s diary,” he whispered to Sanwar.

His friend removed the diary from his pocket, and compared the two texts. His brow furrowed. “Oh my.”

“Definitely the right place,” Jack murmured.

They proceeded, guns readied, careful to avoid the seal. As they ventured further in the cavern, a second was discovered at the top of the domed ceiling, then a third just beyond the statue. Both appeared identical to the first.

On the left side of the room, they discovered the source of the trickling water. An underground stream flowed here, and its waters seeped down the rocks of the cave wall to gather in a luminous pool. Closer examination revealed that this mysterious glow came once again from the gemstones. Submerged in its

depths, they filled the pool with dazzling turquoise light all the way to the bottom, where a fourth and final seal was also visible.

Opposite to the pool, was an ancient laboratory whose furnaces had long gone cold. Empty beakers and alembics were left dust-ridden about its stone workbenches. Ceramic jars were laid about in various states of disarray. Some had fully shattered, others had cracked from the passing of unknown centuries. They were all of varying sizes; from no more than a foot high, to some that looked large enough to fit Jack and Sanwar both comfortably inside them.

There were more bones about this side of the room as well, not all of them human. Antlers, tails, and broken wings were among the piles of tibias, ribs, and femurs.

Eleni brushed aside one piece of note; a large skull, human-appearing at first, until she turned it to reveal a bulge of knotted horn jutting from one half of its

head. Gently, she returned it to the spot where it was found, and covered it with a piece of broken jar.

“Let’s hurry this along, shall we?” she said, steadying herself.

The others agreed.

Jack and Sanwar at last approached the statue, while Eleni and her men stood guard about the room. Hermes regarded them with glassy, onyx eyes, cold and knowing. As they knelt before him, a wave of dread swept Jack’s heart. He had seen this likeness before in Egypt, but now its murky visage sickened him in ways he had not felt in years. Somehow it seemed those eyes were staring into him with judgement, though no light reflected in them whatsoever.

He had to look away.

At the statue’s feet was laid a slab of alabaster, inlaid with golden text along its edges. Traced into the cream colored stone in stunning detail were the

hills and valleys, deserts, plains, and waters that spanned from the banks of Tyre to the Euphrates. A circlet of gold shimmered somewhere in the depths of the Syrian desert between.

“It’s the map...” Jack murmured. “It’s the bloody map...”

Sanwar examined the text, Greek by the look of it, and read:

“Whosoever removes this sacred text shall face the wrath of the Gods, the swift vengeance of the four essences.”

Jack swallowed hard. “Well, that’s not fucking ominous...”

“Let us take a tracing instead.”

“Aye. Let’s.”

At their request, a sailor brought over a pencil and an old nautical chart, which they flipped onto its blank backside. Sanwar’s careful hand set about laying it atop the map, then rubbing the pencil gently across

its surface. His marks were good, for he was sure to leave no detail out, yet because of this, his speed was limited to a crawl.

Jack knew better than to rush his process, but Eleni less so.

“Make it faster,” she urged him for the tenth time in five minutes.

“Faster is not better,” Sanwar chided for the tenth time himself. Jack dabbed the sweat off Sanwar’s brow with the back of his sleeve as he continued. The room’s atmosphere was so oppressive that they both were soaking from frayed nerves. As much as they wanted to flee from it however, they knew it might cost them a crucial detail inscribed upon the map.

Yet what felt like hours later, Sanwar finished his last pencil stroke. Satisfied, he put away the dull nub, and held the map aloft, admiring his work. He nearly breathed a sigh of relief, but it was cut short by a shout of alarm from behind.

He and Jack were on their feet, weapons ready.

The Turks had spilled silently into the room. The Greeks were nearly caught unaware, and would have fired on the intruders immediately if they had not been outnumbered two to one. There were shouts among both ranks as the two sides squared off, rifles pointed at the other, nervous fingers waiting on the trigger. Only Eleni had kept them steady with her commands to hold their fire. Yet, she struggled to maintain that discipline as a tall, dark shape drifted in front of the Turkish ranks.

The utter shock he caused made Captain Bakir grin.

“Very clever, I must admit,” he announced in accented, but passable Greek. “Your little bomb nearly destroyed me. My ship nearly sank, yet we survived.”

“How...?” Jack faltered. “I saw it...I watched you burn.”

“Oh, you came close to killing me, more than most men ever will,” Bakir laughed. He winked at them with his one good eye. “But Allah protects me...me and my comrades.”

A second shape appeared beside him. Red eyes gleamed impassive from the slits of its covered face. It flexed its hands.

Jack’s stomach sank.

“You fell,” Sanwar uttered.

“And another arose to take its place,” Bakir smirked. “It has hunted down its quarry, just as it is written. We have known your every move since you arrived in Smyrna, Mister MacGregor. All we needed was to wait.”

Before Jack could contemplate those words, Eleni cut him off.

“I have heard enough from you, Bakir!” She snapped. “Have you come to kill us with guns or boredom?”

“I have come for them.” He leveled a finger at Jack and Sanwar. “And that map they carry too, of course.”

“Why us?” Jack demanded.

“You are wanted alive. Not by me, of course.”

“Suyun.” Eleni glared.

Bakir gave her a mock bow. “The same. Either way, Misters MacGregor and Dhamija have an important choice to make.”

“Name it,” growled Jack.

“Surrender yourselves and the map, and I will spare Captain Raissi and her men,” said Bakir. Suddenly, a long-barreled Luger flashed into his hand. “Refuse, and I will kill them, torture you, and take you with me anyway. Do you accept my offer?”

Eleni spat at his feet. “We would rather die than see the map in the hands of the Turks!”

Her men shouted in agreement, but Bakir only smiled.

“I would rather see you die as well,” he agreed.

“What is to prevent you from recinding on your promise?” Sanwar called out to him.

The pirate only grinned. “Nothing truly, but you are not in a position to negotiate, now are you?”

“Relax,” Jack whispered. “I’ve got a plan...”

“Oh shit,” groaned Sanwar.

“Now what is your answer!?” Bakir demanded. “You have exhausted all my patience!”

Jack raised his hands, pointing his rifle in the air. “Alright, Bakir. We’ve decided. Eleni...I’ve made my choice.”

She gave him a look of terror and disgust...

...until he winked at her.

Jack turned back to Bakir. “I suppose I can’t argue with you, and all your numbers. So it’s us and the map you want then, is it?”

“Indeed,” Bakir laughed.

“Alright, well here it is, you scurvy pirate fuck!” Jack shouted, and promptly kicked the map right onto the floor.

It landed with a heavy thud that echoed throughout the entire chamber.

The room went silent.

Sanwar and Eleni looked at Jack in horror.

Bakir’s laughter resumed a second later.

“You idiot,” he rasped. “Now they die-”

A sudden rumble nearly knocked him to the floor. The earth trembled. Metal groaned, and the seal on the ground began to split wide open down the middle, its silver faces receding back into the rock. The Turks cried out in alarm, and scrambled backwards.

Jack would have seized the moment to attack, had he not seen the other seals opening as well. Above and behind him, metal slid away to reveal an empty blackness awaiting within.

Bakir and Eleni shouted above the tremors for their men to rally, but every one of them was frozen in confusion, their conflict suddenly forgotten. Instead, they stared at the three gaps that had formed in the rock, their guns quivering as they struggled to decide on where to aim.

Jack, however, was transfixed on the passage nearest him; the one behind the statue. Finally, the earth had stilled, and the silver seals had fully gone away. Something shined through the darkness then, small at first, but growing brighter.

It was the red glow of eyes.

“Aw fuck.”

There was little time to react.

A growl came, followed by a spark of light.

That was all the warning Jack had to shove Sanwar aside.

An instant later, a jet of flame came spewing forth.

Heat buffeted the air. Flat against the ground, seconds that felt like hours. Jack shut his eyes, shielding himself from the stinging smoke and the violent blaze, and pressed Sanwar deeper into the floor. Only when the intensity ended sharply and the cold air hit his face, did Jack dare to open his eyes again.

Men were screaming. Horrid smells of burning flesh had filled the room. Jack looked to see that Sanwar's copy of the map was a flaming heap on the floor not ten feet away, before suddenly realizing that he too was on fire, his shirt singing around his shoulder.

He gasped and rolled off Sanwar, falling onto the hard, dusty stone, and flopping himself about to kill the flame before it spread. Jack was gray from head to toe and wheezing, when he was sure that the flame was doused.

The map's copy had not survived, however. As Jack sprang to his knees, the paper had crumbled into a lowly heap of ash.

Sanwar, his wits returning, saw this, and scrambled towards it, arms outstretched in hopes of somehow salvaging the wreckage.

“No! No!” He cried.

Jack caught him just in time.

A heavy paw scattered the ashes as it emerged from the doorway behind the statue. A roar came with it, followed by a hiss, and then a bleat.

From the darkness, appeared the biggest lion that Jack ever seen. It was nearly six feet high at the shoulder, with scarlet eyes that burned infernally as they glared at him and Sanwar.

That was only the first of its three heads. The second came braying into view; a goat's head bucking in the creature's midsection, horns as long as forearms tossing from side to side.

The third head slithered out from behind the others, the tail end of the beast; a serpent of slick black scales, near as long as the creature's entire body. Dagger-like fangs flashed as it hissed and again, the other heads followed with war cries of their own.

The Chimera turned its amalgam body towards Jack, and opened a huge set of jaws.

“Aw fuck,” Jack muttered again.

Gunfire hailed from across the room. Bullets slapped uselessly into the Chimera's hide as Bakir regrouped, sword drawn, directing his men to fire at this newfound enemy. It purred in annoyance at the futile gesture.

That was all the distraction Jack and Sanwar needed to run away.

Bakir, however, held his ground. The creature stood between him and the true map, which still lay on the floor where Jack had kicked it. He needed to draw the chimera's attention towards the Greeks, and

provoke it to attack them, so that he could slip around to obtain his quarry. MacGregor and Dhamija could burn for all he cared. The map and his life were all that mattered now.

The Chimera snarled, and padded closer. The Turks faltered in their ranks, and the Greeks backpedaled. Bakir gave ground in measured steps, careful not to take his eyes off his opponent.

The beast was turning their way...gaining...

A sudden rush of wind made Bakir duck instinctively.

Talons slashed mere inches from his face. As Bakir dodged aside, they snatched another man instead, gripping him by the arm and neck, and swept him off overhead.

Bakir stood, and saw this new creature swooping high above him. Crowned with the head of a stag, yet bodied like a hawk, the Peryton rose to the ceiling with the struggling man in its grip. It screeched and

dropped its victim, shaking auburn feathers in triumph as the body splattered at Bakir's feet.

He then heard Eleni give the order to retreat, but when he looked to the doorway, he saw that option for escape was no longer possible.

Clawed hands reached out of the empty pit that had opened in the floor. They were massive, strong enough to lift the full weight of the creature that emerged. At eight feet tall, muscled and hooved, the Minotaur emerged. Its horns stretched wider than its four-foot shoulders, and with a snarl, it turned those deadly prongs towards the frightened Turks.

Bakir aside bolted as the three monstrosities descended on his men.

In seconds, the chamber became a charnel house. Blood and gore sprayed freely as Bakir watched his men be torn apart. For the first time in ages, fear was in his heart.

“Siyah! Siyah!” Bakir cried out through the frenzy.

In an instant, his masked and silent servant appeared at his side.

“The map!” He ordered. “Retrieve it for me! Now!”

Siyah nodded. Noiselessly, it slipped away.

Sanwar had also remembered the map, for as soon as he and Jack had escaped the Chimera, he realized that the original was still lying where they had left it, on the floor beneath the statue’s feet. Yet, as he turned back for it, Jack cried out suddenly.

A gunshot clipped the wall behind Sanwar the instant he saw Siyah advancing. Stolid, it marched towards him, rifle pointed at his chest. He ducked and rolled behind the cover of the statue as next shot flew past him. Sanwar unslung his own rifle and fired back, but even though his aim was true, Siyah barely shuddered at the impact of the shot.

Jack gave fire as well, finding refuge behind a rock by the poolside. Siyah was wholly disinterested in

either of them though, instead moving through their gunfire straight towards the map.

“Christ almighty,” Jack swore beneath his breath. He was going to have to close in, and bring the fight into a melee.

He reached for his sword when water splashed everywhere. Erupting from the pool, came a wriggling mass. Wide-eyed, Jack flopped away as the Hydra stepped onto land, its heads a tangle of writhing eels; dark and slippery, wide-eyed and unblinking, full of needled teeth in their many sets of jaws.

Jack screamed in fright, and emptied his rifle into them.

Several heads went limp and lifeless where the bullets struck them, but the lumbering beast charged after him. Jack tossed his rifle aside, and pedaled backwards, pistol drawn and firing. A few shots hit, but some went wide, and soon he was empty again with no time to reload.

The Hydra pounded after him, webbed feet dragging its sleek, rubbery body onto the ground in relentless pursuit.

Sanwar saw the behemoth appear, yet could not help his friend, as Siyah had reached the map.

Leaping out of cover, Sanwar swung his rifle at its head. Siyah shuddered from the blow, not bothering to dodge, then returned one of its own, slamming Sanwar in the guts with the brass butt of its weapon. Sanwar dropped his gun and stumbled, but recovered in time to sidestep clumsily from Siyah's afterblow.

Instinctively, he drew *Cadarama*, and pressed the attack. Siyah parried Sanwar's incoming cut with its rifle stock lazily, and turned the blow aside. It then jammed its rifle barrel into Sanwar's stomach a second time.

The wind knocked out of him, Sanwar sank to the ground, while Siyah stepped past and plucked the map away. It walked away without another glance.

Fighting through the pain, Sanwar staggered to his feet. He hefted his sword, and called a challenge, but Siyah ignored him. It was halfway to Bakir now. The fight was over. They had lost...

Hurling from out of nowhere, the Minotaur came charging in a blind rage, horns amass with crimson gore. Head leveled, it was plowing through anything that crossed its path...including Siyah.

Siyah was flung into the air the moment the two of them connected. As if weightless, it sailed through the air. It dropped the map midair, and collided empty-handed against the far wall. The room tremored from the impact, and Siyah slid with a heavy splash into the pool.

Sanwar could breathe no sigh of relief, however, as the Minotaur now turned itself towards him. With a snort, it scraped its cloven foot against the ground, and kicked off into a charge.

Sanwar only had strength enough to duck behind the statue of Hermes. A second later, the beast smashed into it with a sickening crack, pelting shards of onyx out in all directions. Hermes swayed on his lofty pedestal.

The Minotaur meanwhile, reeled, shaking its massive head. It straightened, its burning red eyes finding their focus on Sanwar once more. The statue had saved him from the initial charge, but now it was pitiful cover as the Minotaur circled around to the other side.

There was only one hope.

Sanwar cried a silent prayer, and threw himself against the statue's legs.

Hermes teetered.

The Minotaur could not stop its momentum in time. As the creature hurtled forward, the statue came creaking down diagonally into its path, taking Sanwar with it.

There was a roar, swiftly followed by an earth-shattering crash.

Sanwar emerged from a cloud of dust a moment later. He struggled to find his feet, nearly slipping on the blood-stained stone beneath him. A pair of horns protruded from beneath the rubble, motionless. He took one sigh of relief, then drew *Cadarama* back to hand, and looked about for the map.

He soon discovered that it had fallen right into the middle of the bloody fray.

He groaned.

In fact, Jack had just tripped over it while running backwards from the Hydra, and had fallen flat onto his back. This seeming misfortune proved to be the opposite however, as several of the Hydra's heads spat out globs of viscous ichor when he stumbled. They sprayed over his head, only to hit the pirate directly behind him instead. The man screamed, and fell beside Jack, steaming flesh peeling off his face.

“Shite, shite, shite!” Jack yelled, and fumbled for *Lann Dhearg*, his only weapon left, as the Hydra closed in on him.

A dozen sets of mouths opened a dozen sets of teeth, each reaching to tear him limb from limb. Instead, they all exploded suddenly in a blast of guts and tarry gore.

A second blast dropped the massive creature dead at Jack’s feet in a river of glistening fluid.

Eleni lowered the smoking barrels of her shotgun, and hauled Jack onto to his feet.

“I thought you were supposed to be watching *my* backside!” She laughed, popping out her empty shells and reloading. “Looks like I am too busy watching yours, Scotsman!”

“Eleni, watch out!”

“*Malaka!*”

Jack's warning came too late. Eleni was plucked screaming into the air, her arms caught in the talons of the Peryton.

“Eleni!”

Without thinking, he threw himself after it.

Arms wrapped around its tail feathers, Jack too went soaring off with them towards ceiling.

The Peryton weaved this way and that, rolling in the air to try and shake him, but Jack only tightened his grasp. Hand over hand, he pulled himself along its body, inching towards its wings for a better hold.

Poor Eleni was being tossed about below. Her world was spinning, turning into blurs like it did when she had too much *raki*. This was one sensation she did not enjoy, however.

Jack found his grip around the creature's neck and grabbed ahold, securing himself with both legs and an arm. He found a seat between its wings, and the Peryton buckled, then dropped ten feet in the air

from the sudden weight. Jack was nearly thrown aside, but lashed his free hand onto its antler in time to save himself. The force of his grip dragged the creature to one side, and the three of them went banking downwards together. Eleni shrieked as the Peryton released her accidentally from its hold.

Luckily, her long fingers caught it by the ankle, though now she was dangling one handed, fifty feet above the floor.

“Scotsman!” She shouted. “Scotsman, you bastard!”

Her screams were cut off by a gunshot.

Bakir had found himself a fallen rifle, and pulled away from the carnage to take aim from a safer distance. He had lost sight of the map for now, but would take this chance to kill Eleni if could.

He fired another round. It went whizzing past Eleni’s shoulder, but tore off several pieces of her hair on the way.

Jack got his second hand around the antlers, and yanked. The Peryton bucked and brayed in protest, which was exactly what he wanted. The three of them would be a harder target if they moving too wildly, too erratically for Bakir to place a shot.

The only trouble now was that they were spinning, hurtling straight towards the pirate.

Bakir lunged aside. The Peryton went hurtling by, and would have hit the ground, had Jack not yanked its antlers again, and sent the creature flying upwards before they crashed. Once more, they were rising towards the ceiling, high above the confusion below.

“Jack! Jack!” Eleni was screaming, but this time in pure elation. “Jack! I’ve got the map! I’ve got it!”

Sure enough, Eleni somehow held the slab of stone in the crook of her dangling arm as they circled above the raging battle.

Jack gaped in utter shock at what she had done, which was more than long enough for him to drop his guard.

The Peryton screeched as Bakir's next shot struck its eye. Jack's eardrums wanted to explode from the sheer cacophony of the shot and the creature's cries, but he could not let go to cover them, for now the beast was flapping more wildly than before.

Eleni had to grab onto it with both hands to save herself from plunging to her death.

In doing so, the map went plunging down instead, and landed right at Bakir's feet.

The pirate paused for a moment, then laughed at his amazing luck. He reached to grab it, when a sword came swinging into his path. Bakir parried *Cadarama* in time with his rifle stock, as Sanwar stepped between him and the map. He tossed the gun away, and with a single fluid motion, drew his *kiliç* to meet the next attack.

He and Sanwar danced about each other, trading blow for blow, sparks flying off their weapons. Their styles matched each other perfectly; their curved blades moving in long, drawing cuts that could twist around the other's weapon, transforming a simple block into a cleverly angled thrust. Either man anticipated the other's movements, even his feints, and bound, countered, then disengaged his blade with careful symmetry.

No one could anticipate a Chimera, though.

The creature shook the sailor in its mouth to ensure its kill, flung the lifeless body aside, then gave a roar that stopped Sanwar and Bakir's duel dead in its tracks.

The two men exchanged a look, then split apart as a blaze of fire burst between them.

Sanwar rolled, then regained his feet, expecting another attack. None came. Instead, the Chimera was rearing back, and clawing at the air, as Jack, Eleni,

and the Peryton came whizzing overhead. The three of them went flying down the entrance to the cavern, and vanished in the darkness. The Chimera roared, and bounded after them, smashing into any men unlucky enough to be in its way.

Sanwar stood in disbelief for a moment, until he noticed that the map was lying just a few feet in front of him.

He rushed for it, only for a wet hand to strike him hard across the face with a heavy blow. Sanwar staggered away, shook himself steady, and turned to face this new foe.

He groaned.

Siyah had returned.

Dripping from head to toe, it gazed at him unblinking, before slamming a second punch into his face.

Its fist like stone toppled Sanwar over. *Cadarama* fell loose from his hand, and clattered away out of reach.

Siyah advanced on him, grabbing the nearest discarded rifle. It reloaded, pulled back the bolt, and made to aim at him as he lay prone.

Without thinking, Sanwar reached inside his shirt pocket, and hurled the vial of *Aqua Regia* into Siyah's face.

Even slightly empty, its effect was more than potent. Yellow smoke exploded, obscuring Siyah above the shoulders. The acid worked quickly. Seconds later, Siyah sank to its knees. It gave one last feeble swipe at Sanwar before dropping to the floor with a stiff thud.

Once the vapors dissipated, Sanwar looked upon his foe. Siyah's garments had burned away, revealing a plain, clay face beneath; featureless except for a pair

red eyes that glimmered for a moment, then faded to an empty dullness.

Sure that his opponent was dead, Sanwar glanced about for the map again. He was just in time to catch sight of Bakir swiping it into his arms, and running off back towards the entryway.

Sanwar sighed. Grabbing *Cadarama* off the floor, he gave chase once more.

They came bursting through the waterfall, out into the brilliance. The Peryton shrieked in pain. Blinded, Jack felt the world spinning. He shut his eyes. The phosphorescence went from white to black to white again, over and over, until his body shuddered from a sudden impact. He went flying from the creature's back, and hit hard stone.

Groaning, he blinked his eyes open. He was lying flat, staring at the bright blue sky. He scrambled, dazed, desperate to get his bearings.

They had flown all the way back to the hilltop, and he was now atop the main archway in full view of the columns all around him. The Peryton had smashed into the archway so deeply, that it was buried to its neck in the stone. Its body sagged from its own weight, then fell away, crashing in a gory ruin twenty feet below.

Jack peered over the side of the arch to ensure that the beast did not rise again, when a small voice called out beneath him.

“Jack...” it strained.

He looked over to where Eleni was dangling for dear life on a loose stone not two feet away.

“Captain!”

He heard the growls as he rushed to her. The Chimera was bounding up the hillside, rushing straight towards them.

Jack’s timing could not have been better, for as he wrenched Eleni over the precipice with both hands,

the Chimera came leaping through the arch. Its claws swiped inches from her feet.

She and Jack flopped back onto the stone. Jack made to regain his balance, but Eleni shoved him to the ground as a gout of fire came blasting overhead.

The Chimera roared, enraged that both attempts had failed to kill its quarry, and so leapt again, shoving its whole mass into the supporting columns.

The archway shuddered, and began to teeter.

Sanwar stumbled out of the waterfall. The roar of the Chimera from the hilltop above was enough to reignite his senses, and it could not have come a moment later.

Bakir's sword descended on him from out of nowhere, but Sanwar was fast enough to meet it. Their blades met as Bakir emerged from behind the rocks. The two exchanged a cut, then disengaged, each man pulling away to reassess their foe.

Maintaining distance, Sanwar kept his eyes on Bakir, while privately testing the ground with a gentle touch of his toes. The footing here was rocky, slick, and totally uneven. Every motion would need to be a careful one, or else he would suffer a fatal slip.

“We will find the Stone with or without you,” Bakir growled. He had the map tucked beneath one arm. In his other hand, he gave his sword a flourish. “And we only need one of you alive, truly.”

“How marvelous,” Sanwar returned. “For I do not need you alive at all. I suspect that your mother felt the same.”

That sent Bakir into a rage. His next cut came in, wild and unprofessional. Sanwar parried it easily without giving ground, then shoved Bakir’s wrist with his free hand.

The pirate splayed his legs to catch himself as he slid upon the slick stone, and instinctively threw his hand out for balance.

In doing so, the map fell away from his arms, and splashed into the shallows of the basin.

“No!” Bakir cried.

His shock had caused him to forget his guard. Sanwar exploited it with a solid chop.

The pirate rasped in pain, then staggered back, clutching at the stump that was his wrist. His hand lay bloody on the rocks, the sword still clasped within its grip.

“It’s over, Bakir,” Sanwar declared, advancing cautiously.

The pirate grinned. “They’ve all said that to me.”

Red light flashed, and suddenly a gush of water burst forth from the basin. It buffeted Sanwar’s face, causing him to recoil. Somehow, he managed to keep his balance and his guard, anticipating an attack. However, none followed. When the mist had gone away, Sanwar saw that Bakir had vanished altogether...along with his fallen hand.

There was no time to ponder, though. Roars came again from the hilltop, followed by a pair of screams.

Jack.

Eleni.

Sanwar made to run to them, then paused.

First, he checked the shallows to see if the map was still there.

The Chimera slammed into the archway. Its claws scored deep marks along the stone.

Jack and Eleni lay flat in the center of the arch. If they risked trying to stand, then they would surely be knocked over. Then again, if they continued to lay here doing nothing, the Chimera would tear the stone apart eventually, and they be equally as dead. They screamed as the beast smashed the stone again, which brought forth an audible crack.

The archway wobbled.

“Fuck this,” Eleni said, after enduring the barrage for several minutes. She made to rise with her pistol drawn.

“Eleni, no!” Jack shouted, shoving her back down.

“Scotsman!”

The Chimera slammed the arch again, and sent Jack plummeting over the side.

He went screaming twenty feet to his death...

...or what would have been his death, had Sanwar not been there to catch him in his arms.

The two untangled themselves, unharmed, but fully in a pile on top each other.

“Aw fuck,” Jack groaned.

“Thank me later,” Sanwar wheezed.

“If we live...shite!”

A hiss from the Chimera ended any further banter.

They had landed behind the beast, but its serpent tail had turned around to face them plain. It hissed again, fanned out its hood, and reared to strike.

Instinctively, Jack and Sanwar rolled apart, allowing the attack to land harmlessly between them.

The rest of the Chimera wheeled about to face them, so they took off running in opposite directions. Its three heads spewed fire after them, then tugged in three different directions, each arguing over whom to chase. The lion's head won out in the end, and went bounding off in pursuit of Jack.

He heard it pounding behind him, felt the ground shaking beneath its every stride. He weaved between the columns, dodging claws, teeth, fangs, and fire as he ducked underneath the fallen places where this massive creature could not fit.

He knew the chase would not last forever. His legs were giving out already, and yet this thing was tireless. He had to make a stand.

Circling around a column, Jack doubled back beneath the archway, so that he faced the crater that the Peryton had made. The Chimera roared, catching sight of Jack again, and changed its course, running straight towards him.

He had time enough to draw and load his pistol, and take aim.

“Eleni! Move!” He shouted, training on the archway.

She threw herself to one side as the Chimera came bounding underneath the arch.

All six of Jack’s rounds went straight into the crater, right where the stone was weakest.

The archway shattered. Its center came crashing down on top of the Chimera, burying it up to its hindquarters and crushing the serpent head under its weight.

However, the rubble spilled over quicker than Jack had anticipated, and he too found himself chest-deep in the debris just yards away from the Chimera.

Its remaining heads turned to face him.

Jack's heart sank into his guts.

A long horn swept the ground in front of him, and jammed into the rock beside his ribs. Another followed seconds later. Jack twisted to avoid it, and squirmed like mad to escape, but he was stuck fast in place. The goat's head was nearest to him, trying to gore him with its horns, while the lion pawed frantically at the rubble to free itself. He had maybe seconds before it did, before everything was over.

A horn came close to stabbing him in the neck. Jack dodged it by lying flat. The goat's head brayed, and aimed for him again, but as it drew back, it gave a horrid bleat of fear.

A massive slab of rock came slamming down on top of it, crushing the head and horns beneath with

ease. Blood seeped out from underneath the stone. The goat's neck lay still.

Jack looked round to see Eleni standing atop the crumbling remains of the archway high above him with her arms raised. She panted heavily, and dropped to her knees, her clothes torn and bloody. In a final act of exhaustion, she pulled her pistol from its holster, and hurled it through the air towards him. It landed just a few feet away as she collapsed from the effort.

His own weapon buried somewhere in the rubble, Jack strained to reach for it.

The Chimera however, turned its final head.

The lion snarled. Abandoning its dig, its claw grazed Jack's arm, drawing four thick lines of blood. It roared in triumph.

Jack ignored the pain, and grabbed the pistol anyway. Wincing, he leveled it straight at the Chimera's open jaws.

“Fuck you,” he said, and squeezed the trigger.

The gun clicked.

Empty.

“Aw fuck you!” He shouted again, this time to the gun, and hurled it the creature’s face. The lion’s head squeaked as the empty pistol smacked it in the nose. It clawed it him in response, but Jack held up his arms, pulling them just out of reach.

The Chimera snarled in contempt, then opened its mouth.

Jack’s eyes went wide, seeing sparks appear inside. Furnace winds buffeted his face. A hazy orange glow was welling deep within its maw. He could see his very death beginning right before him; swift, hideous, and painful, just as he had always imagined. He took a final breath, thankful at least, that he had at died fighting for the Stone. No one now could think of him as a coward.

Then Sanwar was at his side, pistol drawn and ready.

He fired.

The bullet traveled down the Chimera's throat.

A split second later came the explosion.

When Sanwar finally unwrapped himself from Jack's body, he was covered in blood, dirt, and chunks of organs.

The Chimera's lion head was a smoking ruin in the rubble. Surrounded by a charred circle, it smelled absolutely horrible.

"Are you alright?" Sanwar asked, eventually.

Jack blinked.

"Are you?" His friend was covered in a load of filth, after all.

Sanwar slumped back against the stone, and laughed.

“I’m bloody fine, Jack MacGregor.”

Suddenly, Jack remembered.

“The map...” He wheezed, coughing out bits of dust and lion brain. “Where’s the bloody map!?”

“You!”

Sanwar’s response was interrupted by a shout. The surviving members of the *Gorgona’s* crew were gathering around them stupefied, and who came pushing through their ranks but Eleni, her eyes ablaze with fury.

“And you!” She jammed an accusing finger at each of them. At first they thought she was going to release a tirade on them, but her expression turned from “You are the craziest men I have ever met...and I am so happy that you’re alive.”

She rushed at them, nearly knocking them both over with her embrace. Her grip was so strong that Jack struggled to breathe.

“The map...Eleni...where’s the map...?”

“Relax Scotsman! We have it.” She motioned to her crewman, who brought forth the slab of alabaster in his wet hands.

“My men said they fought off the rest of the Turks,” Eleni continued. “Then found this waiting for them in the water, all thanks to you, Sanwar.”

He touched his head to hers. “I did what I could.”

“And only Bakir has escaped,” said the sailor. “The rest are dead.”

“Perhaps he will soon join them,” Sanwar managed. “I severed his hand. He shan’t survive a wound like that much longer.”

All of this talk was too much for Jack.

“So...we’ve won? We’ve truly won?”

“Aye, Scotsman,” Eleni said with a smile. “We’ve won.”

“*Mera bhra.*” Jack touched his head to Sanwar’s.

“*Mo bhrathair.*”

“Oh, I love you both...” Jack said, and fell back, exhausted.

The others hauled him free from the debris, and all but carried him back to the ship. He was tired. He was so very tired, but today at least, Jack MacGregor had finally won.

They had won.

XII

Where Secret Treasure's Lade

Tuesday, September 5th, 1922

The Aegean Sea

The drinking went into next morning while the *Gorgona* drifted on the open sea, swaying in the wind as if it too, were partaking in the revelry. *Ouzo* and *raki* were flowing liberally, and Takis had just begun another round of “*Yialo, Yialo*” with his *bouzouki*. The crew joined in for the chorus, though they were having a hard time keeping tempo or pitch, not that either mattered to them in the slightest.

On another night, Jack might have added his voice to the drunken choir, but tonight he joined Sanwar in sobriety. Together, they had sat silently at Eleni's table for hours, transfixed upon the slab of alabaster

laid out before them. The cream colored stone was a wellspring of detail from which they could not look away. Every feature of the Levant was there to see, down to the smallest foothill.

At last, Sanwar's finger landed on a solitary peak "There."

Jack nodded gravely. The mountain lay deep within the desert, taller than the others by the looks of it, and if Agiotopos were any metric, any manner of awful things could be waiting for them there.

"Monsters, maps, and magic rocks," Eleni said for the hundreth time that night. She had been watching them for quite a while, though they had paid her little mind. "You really weren't lying, Scotsman, were you?"

"Oh, so now you believe us?" asked Jack. His tone was more playful than incredulous.

Eleni paused, poured herself another glass of *raki*, and drank before answering.

"Now, I believe you."

The cabin burst into a roar of laughter. Had Jack not known any better, he would never have suspected that three of the crew had died just hours earlier. The rest of them had injuries of one severity or another, but were all in the highest spirits and drinking like it was just another night on Delfini. Envious that he could not share the sentiment, Jack only mustered a smile at their delight.

Eleni slapped his arm. “Scotsman-”

Jack winced from the jolt of pain.

“Sorry, your bandage! I forgot.” She hiccupped, as he pulled back the sleeve to check if his upper arm was bleeding. Luckily, Sanwar had done some tidy work.

“Sorry Scotsman,” Eleni continued with a smirk. “But why do you look so sad? You should be drinking with the rest of us! And Mister Sanwar! You have not touched your orange juice!”

It was true. Eleni had squeezed it herself early in the night from fresh Smyrna oranges in their store, but Sanwar had yet to taste it.

“Oh, my humblest of apologies,” he said, taking an obligatory sip. He raised an eyebrow of genuine surprise. “That flavor is magnificent! The sweetest I have ever tasted!”

“I told you,” she grinned, tugging at Sanwar’s arm. “Now, come on! Party with us a little. We are alive are we not!? That is better than being torn to little tiny bits by snakes and lions, no?”

A gout of laughter came from across the cabin, as if to agree. The men were doing shots now, and Takis could barely keep his fingers on the strings.

“Well, I think it is in order that we discuss what will transpire next,” Sanwar posited, once the room had settled to a more reasonable volume.

“What do you mean!?” Eleni asked, her face completely flushed. “We go back to Smyrna. We give

this map to the Army. We fight the Turks, and then with the Stone, we win the war! Simple.”

Jack and Sanwar exchanged a look.

“Eleni,” Jack said, gently. “The war’s over.”

She waved a hand at him. “It’s over when I say it’s over. *Opa!*”

“*Opa!*” The men cheered back.

She joined them for a shot.

“Come on Eleni,” Jack reproved. “You said it yourself. Today, we won. We have this. This is the victory.”

She followed his finger to down to the map, and could not take her gaze away from it.

“But we do not have the Stone.”

“No, not yet,” Jack admitted. “But if we go and give it over to the Army, then we’ve lost completely. All they know is how to fight and die. What we need now is to live. You want the war to end, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“Then we have to make our own way to peace,” he said. “Take it from two fellows that’ve been fighting for a long, long time.”

“And I have been fighting all my life,” she reminded them.

“You have. But what will the rest of your life be like?”

She took pause a moment.

“You should come with us, Eleni,” Jack said.

“Yes!” Sanwar readily agreed. “Jack is right, Eleni. After we collect your crew from Smyrna, our road takes us to Syria. It would be a far less difficult route if we sailed there together.”

“And besides,” added Jack. “We would’ve never made it this far without you. You’re loyal, and more than handy in a scrap, Captain. We need you.”

Eleni sobered, and for a moment, those zircon eyes were filled with sadness as she cast them down.

“I will think about it,” she said at last. “And I will have an answer for you when we get to Smyrna. Is that fair?”

“Fair,” he and Sanwar conceded.

“Good.” She filled a pair of glasses. “So let’s enjoy tonight at least? Yes?”

Jack accepted one of them. “Aye, I can do that. Sanwar?”

“Oh, I suppose we owe ourselves a small reprieve,” he conceded, and raised his glass of orange juice to theirs. “Shall we?”

“We shall,” Jack grinned.

“*Yia mas!*” they cried, and clinked their glasses together.

Sanwar was not drunk, but the way he struggled to keep his head from falling, he might as well have been. The world was fading, and though he desperately wanted to shut his eyes, so too did he want to hear the story that Eleni was telling. She had told so many over the past few hours; some bawdy, others daring, and a few sad ones as well, though all were of the sea and thoroughly entertaining. Yet, in these small hours, even the manliest of drinkers in her crew was spread about the cabin in varying states of unconsciousness.

“...and that is why you never sell a bull in Crete,” Eleni concluded. Normally, her captive audience would have been in an uproar, but the cabin was filled only with their snoring.

“My apologies, I am afraid I missed the beginning of the joke,” Sanwar yawned.

“Ah, well, like I said, a eunuch passes by a farm where a milkmaid is squeezing her sheep. He says, ‘My dear, don’t you know that’s a ram’-”

“Oh, please do not feel obligated to start over on my behalf.”

Eleni chuckled. “Sorry, that one’s an old favorite...where’s the Scotsman?”

Sanwar looked around. “I believe he went above to...relieve himself, as it were.”

“I see,” she said, leaning her cheek on her hand. She tipped over the nearby *ouzo* bottle, but it was long empty. With a groan, she let it fall onto the floor, where it rolled about, creaking against the wood. Her gaze turned to the open porthole instead, as she stared out into the night, catching wistful beams of starlight in her eyes.

“I had a question for him...well, for both of you really,” she said.

“What is it?”

“The Stone,” her voice was soft, almost inaudible. “Can it bring the dead to life?”

Sanwar weighed his words. “In Egypt, Jack and I saw something like it. Bodies that had risen and could walk again...but that was not truly life, at least not in the way that I think you mean.” He breathed a heavy sigh. “The truth is that I do not know, Eleni. Perhaps. Maybe. No one is certain of the Stone’s full capabilities, not even those who crafted it eons ago, I suspect.”

She nodded, silently taking in his words.

“Why do you ask?”

“Just curious,” she said. “Thinking about your offer, perhaps.”

“I thought tonight you wanted only to drink.”

“And I have drunk everything!” She laughed, throwing out her arms towards the empty bottles all around. Her smile lingered, then turned into a gasp. “Your hands!” She brushed her fingers against the scars that lined the back of them. “Were you hurt today?”

“No, no,” said Sanwar, looking down at the marks he knew as well as letters. “These I received...a long time ago.”

“During the War?”

He shook his head. “Before.”

“Oh.”

They paused.

Both of them had realized that their hands were intertwined. Without another thought, their lips were intertwined as well.

The cool night air caressed Jack’s hair with a cleansing breeze. It was a welcome change from cramped heat down in Eleni’s cabin, as was a chance to relieve himself. His stream must have lasted five minutes straight, he had that much *raki* in him.

A bumping wave nearly sent him overboard, but he fumbled with the rigging, and caught himself. He

giggled, realizing he had stained his trouser leg in the process. Glancing about, and seeing that the helmsman was silently judging him, he laughed a little more. After rebuttoning himself, he washed his hands with a bucket of seawater, and stood at the bow, drinking in the night.

Warm nights like these always made him think of summers spent around the islands. Father's tutors only taught him twice a week in the few short months of July and August, but those were months well spent. They were days of boating with the fishermen, and nights of dancing in *tavernas*. Not to mention, keeping lots of secrets from his parents. They were the kinds of days, he knew even then, that Morag would have loved. If only she could have come.

Remembering it all under the waxing silver moon, Jack could not help but smile, however briefly.

He went back below. His absence was likely noted, and he was exhausted besides. They would be in Smyrna again soon, and he would need his strength.

Only God knew what would be waiting for them there when they returned. Although a dark, sinking feeling churned inside him at the thought of it, there was a shimmer of hope as well. He dared not squander it, little as it seemed. If he could convince Eleni to flee south with him and Sanwar, then there was still a hope. Small, and fragile, but something nonetheless.

Yet, he would have to wait to see what tomorrow would bring.

Snores greeted Jack as he came down the cabin steps. The crew was arranged in slovenly slumber about the room, slumming in a disarray of glasses and bottles. Eleni and Sanwar were nowhere to be seen, however.

Jack's confusion was answered by a few muffled sounds coming from Eleni's open bedroom door. He stumbled towards it, meaning to ask them what they were doing, but the words caught suddenly in his throat.

Eleni stood there with Sanwar, wrapped in his embrace, as she peeled away his shirt. Their hands explored each other. Their lips were knowing. They had fully melted into one another.

At first, Jack was frozen, then slowly, he began to step away, making sure they would not see him. He was happy for them, truly, and that happiness was better left undisturbed. He would go.

He had wiped away the tears, and had turned back to the stairs when he heard her call his name.

“Jack.”

He faced them.

Sanwar’s eyes were sympathetic. Eleni’s hand was outstretched.

“Jack,” she said again. “Stay.”

He accepted it, and she pulled him into her.

Warm lips kissed him, and gentle hands removed his clothes, while he and Sanwar undressed her from either side.

Then, when all three were laid bare before each other, Eleni shut the door.

XIII

There on Lonely Sand

When Jack awoke, he was staring down the barrel of a gun.

Lazily, he pushed it aside, and shut his eyes again.

“On your feet,” came Nikos’ gruff command.
“Get dressed.”

Jack was too tired to follow any order until he felt cold steel against his cheek, and heard a hammer clicking into place. The sudden realization jolted him awake. Now aware this was no dream, he sprang back in bed with a pounding heart and heavy breath, desperately trying to cover himself with the sheets.

Nikos stood in the center of three armed men, and was more grim-faced than usual. The old man waved his antique pistol at the piles of clothing strewn about the floor.

“Both of you. Make it quick.”

Jack roused Sanwar beside him, or at least tried. Otherwise a light sleeper, he now slept like stone, until Nikos grew tired of Jack’s attempts, and splashed some nearby water on him. Sanwar came gasping back into reality, then along with Jack, was dragged out of bed by one of Nikos’ companions.

The sailors did not look away as the two men dressed themselves. Jack plucked his shirt off the ground, and gave Nikos a tired glance.

“Looks like you’ve got the gun on us again, Niko,” Jack said, once they were decent. “I wonder if you’re really going to use it this time.”

“Quiet. Now move.”

Nikos beckoned them to follow with his pistol. The two other sailors fell in behind them, and shoved Jack and Sanwar along.

Outside, the dawn had not yet fully risen. The air was cool, the first herald of autumn, and Jack hugged himself to brace against the chill.

They had anchored on some forgotten islet, little more than a patch of sand in the Aegean with a lonely palm tree in its center.

Eleni waited for them on the shore beside the bark of a narrow cutter, watching as they came down the gangplank of the *Gorgona*. Solemn, she regarded Jack and Sanwar as Nikos brought them to a halt before her.

“Captain,” Sanwar pleaded. “What is the meaning of this?”

“I’ve made my decision, gentlemen,” she told them. “The map comes with me back to Smyrna, and the diary. But not you.”

“I do not understand.”

“These things must go to the Army,” she stated. “And must stay here. If I take you with me, you will

escape, and I can spare no men to guard you. I need every gun I can.”

“So that’s been your plan all along, has it?” Jack’s blood was boiling inside him. “To be rid of us, then steal the map for yourself?”

Eleni glowered. Her voice was acid. “It is you who steals for yourself. The map and the diary go to the Army. This is for my country. This is not for me.”

Sanwar gave out a painful sigh. “Eleni, you cannot surrender such power to them. Armies are not meant-”

“They are the only ones who can use such power,” she snapped. “If I have seen only part of what the Stone can do, then I know that this is the only way for Greece to win. Smyrna must be saved!”

Jack let out a growl. “You bloody fool! Smyrna’s going to fall-”

“Then we will take it back!”

“And start the war all over again?! It’s over, Eleni. It’s lost-”

“Do you think the war will ever be over for me!?” she snapped. “Three times my island has changed countries! Only four years have I lived in my own! In Greece! And why? Because a great war was fought. The war to end all wars. But even that was not enough. You know how long we have been fighting!? Since the day our country was born. We died for them fighting the Italians. Then, we died in their labor battalions at Gallipoli. They slaughtered us at Foça. They have slaughtered us for years! Half a million graves are filled with Greeks. Half a million, Jack, with my people! I will not rest until half a million more are filled with Turks, however many wars that takes. Only when all the enemies of Greece are dead, and my people are made one, will this war ever be over for me.”

“Then, I suppose you’ll be waiting for all eternity.”

Contempt washed across Eleni's face. "I did not expect you to understand, Scotsman. How can I trust a man without a country? You fight for no one but yourselves."

"No, Eleni," he said, hoarsely. "You don't understand. We fight for everyone but ourselves."

The Captain turned away from them. "Niko. We're finished."

"So you're going to kill us now, then?" Jack demanded.

"No, Jack," she said, weakly. "I am not killing you. I will leave what food and water I can behind. When we win the battle, I will send a boat back for you."

"Then, I suppose we'll never see you again."

She ignored the comment, and ordered her men to leave some barrels in the sand.

Nikos protested this, saying, "We can't spare any. There won't be enough left for us to get back to

Smyrna. We might not get the chance to resupply, Captain.”

She ordered that a barrel of water and some food be left for them anyway, but nothing more.

“Eleni,” Sanwar pleaded one last time. “Rethink this. I implore you. The moment is not too late. The situation can be reconciled-”

Jack shook his head. “No. She’s made her choice.”

Again, Sanwar sighed. Resolute, he straightened. “I then request that you permit Jack and I our weapons. I must have my *kirpan* with me always. Grant us this small courtesy at least, Captain; as warriors and men.”

“No.”

Sanwar’s shoulders fell. He hung his head. “So be it.”

Eleni turned, and walked away without another word back to her ships. Nikos boarded the *Gorgona*

with his three men, while she manned the cutter alone.

“I suppose last night meant nothing then?” Jack called to her.

“You were never going to change your mind,” she called back. “And neither was I. I did what I must.”

“So it was all a trick?”

“You let yourself get tricked.”

With the reef of her sails, the wind carried Eleni away. The *Gorgona* followed after.

Jack and Sanwar stood on the shores of the little island, watching as the two ships sailed towards the horizon, and vanished into the rising sun.

Jack thought that he had seen tears in the Captain's eyes as she was leaving, but maybe that was just another trick.

Once again, they were alone.

By noon, the island's shade was all but gone. They sat beneath the single palm, eyes downcast, and covered by their hands to avoid the sun. Already, they were beset by thirst. The day had turned from a calm cool morning to a scorching heatwave in mere hours, and the sweat was draining from their pores.

Eleni's water had not lasted long. Even rationing as best they could, the raging heat required they drink more of it. Worsening matters were the dried goods left to them. The food was mostly bread and salt fish, which incidentally made a man thirstier with every bite. The supplies lasted them about a day, before they converted the barrels into their makeshift latrines.

Meditation had failed Sanwar. Not once could he reach his flow, for the blaze was so intrusive. His mind had wandered elsewhere. His thoughts were fixated on his hunger and his thirst, but also her.

He had been a fool to trust Eleni. He had been a fool allowing Jack to suggest that she should join them. He had been a fool in ever asking for her help, in ever taking on this quest. Yet, he had allowed his heart to overcome his mind anyway, against all better judgement.

No one had touched him since the War.

He had other thirsts that he had not sated for so long, and when Eleni had offered to assuage them, he could not will himself to refuse. Victory, however small and fleeting, had become so intoxicating after so many defeats. The chance for other pleasures had been too.

Anger roiled in his stomach at his actions. Shame followed after. He had been selfish last night. He had known how Jack had felt about Eleni, but still Sanwar did not control himself. He had done a wicked deed, and so, cursed his name.

His hatred soon turned towards Jack instead. Sanwar hated nothing more than him in this infernal moment. He glanced over at where Jack lay, pathetic and wallowing, languishing from the heat beneath the palm tree, and he hated him. He hated him for getting them here. He hated him for ever offering him a chance to find this damn Stone.

Had there ever been a chance for them? Had there ever been a chance for a stupid little boy from Punjab to contend in the world of the white man? To think that he could ever change it?

It had always been a dream.

A stupid, silly dream.

Jack stirred, groaning from the itching heat, and the hatred fled from Sanwar's heart. Pity welled up to replace it.

It was a useless effort to hate him. It would not change their fate. For however loathsome Jack might be right now, so too was Sanwar. They shared

the same circumstances, and would share the same judgements by their Creator too.

He hung his head. No boats had come. The only land in sight was the distant haze of the Turkish coast, too far to swim. The hopes of rescue or escape were now the silliest dreams of all.

No, the best use of Sanwar's time would be to prepare his soul for death. He reckoned they would last another day or maybe two. In this September heat, the end would come swiftly.

Jack groaned again. Perhaps he was asleep to conserve his strength, but his noises were followed by another sound. Something fell, and brushed Sanwar's fingers with sand when it hit the ground.

He opened his eyes. Eleni's flask lay inches from his hand, the blinding sun glinting off its steel. It must have fallen from Jack's shirt pocket, though he was only half-awake, and had barely noticed it. His heart swelling with hope, Sanwar forgot the heat for

just an instant, and stung his fingers when he plucked it off the ground. He recoiled, but the pain had not lessened any of his elation.

Tearing away his sleeve, he wrapped his hand, and carried the flask closer to the shore. Laying it down, he began to dig a hole with his hands, far enough from where the tide came in. The task took only minutes to complete, for the hole was just a few inches deeper than the flask was tall when finished.

Then, Sanwar filled the flask with seawater and poured it in, ferrying many loads like this until the hole was partway filled. Next, he left the flask unstoppered, and jammed it into the water, packing sand and rocks around its base in order to secure it. Finally, he covered the hole with his torn sleeve and placed a pebble on top of it, one just heavy enough to crease the fabric towards the bottle's open neck. Now, it was a matter of letting the sun do its work.

With any luck, they would have freshwater by the evening. The only trouble was how long it would last.

November rain dashed against Jack's face. It was the kind of weather that would make men strong his father would have said, but Jack felt like a weakling struggling to hold his rifle.

The buck strutted into view. It wore its crown of sixteen-points with pride as it surveyed the glen. Gingerly, it grazed.

His father let out a quiet gasp of excitement beside him.

“Go on, Jack. Go on and shoot, it's yours, lad. Go on.”

Jack fought against it, but his arms trained the rifle against his will. His fingers protested, but they pulled back the bolt anyway. His eyes wanted

nothing more than to shut themselves, yet there they were staring down the iron sights.

“Go on then. Take your time. Easy, Jack. Easy.”

Jack remembered this day, and how it had gone.

At the last second, he had jerked the gun away, missing by a yard.

The shot had sent the buck running for its life, but Jack’s uncle had been aiming too, and had killed it anyway.

The three of them returned to Cairndow that night, and Jack had suffered another bout of his father’s wrath. Even now, Jack heard his voice again; the shouts blasting in his ears like a barrage of artillery shells.

“You missed! You had it in your sights, and you bloody missed!”

“I didn’t want to kill it!”

Jack heard the sound of his own weeping.

“You think that anybody wants to, Jack!?! Of course nobody wants to, but we have to! That is the way of men. We make the hard choices. We do what must be done. You think the things I’ve done were ever easy!?”

Jack saw himself now; a young boy crying in the parlor, shaking his little head in desperation. Rain was beating against the windows. Father had not yet taken off his muddy hunting boots.

“Life is pain, Jack. And if you don’t want to be in pain, then stop your crying, and understand this: Life is nothing but hard choices. It doesn’t get any easier the older that you get. No, it only gets harder from here, and you’ve got to fight every day to prove that yours is worth living. So don’t you cry and ask for mercy, because you won’t get an ounce of it. The world is full of wicked men who won’t ever give you the chance. Because they know that life is pain, Jack, and they can take it. Learn to take it too. Steel yourself. That’s a man’s way in this world. To be as

hard as metal. Ease and comfort are for the women and the children, because we've fought to make the hard decisions for them. That's why I took you out today in the cold, and the mud, and the rain. To kill a deer. Because if you can't do that, then how can you be prepared to kill a man who wants to kill you? You're thirteen years old today, Jack, and it's past time you learned that lesson."

His father had granted him that night to cry at least; his last night before manhood began.

Outside the storm had gathered, darkening the night, and the rain kept pounding down against the windows.

When the morrow came, however, it had faded to a drizzle, and the white light of early morning streamed into the room.

Jack had basked in its light. He had slept so poorly the night before, and exhaustion seeped

through every part of him, but he could find no rest today.

The old church was silent as the grave, but there was no peace to be found here.

He was a man now, albeit a younger one, and an officer dressed in kilt and sword. He sat in the pews, his pen mindlessly scrawling across the pages of his notepad. It was supposed to be for writing orders, but he was etching pictures of the Stone on it instead.

The doors swung open, their banging, creaking gait echoing throughout the empty cathedral. Jack knew the heavy steps before he heard the booming voice.

“Iain! *Ciamar a tha thu?*”

“*Hallo a Thormoid,*” Jack replied. “*Tha gu mbath.*”

“*Magairlean,*” Tormy said, sitting down beside him. The wood squeaked beneath the big man’s weight. “You look terrible.”

“No way to speak to your commanding officer.”
There was no humor in Jack’s voice, only exhaustion. “How’s the line today?”

“It’ll hold, Iain.” Tormy conceded, looking up at a broken statue to Christ. “Anyway, been looking for you,” He went on for a moment, then stopped again. “What’s that then?”

Jack shut the notepad, and stuffed it away.
“Nothing.”

“Right, well, the lads are wondering where you are...” He glanced about the burnt-out church, staring at the scarred walls and the bullet holes in the stained-glass windows. “Never took you for a God-botherer, Iain.”

“It’s the only quiet place around.”

His sergeant nodded, and was silent. For a time, Jack had only heard the gentle drizzle of the rain, and Tormy’s heavy breathing.

“Still thinking of yesterday, aren’t you?”

Jack nodded.

“Aye,” Tormy sighed. “You’ve got not to do that, Iain. Only makes it worse. Aye, only makes it worse, it does.”

“How many of our men are underage?”

The question was fired point blank, and it made Tormy pause. “In our platoon? Maybe three or four of them, I reckon.”

“A boy in the trenches yesterday...a German...he was young.” He had felt Tormod MacLeod’s eyes on him then, even though Jack never looked at them. He had just kept staring; staring straight ahead and miles away, through the rainbow of the stained-glass windows, out at the golden light of morning.

“He pissed himself when I did it,” Jack felt himself say. “He cried when I stabbed him in the guts. He was trying to surrender. I killed him anyway.”

“You can’t think like that, Jack,” Tormy cooed after a time. “Otherwise you’ll be thinking on it forever, and you’ll be no damn use to anybody.” He took a deep breath. “Don’t think on that. Think of your men. The lads need you, Jack. We’re going to the Somme in a few days. We need you. And you can’t help anyone in a state like this, now can you?”

“The men don’t need me, Tormy. They don’t even like me.”

“Now, what would make you say a thing like that?”

“Because they want to be here. I don’t.”

Tormy considered the words. “Well, none of us really wants to be here. We’re here because we’ve got to be. For King and Country, and all that.”

“Not our King. Not our Country. Not truly.”

“Aye.” Tormy could not rightfully disagree. “Suppose not. But freedom? Liberty? That’s something worth fighting for, isn’t it?”

“I bet the Germans say the same thing.”

“Maybe, but it’d be in German!” Tormy boomed with laughter, but when Jack did not share the joke, he quieted. “Well, lad,” he went on, more soberly. “I’ve fought against the Krauts, and I’ve fought against the blackamoors. All I can tell you is that they all bleed the same red blood as you and me in the end. Can’t say if they were right or wrong. Just know what my duty is. Don’t have to feel good about it. Never have in sixteen years, if I’m being honest with you.”

“Then, why do you keep on fighting, Tormy?”

His sergeant paused a moment, weighing his answer. At last, he arrived at the conclusion.

“Someone’s got to do it, Jack.”

Jack.

You’ve got to do it, Jack.

Jack.

You've got to.

The golden light of day was blinding him when he finally heard the voice.

“You’ve got to drink, Jack. Please.”

He looked down. Sanwar was holding out a flask in front of him. Eleni’s flask. That’s when the thirst set in, and the hunger, and the nausea. The sand was stinging hot beneath him, and his skin was burning. Jack moaned with itching pain, but it would not go away, and there was little shade to hide himself.

“Drink,” Sanwar urged again. “Please drink.”

“Food,” Jack bade with a dusty voice.

“There is none.”

Jack turned away. If there was no food, then there was no point. Water would only prolong their pain. They might last another day, but nothing more. Better that they did not linger. Jack was through with waiting.

Water was forced into his lips. Jack struggled at first, but Sanwar held him firm, and dipped the flask forward. Jack sputtered. The water was warm and choking, hardly kind enough to quench a thirst, but he let it run down his throat. He felt not the slightest bit better.

Then, the world went black again.

When he opened his eyes, the heat had been sapped from the air, and everything was cold. The rain was back as well, pitter-pattering above the roof of his dugout.

Tormy was long dead by now, and Danny McCrae had been sent home with half a face. The Captain was long dead too, and Jack had taken his place, mostly because there was no one left.

Last night had been *Sambain*, and he remembered it well. One man in the company had made a Jack O'Lantern from a German helmet and a flashlight, but that was it. There were no night time

tricks besides the shelling, and no ghostly masks besides their respirators.

No, it had only been a bitter night and moonless. Through it all, the wind had howled, and the rain had fallen heavy on the field. By morning, a wraith-like fog hung over the grey and lonesome morn.

There was no fear for Jack today, only exhaustion. They said the War was almost over, that the Germans were almost spent, but they had said the same at Christmas of the first year too, and every one since. No, he feared that it would never end, not truly. On and on and on again, it would go til he was dead, and even longer after that. It would start and stop and start once more, until the whole damn world devoured itself fighting what it could not win. That was what he truly feared. Jack rubbed the ring upon his finger, his hand shaking from the effort.

“Letter for you, sir.”

A skinny private handed him an envelope as he made his rounds along the trench. Jack leaned back on his stool, and tore the soggy paper open.

He read the words, then read them over.

Then came the tears.

They came pouring down Jack's cheeks to spatter on the page. He bent forward in a fit of sobbing, his head sticking out the cover of the dugout and into the rain. The ragged drizzle stained the ink, which mixed in with his tears, and made it run. Dark pools swirled around Jack's feet as the letter soaked, and crumpled in his grip. Eventually, he let it fall into the puddle, where it dissolved into a muddy cloud.

Jack straightened himself, and ceased his weeping.

He drew his pistol, and put it to his head.

Click.

Empty.

He laughed.

He laughed the hardest he had ever laughed in his life, and he hoped that every man in this trench and in the enemy's could hear him and know that he had gone mad. They called him "Mad Jack" after all. He hoped the whole world would know today just how mad "Mad Jack" truly was.

So mad, so stupid that he had forgotten to load his own pistol.

It was no matter.

He threw the gun away while the men stood watching. No one stopped him as drew his sword, and climbed over the top.

Jack let out a scream, and started running.

The mist was clearing. Ahead of him, across the broken ground, lay the rotten bodies from the last offensive, oozing with fetid blood and darkened bile. Feasting ravens cawed, and flapped away as Jack

rushed through their ranks, forcing them to leave their carrion breakfasts behind.

A shout went up behind him as he passed another rain-filled crater. It must have dawned upon the men that their officer had gone over the top all by himself. Jack paid them no heed. He was gaining. He could see the German line. The space between it and him was narrowing, and the muddy ground would not slow his charge. He even saw the Germans poking their heads out of the trench in total disbelief. Jack let out a pant of laughter. They must have been expecting an attack, but not that it would be led by just one man.

Yet, when they saw him, not a single one of them raised their guns, and that made Jack angry.

Go on, he remembered himself saying. Go on and shoot. Go on, I'm yours! Go on!

“Go on!” He screamed at them, with all the air that his lungs had left.

The bullets starting whizzing as if to answer. They were aiming wide, the cowards. They landed just in front of him, as if to send him back, but Jack kept running. There was no turning back. He would take this trench all by himself if they let him.

He would die a hero on this day, and no one would forget it.

It was not far now. He was well within range. They could not miss, but they were looking elsewhere. They had turned their gazes away at something else, something just behind him.

“Go on,” Jack begged them one last time, before he realized, too late, at what they had been watching.

The huge Sikh came crashing into Jack, as bullets slapped into the ground where he had stood.

The two of them went tumbling together, falling over one another down the side of a massive crater. They stumbled and slid, until at last, they landed,

breathless at the bottom, forty feet down into the wet, dank earth.

No, you fool, Jack tried to say, once his world had stopped spinning, but he could not form the words. All he wanted was to scream, and yet he had no breath.

The two of them were trapped; trapped inside their grave in No Man's Land, between the bombs and bullets of either side.

The tears welled in Jack's eyes. He had hoped his death would just be quick. Instead, he would suffer in thirst and in starvation. He could not help but laugh.

Even at trying to kill himself, he was a failure.

The Sikh helped him to a seated position against the slope, and brushed aside the loose dirt on his coat.

“Why?” demanded Jack. “Why would you save me?”

The Sikh looked at him with solemn tourmaline eyes.

“Wouldn’t you?”

When Jack awoke, the crimson light of dawn was cresting over the horizon. Sanwar was motionless beside him, leaned against the trunk of the palm.

It was a battle just to stand. He had only risen to piss since they had been left here, and that activity had become less and less frequent with every passing day.

He staggered over to the hole that Sanwar had dug. Salt crystals had congealed at the bottom of it, Jack saw when he removed the sleeve. The flask was about halfway full with tepid water. Hands shaking, he wrung out the damp sleeve to try and get more moisture inside the bottle.

Jack took just a sip. The drink was warm, but it gave his cracked lips a brief respite.

The rest, he brought to Sanwar. At first, his friend protested in his weariness, likely from hallucinations, but in the end he accepted. A little was left to have Jack take one last sip, but nothing more.

Soon, it would be full daylight, and then the torment would begin all over. He could not recall how long it had been since Eleni had left them, but he did know that hers had been the last ship they had seen. That had also been the last time they had eaten. It would not be long now. Perhaps today, he would go. He felt tired enough. His soul would leave this place, though maybe not his body.

But not Sanwar.

Sanwar would live. He would make sure of it.

Silently, he made this vow.

Jack crawled back to the hole, and refilled it with seawater. He scanned for food all the while, but there was nothing with which he could fish. There

were a few barnacles on the underside of rocks, but scraping them off would be hard, and their taste was so salty that eating them would likely kill them faster.

By daylight, he had returned to his spot beneath the tree. Sanwar had not moved for hours, and together the two of them shared what little shade there was.

Sleep escaped Jack, though he fought to keep his eyes shut, if only to stop himself from being blinded by the sun. He tried to play games with himself inside his head, like how far could he count before he fell asleep. The pain was too much however, and he remained awake.

Eventually, he opened his eyes. The brightness blinded him. The world was dizzying, but he caught something moved on the horizon, or at least something that Jack thought was moving. He had seen many a mirage in the desert both ways of their

journey through Egypt. He knew the sun played tricks on a man's mind if he stared long enough.

Yet, he had never *heard* a mirage before.

The foghorn snapped Jack awake. He shook himself in disbelief, but what he saw ahead of him was very real.

A ship.

A big, beautiful ship sailing not far in the distance.

Jack wanted to scream and jump for joy, but his throat was hoarse and his legs were stiff. He tried to stir Sanwar, but Sanwar would not budge, so Jack crawled across the stinging sand on his knees, waving his hands to signal.

The ship started turning away.

Jack tried to scream, but only a rasp escaped his lips. His arms flopped, but the ship kept on turning, oblivious to his suffering.

In desperation, Jack scampered back to the hole. He jammed his hand through the sleeve, and snatched out the half-filled flask. He drained the water into this mouth, so as not to waste it, then took the burning steel in both hands, and angled it towards the sun. He shut his eyes from the glinting light, and prayed.

The horn blew a second time, and a shout went out across the deck. The ship veered back around.

Eleni's flask fell away from Jack's hands. He collapsed into the sand, body aching as he rasped with laughter. He forced a ragged smile to his lips.

They were saved, he thought. Finally, it was over.

That was, until he saw whose ship was sailing towards them.

XIV

Into Trials They Head

Saturday, September 9th, 1922

The Aegean Sea

He could not tell if his eyes were open or shut, so vast was the darkness around him. Yet, the creaky rocking of the ship told Sanwar that he was still alive, as did the nausea that ensued from his wakefulness. His eyes finally adjusting, he saw that Jack lay just beside him, drawing shallow breaths.

They were locked inside an iron cell. No portholes graced them with an ounce of light, so he reckoned they were deep within the bowels of this ship. To whom did it belong, however?

He felt a presence in the shadows. Someone was standing close to them, but remained unmoving. They were watching.

Footsteps creaked upon the floor. Something clattered onto the ground at Sanwar's feet; a metal tray with bread and water on it. The stranger had dropped it in front of a small opening at the bottom of the cell, one just large enough to allow Sanwar to slide the food inside.

A voice rasped out from the dark. "*Ye. Iç.*"

Eat. Drink.

It took Sanwar a moment for his Turkish to return to him. He accepted the food with trepidation. The water was brackish, and the bread was stale, but it was at least something to sate the void inside his stomach. He stirred Jack awake, and shared it with him. They ate in silence for a time, all the while feeling that cold gaze upon them.

“You must be strong when I take you to see Suyun,” said the voice eventually. Its scraping timbre had become once more familiar. The floor creaked again, as Bakir prowled about in front of them, his form no more than a vague outline against the black. “He will have use of your talents.”

“So he wants the Stone too, does he?” Jack mocked. “Why’s it that you’ve gone from trying to kill us from wanting us alive, Bakir?”

“Oh believe me, I would not mind your death at all,” he cackled. “But the Colonel has made a breakthrough, and now he knows that you are no true friend of the Hospitallers...or Eleni, it would seem.”

Jack glowered, and Sanwar felt the sickening feelings returning to his stomach. He sipped at what was left of the water, but its stagnant taste only seemed to worsen his nausea.

“It is dangerous to trust a Raissi,” Bakir warned them. “Theirs is spoiled blood. It is written.”

“Your ilk seems little better, feckless corsair,” Sanwar returned.

The Turk seemed pleased at that remark. He crept closer, and wrapped his hands, both his hands, around the iron bars. He smiled at the apparent horror on Sanwar’s face.

“You should speak more kindly to your savior,” he grinned. “For although Suyun wants you alive, the state of your arrival is more... negotiable.”

His scraping laugh filled the icy, empty air. His footsteps creaked as he began pacing about once more, this time staying close to the cell, so that he could watch them carefully.

“You should not be so surprised, Mister Dhamija,” Bakir said, flexing the fingers of his sword hand. “Or perhaps you should be. Perhaps, you do not understand the Art as much as you may believe.”

Sanwar barely heard his words. Instead, he only stared at Bakir's hand, lively as it had ever been.

“Will you permit me to tell you a little story?” Bakir asked. Without waiting for an answer, he continued. “Good. After the Hospitallers were defeated by the Ottomans, they fled away from the Dodecanese and back to Malta forever. With them gone, these waters became the hunting ground of pirates for centuries after, for there was treasure to be found among the islands. Many captains became so rich in those days, and many captains died soon after, for there was always another man more vicious than the last waiting to take his place. And it was the most vicious one who heard tale of the greatest treasure of them all.

“One day, he had captured a tradesman sailing from the south. His hold seemed worthless at first, until he tortured the man into giving him more answers. The trader spoke of a crimson stone, an object so powerful, it could transform mere lead to

gold...and grant immortal life. The trader died quickly from his wounds, but the captain never forgot that day...nor did he cease to search for such mighty power since. Through all the bloodshed, the mutinies, and wars, he has not forgotten it.”

Bakir turned away from them, and stayed silent for a time.

“Is that Suyun’s promised price for you?” Sanwar ventured. “Life and gold and jewels without end?”

“Gold and jewels have worth only because men give it to them,” Bakir replied. “They are worthless by themselves. It is only what they can give you that matters. But violence? Power? Power is a treasure in and of itself. And the Stone is power, my dear friends. I may be a godless man, but I have seen the might of Allah in it.”

“So that is what he pays you?”

The Captain gave a mirthless laugh. “Don’t you understand the laws of Alchemy? All exchanges

must be equal. I pay Suyun in blood, and he will gift me power in his new world; more freedom to take what I please in a world that he and I will build together. When this war is won.”

“Sounds like a lousy fucking deal,” said Jack.

“You say this only because you are weak, and foolish to think that man fights for anything but power. That is all that the Stone can grant you, but again you do not understand, because you do not know the cost.”

“We have lived the cost,” said Sanwar.

“Aye, and died for it,” said Jack.

Bakir turned to face them. Slowly, he peeled back his eyepatch. When he did, the darkness of the room was filled with glowing scarlet light. A small, crystalline object was planted in the socket where the Captain’s eye should have been.

“So have I,” said Bakir.

Jack and Sanwar retreated to the back of their cell as he covered it once more.

“Such a heavy price for so small a thing.” Bakir’s smile waned. “But even one with imperfections, I could not live without. Are you prepared to pay the cost when it comes time to craft the Stone to its full perfection?”

The two of them said nothing.

Bakir dismissed them with a wave of his hand, then walked away from their cell, receding back into the darkness.

“You should get your rest, gentlemen,” came the echo of his rasping voice. “We will be in Bodrum soon to meet the Colonel. Then, he will make you understand.”

*Bodrum, Territory Held by the Turkish Nationalist
Movement*

Raucous gulls sounded their arrival. Bakir's men dragged Jack and Sanwar from out of the brig and into the blinding sun, as the ship drew into its harbor. Two stone walls defended the marina from the sea, extending from the land on either side.

Off starboard, Bodrum Castle stood. Stark walls jutted out from its peninsula in a star shape like a set of fangs. The scarlet flag with moon and star fluttered from its towers, proud sentinels overwatching the quiet harbor town beneath.

Jack shuddered. He had visited the city with his father once before. The Turks had used the castle for a prison then. He did not want to imagine what they were doing with it now, but reckoned he would soon find out.

Bakir docked in the shadow of the castle, then ordered his men ashore. They shoved Jack and Sanwar along in tow, a trio of guards assigned to each man, despite the fact that they were half-starved and their hands were bound.

The pirates led them down the wharf towards the fortress gates. As they traveled beside the length of Bakir's ship, Jack noticed deep scars about its hull; silvery gashes where the metal looked to have been welded shut. Jack shuddered in disbelief. The vessel was as battered as its Captain, and yet both stood before him, plain as day.

He and Sanwar were then taken inside the gates and through the double set of walls that formed the castle's formidable defenses. A horrid, familiar stench filled the air within. Jack stumbled, and gagged out several dry heaves, but the pirates struck his back with leather clubs, and kept him moving.

Soldiers in their cloth wrapped *kabalak* filled the castle ward. Their khaki uniforms had gone muddy brown with sweat, and their faces glistened as they worked. In teams, they staggered over to a massive pit dug beside the nearest wall, and filled in it with wheelbarrow loads of bleached white bones and shriveled bodies.

Jack's blood went searing hot at the sight of it. His stomach churned into a tempest.

“Running out of space, Major?” Bakir called out to an officer.

The man rolled his eyes, and sighed. “Running out of patience.”

There was a commotion from across the ward. Soldiers shouted, but the officer regarded their cries with nonchalance. Jack followed him with his eyes as he walked over to the source of the problem.

A frail old man had apparently escaped his bonds, and now knelt on the ground, sobbing and cradling a body in his arms. As Bakir moved his men along, Jack could see that the body was that of a younger man. The both of them were almost skeletal, but the old man clutched the corpse so fiercely that he would not relinquish it to neither the soldiers nor the flies as he wept there.

He babbled something in what sounded to Jack like Armenian, to which the officer only sighed.

“Men, you may allow this man to join his son.”

A pair of soldiers wrenched the old man to his feet. He kicked, and screamed, and struggled, but he did not have even half their strength. Together, they dragged him over to the well, and hurled him in.

Jack’s world went black.

When he could see again, the soldiers were on the sand beneath him, faces bloody, while four of Bakir’s pirates hammered at his back with clubs. Jack cried out in pain, suddenly feeling the blows, and collapsed.

Sanwar helped him to his feet as Bakir broke his men apart.

“Why are you so angry, Mister MacGregor?” He grinned. “That well was empty. We don’t waste our water here.”

Jack would have lunged at him again, had Sanwar not placed a steady hand upon his shoulder.

“We will remember, Jack,” he whispered. “We will remember.”

Jack snarled, but subsided, and hung his head.

The soldiers moved them both along once more.

They were taken to the lowest levels of the castle’s keep, down into the cold, dark tunnels where distant screams echoed along the walls. Bakir’s men confined them to wretched quarters; a cramped room with a moldy cot and only a hole in the floor to relieve themselves. Water was given to them, but nothing else, and they found no rest until the guards returned, perhaps an hour later.

These were no ordinary soldiers however, but a pair of massive men with their faces covered, save for their luminous red eyes. Alongside Bakir, they accompanied Jack and Sanwar down the long

corridor to a larger room lit with rancid yellow light. Two chairs awaited, with a third stationed across from them. The huge men, if they could be called men, placed Jack and Sanwar in their seats, and bound them to the backs with sturdy rope.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” wheezed a voice in English, though its Turkish accent was obvious. It was followed by a series of coughs, then a clatter and a scrape, as a figure emerged from the dark side of the room.

He was a small man, a whole head shorter than Jack and deathly thin at that, who wore a colonel’s uniform complete with the Army’s distinctive woolen hat. His years were written on his face in ghastly wrinkles, and his well-kept goatee was quickly turning from gray to ghostly white. As he crossed over to the chair, he held a heavy portion of his weight onto an ebon cane; steel-headed in the shape of a wolf, with onyx inset eyes. When he at last reached the chair, he used its back to hold his

balance while he pointed about the room with the tip of his cane.

“Do you know how the Hospitallers strengthened the walls of this mighty castle?” he asked. When they did not answer, he told them anyway. “This city once was called Halicarnassus. The Knights built it with stones from its Mausoleum, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Yes, it was in ruins by then, but not even Alexander would touch it when he conquered this city. A pity. All that history; the treasures of Persia, Babylon, and Egypt...gone. Who knows what other secrets we have lost? Now all that remains are some stone and a few jars of alabaster. But of course, you know the Hospitallers intimately, don’t you?”

“We’re not Cassar’s henchmen, if that’s what you’re implying.” Jack let his indignation be known. He would risk another beating, even if it meant upholding his name.

“This I know,” the old man replied, taking his seat across from them. “I know much about you Mister MacGregor, and you as well, Mister Dhamija. You both have a talent for Alchemy. No doubt Cassar saw the same potential as I. Your talents for disguising your death however, are less impressive.”

“And how would you know a thing like that?”

The old man looked upon them with disdain. “You should know who I am by now. My name is Lieutenant Colonel Suyun. I am head of Turkey’s Special Affairs. It is my solemn duty to know things, by one means or another, and I was pleased to learn that you had survived both the Great War and being thrown overboard.”

“And you will use said knowledge to coerce us into crafting for you the Philosopher’s Stone.” Sanwar’s tone was short. “But perhaps there is something else that I have missed.”

“There is, actually,” Suyun corrected. His withered fingers searched inside his breast pocket. Jack and Sanwar turned their eyes to shield them from the scarlet brilliance that he withdrew. “I know how to make the Stone, but you will help me perfect it.”

“Never,” said Jack.

Suyun shrugged. “You will.”

A mere nod from the Colonel had Bakir’s pistol jammed against Sanwar’s temple. Jack’s bonds held fast no matter how much he struggled.

“This project would be easier with two of you,” Suyun yawned. “But I am sure I could convince just you, Mister MacGregor. And if not, I will do it with neither of you. You are here, because of my mercy and my convenience, rest assured of that.”

Tears were sticking to Jack’s sweaty, dirt-stained cheeks. He grappled in himself to find the words to tell this monster off. He could not accept the offer,

nor he could refuse; and yet Sanwar somehow had his eyes shut, and his head bent in prayer, awaiting Suyun's command. Bakir only grinned at their predicament.

“I was at Gallipoli,” Suyun continued, eyeing Sanwar. “The Sikhs died there in the thousands. It was truly magnificent. Never did I think that I would have the honor to kill another...but that depends on you, Mister MacGregor.”

Tears were running down Sanwar's cheeks as well. His prayers grew louder, as if to blanket out the sound of Suyun's voice.

Jack's voice went dry. “I accept your offer, Colonel.”

“I am so glad you could be reasonable.” Another nod, and Bakir whipped the pistol back into its holster. Silently, he floated back into his place among the shadows.

Sanwar raised his head, and stopped his praying. When he opened his eyes, they were vacant, and only stared straight ahead as if they were watching something many miles away.

“The Italians held this castle until last year,” Suyun resumed. He stared down at the gleaming Stone within his hand. “When they abandoned it, I was presented with an opportunity. All those secrets, all those rumors of Alchemy I had tortured out of Hospitaller spies...confirmed. In these dungeons, I discovered what time had lost; inscriptions from the Emerald Tablet itself, which you will help me translate, for my work has thus far been incomplete.”

Jack’s blood went chill.

Sanwar only shook his head. His voice was as empty as his gaze. “So much power...so much knowledge. You would squander it all to create a weapon when the war is so near to being won.”

The Colonel returned the Stone to its place inside his jacket. “No, I would create something more than that, Mister Dhamija. You know its power. With this Stone, I could feed the hungry. Clothe the poor. Heal the sick-”

“And kill the Armenians,” Jack interrupted. “The Assyrians. The Greeks. Kill anyone you want.”

Suyun’s eyes met Jack’s, and for the first time, he saw how pale, tired, and lifeless they were.

“Yes,” the old man replied. “I would kill them. For they made my people the hungry, the poor, and the sick. They were the few who commanded the many. But it will be that way no more. The infidels in Smyrna will take their sins and vices elsewhere, or they will burn. For how can there be a Turkish people if there is no Turkish State? How can Islam flourish if it is governed by Christians? How can my people be united when this system constantly divides them? No, I have no stomach for such hypocrisy. This Stone will be our future. It is our red

apple...and Turkey will at last be for the Turks alone.”

That final remark brought Suyun to his feet again. Such exertion also brought on another a fit of coughing, however, which he stifled with his handkerchief. When it passed, he folded the bloody cloth and tucked it away inside his jacket. He then began to pace in front of them, all the while looking down.

“The Stone does not grant a single man immortality, Mister MacGregor. That was never its true purpose. But a people? It has the power to unite them, and at the same time, destroy those who would seek to eradicate and replace them. The Empire has failed to recognize that, but I know that it is inevitable. Kemal Pasha is just the beginning. Our new Republic will stretch from Austria to Algiers again. We will take back what was stolen by Greece, Britain, Italy, and France; what I have been fighting to protect since Ninety-Seven. It is written,

as sure as the blood of the Sultans runs inside my veins. *Solve et Coagula.*”

The words hung on the air as Suyun went deathly silent. The only sound was shaking of his cane, and the horrid, wheezing cough that he suppressed.

Jack was speechless for a time, but at last, the words finally came. “You’re mad. You’re bloody mad, you are. You’re fucking insane!”

Suyun stuck his cane beneath Jack’s chin, and levered up his head so that their eyes could meet.

“Silence your hypocrisy,” he commanded. “You helped Cassar so easily enough. Now you will help me. You will translate my documents eventually, but now there is something more pressing.”

Jack glared at him. “The map. The diary.”

“Yes, you will get them for me.”

“Eleni’s got them-”

“I know. That is why she left you.”

“She’s taken them to Smyrna-”

“Exactly, and that is where we go tonight.”

Terror seeped into Jack’s heart.

“No...”

“Yes, and you will show me exactly where she is hiding.”

Suyun nodded to his silent guardians. Jack did not even attempt to resist as they untied him and Sanwar, and hauled them to their feet. As they shoved them away, Suyun’s haggard voice called out, echoing along the walls.

“Do not be so surprised, Mister MacGregor. You knew it was inevitable, and as I told you...they will burn.”

Within the hour, the motorcade had departed from the castle. Jack and Sanwar were thrown into the backseat of Suyun’s car, which led the

procession. A dozen of Bakir's men and a full company of soldiers piled into the trucks following behind them.

By nightfall they had left Bodrum far behind, and had neared the city from the south road, traveling through the miles of rugged foothills. As they crested over the final ridge, Jack was stricken by the horror below.

Smyrna was ablaze.

XV

Lost Upon the Wave

Saturday, September 9th, 1922

Smyrna

Smoke clouds slathered the night sky. Flames of gold and red licked the waxing moon, whose silvery-white orb gazed down upon the carnage with dispassion.

Jack bore witness to the scene as Suyun's motorcade came down the waterfront. The markets, restaurants, the offices, the businesses were little more than tinder on the pyre. Café windows lay in shattered pieces beside the bodies and the pools of blood. Soldiers streamed through the open streets, marching stolidly to storefronts and smashing them at their officers' command. Refugees overflowed the

marina; a great mass of men, women, and children screaming, and crying out as the Greek quarter burned.

The motorcade turned down a corner to avoid their swell. This change in course brought them to a major street where a group of soldiers were siphoning their car's gasoline to set fire to a church. A priest was cursing them until they shot him dead, and the crowd of his parishioners behind him broke and ran. The soldiers paid them no heed, and continued their work while the cavalry came riding past. Bathed in pale moonlight, they brought their sabers scything down on those that fled. Their horses trampled over the body of a child, turning the flower that she held to dust beneath their hooves.

For the first time, Jack saw Suyun smile.

He sank into his seat. He no longer had the strength for anger, and he no longer had any tears left in him. All that remained was pain that snaked through every fiber of his being, a pain he had once

hoped was forever lost to him. Sanwar said nothing. He kept his eyes forward, and his expression had remained blank since Suyun's cell. That brought an almighty fear to Jack's heart.

Their cars pulled over to the edges of the Turkish quarter, where a table had been set in the middle of the street. A general sat there, surrounded by his staff. No lamps had to be lit, for the distant blaze was light enough for the man to read his maps.

Suyun's driver parked beside it, and opened the door for his commanding officer. The two of them approached the nearby table while the massive guards remained inside the car, their red eyes fixed on Jack and Sanwar, unblinking. Jack stayed frozen in his seat, but kept his ears open to listen in on the Colonel's conversation.

"Colonel Suyun! The Pasha was not expecting you," came the General's address. He spoke in overly dignified tones.

“I came as soon as I had heard,” Suyun rasped in reply. “I have good news for our Pasha. Two prizes won. My operations will be progressing soon. I will have results.”

“Comforting to hear. Perhaps, I can relay that message-”

“Later. I will tell Kemal myself. But first, I understand that there is continued resistance from the Greeks. Tell me.”

“There is some,” the General replied, his tone somewhat less than dignified now. “We have had skirmishes with irregulars near Foça since we captured the city yesterday. The Greek Army has long since abandoned their post. These peasant troops won’t be much trouble.”

Jack’s heart sank.

Eleni was still here. She had to be.

“Then I request support for my own forces,” Suyun declared. “Another company should suffice. I

will engage these irregulars, and finish the task for you.”

“Denied,” the General put flatly. “You are not here under orders. We cannot divert resources from our current operation.”

Suyun turned to where a group of soldiers was having their way with a woman they had captured. A sergeant reprimanded them when she cried out that she was Turkish and not Greek. The men released her, then went off searching for another quarry to torment.

“Yes,” The Colonel said, acid dripping in his voice. “Clearly your men are performing important duties here in Smyrna. I will let Kemal know of your personal conduct when I return, General.”

With that, he and his man showed the table their backs, and returned to the car. Suyun turned in his seat to face Jack.

“Eleni has hidden her ship somewhere, I know it,” he said. “You will tell me where it is, and you will take me there.”

Jack hesitated.

“Do not test my mettle tonight, Mister MacGregor.”

“There’s a hidden cave near Foça.” Jack hated the words as they escaped his lips. “She has the *Karkinos* docked there.”

“Good. Now show me.”

The motorcade turned north, back through the flaming city, and all the while, Jack hung his head and did as he was ordered.

They parked upon the ridgeline that overlooked the placid beach below, right where Mavros had his caravan just a week before. Distant gunfire split the night, muffled cracks and little muzzle flashes

interrupting its serenity. Suyun exited the car, and took a breath of the clean night air.

“Yes, I remember this place,” he said, surveying the land and the calm tide washing in. He pointed to the cave mouth waiting just down the shore.

“There.”

Bakir and the others piled out of the truck. Pirates and soldiers alike lined the ridge with rifles focused. Suyun’s guards yanked Jack and Sanwar over to their Colonel’s side.

“You will go down there, MacGregor,” Suyun commanded. “You will call for Eleni, and draw her out.”

“Alone?”

“Alone.”

“Will you free my bonds at least?” Jack extended his hands. “Please, it’s steep. I need to keep my balance.”

Suyun considered the request, then nodded to his driver, who untied Jack's wrists.

"No tricks now, MacGregor," Bakir reminded him by putting his pistol to Sanwar's head.

Jack gave one last look to Sanwar.

He met his gaze, and nodded.

"Go and call the Captain," Suyun urged again. "I'm waiting."

Jack rubbed his blistered wrists, then made his descent.

The going was treacherous, even with the full moonlight. Jack's footing was steady, but he used this as an excuse to stumble, just for a moment. While feigning his rebalance, he slipped a jagged rock into his pocket, and carried on.

The beach glowed pearly white. Tranquil waters shone like diamond, and silver stars glimmered in the sky above. It felt so strange, nigh unnatural, for

Jack to break the peace with the clangor of his voice.

“Eleni!” He called out into the empty air as loud as he could. He needed to make certain that Suyun could hear him. “Eleni!”

Her name he repeated for a time, until a small voice called back from across the beach.

“Jack?”

He whipped his head to face the sound. A set of dark figures was emerging from the cave, stepping out from the behind the rocks. As they drew nearer, he caught sight of her dark hair and the gold fringe of her captain’s hat.

“Jack!?! Is that you!?” She called his name again.

She and a half a dozen men were running to him now.

Jack could hardly bear it any longer. As she came close, he realized his mistake. He threw out his arms, and screamed to her.

“No! Don’t! It’s a trap-”

His cries were cut short by rapid gunfire.

When the spray had ceased, the bodies lay in tatters on the sand. Tears streaming down his face, Jack pounded over to her, and clutched her body in his arms.

Gently, he wiped the blood from her honey-colored hair.

“Kyriaki...” he sobbed. “I’m so sorry...”

“S-sister...?” She had no other words for him, only gasps of air and gulps of blood. Jack cradled her until Suyun and some of the others came down to join him.

They crowded around him to regard the bodies. Bakir examined each of them with his one good eye.

“It is not the Captain,” he proclaimed. “This one is her sister.”

“Disappointing,” Suyun said with disgust.

Bakir ended Kyriaki with his pistol, then reholstered it, as she fell lifeless from Jack's arms. Gore splattered across Jack's face. Sanwar was dragged over while he stared down at his blood-stained hands.

“We said no tricks, MacGregor,” Bakir growled, shoving Sanwar to his knees in front of him. “But you called out a warning to her. Now he must die.”

Suyun stayed him with the raise of his hand. “Perhaps just a piece of him, Bakir. We have not yet found Captain Raissi. I think that will be enough to tell Mister MacGregor not to disappoint me ever again.”

Bakir nodded, and drew his *kiliç*. “Then I will give you the choice of the cut. What will it be, Jack? His hand or maybe his balls?” He brought the tip to Sanwar's cheek “Or maybe an eye?”

Jack was spared the answer by the sudden, deafening explosion.

A ball of fire burst forth from the ridge. One of the trucks upon the ridge had been turned into a blazing rage of flames and melting metal.

A second explosion followed, then another, and another as all the other cars took light as well.

Gunfire sparkled along the hills. The soldiers who had remained on the ridge above ran in terror, falling from either bullets or the sharp terrain as they raced down towards the beach.

“Cover!” Suyun snapped. His men broke for the meager safety of some nearby rocks.

It was all the time Jack needed. He pulled his rock into hand, and hurled it into the face of the nearest soldier, then pounced on him. The two struggled in the sand, fighting for his rifle.

Sanwar had already seized his initiative. The initial surprise had caught Bakir off guard, an ample opportunity for Sanwar to jam his head into the pirate’s midriff. The captain shuddered from the

blow, and had no time to recover as Sanwar toppled him. They rolled into the tide, and thrashed about.

Bakir's hands were unbound, so he was able to bite, and punch, and claw himself free. The two men came apart. Quickly, Bakir reclaimed his blade from where it had fallen the ground.

“Now I will cut off more than just your hand,” he spat, giving the weapon a twirl.

He would have stepped into measure, and struck his opponent down, had Sanwar not leveled a pistol at him.

Bakir grasped at his empty holster, then stared back at the long barrel of the Luger right in front of him.

“I hope you rot with me in Hell,” he cursed, lowering his sword.

“It is written,” Sanwar said, and fired.

There was a flash of crimson light. Bakir fell straight back, blood leaking from his eyepatch.

Sanwar rushed to the fallen sword, and sliced away his bonds. The other Turks were too occupied with the firefight to care.

“Sanwar!”

Jack knelt over a body, rifle in one hand, a bloody rock in the other. He tossed Sanwar the gun. Sanwar tossed him back the pistol. The two of them lay flat in the sand, Sanwar with the rifle trained, and Jack with a brace of pistols drawn.

The scene was utter chaos. All around them bullets flew. Suyun was cowering behind his guards while they stood out from cover, absorbing bullets without a qualm, and returned fire of their own.

The Colonel saw them lying on the beach, and screamed an order, which turned the two massive automatons towards Jack and Sanwar. Their new targets found, they traded fire, though not even rifle rounds would make these giants flinch.

The men saved their fire, and rolled into the tide, where the water cushioned the bullets to a halt.

“Watch the flanks!” A soldier shouted.

From the side came a new threat; Greek sailors who had snuck around during the exchange. With nothing but clear shots, they unloaded into the Turks’ exposed right side.

Jack watched Suyun hobble away while men were mowed down around him, and the Greeks overwhelmed the position.

An old man stepped through the gunsmoke. A muzzle flare revealed the dour face of Nikos, a grenade held mighty in his hand.

“I saved this one for you, Suyun!” He snarled, then lobbed it as the Colonel tried to run. “A gift from the Raissi family!”

The grenade would have surely killed Suyun, had not one of his giant guardians stepped in the way to intercept it. The creature bore the full brunt of the

explosion, and crumbled in a smoking ruin. As it fell, its mate stepped out, and trained a gun on Nikos, yet it too was stricken down by a double blast of shotgun shells to the face.

Jack and Sanwar emerged from the water as Eleni tossed aside her empty weapon. She watched as her men finished off the last of the fleeing Turks, either with bullets or by drowning them in the surf, then walked past Jack without an ounce of recognition.

Suyun just kept running.

Eleni crossed to where Kyriaki lay.

She looked upon on her fallen sister, and drew her pistol.

Suyun turned.

He dropped his cane, and fumbled to draw his Luger when the first bullet hit him.

From down the beach, he whimpered, and nearly collapsed.

He was halfway to the ground, as Eleni's second shot took out his other leg.

The Colonel dropped, and rolled into the tide.

The Captain strode over to him. He tried to rise, so she pressed her boot into his chest.

He coughed out blood, and laughed. "Go on, Eleni. Finish it."

"No, you will not be given the mercy of a quick death," she told him. "We will wait until the tide comes in."

His expression changed to horror.

Dark waters were gathering around him. Fingers straining, Suyun babbled something incoherent, and clawed at his breast pocket. The others formed a circle around their captain, watching.

She pressed down harder, shoving Suyun underwater.

He wriggled underneath her, gasping for air.

The third and final shot ended all his struggle.

Eleni tore a vicious look at who had fired.

Jack threw down his smoking pistol, and met her gaze.

“Eleni. It’s over.”

She glared at him, then down at the gory sludge that was Suyun’s face, then droppeed to her knees, and filled the night with her screams.

Jack and Sanwar could not bear to look at her.

Instead, they watched the sea, for they saw a tiny shimmer of scarlet light had drifted out of Suyun’s withered hand. It lingered for just a moment on the waves, before it was swept away in the bloody tide.

XVI

When the Shadows Fade

Wednesday, September 13th, 1922

Delfini, Kingdom of Greece

They had sailed from Smyrna, leaving it to burn. Jack had watched from the top deck while the fires raged through night and into the dawn. Even when the city was leagues behind them, he could see the smoke still rising towards the sky.

Eleni had not uttered a word to either him or Sanwar the whole way back, a trend she had maintained unto this very morning. She stood stone silent, facing the sea as the priest gave the last rites.

“Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust’, these are the common words,” he called above the wind in a high voice. Rather than a pulpit, he spoke from the

quarter deck of the *Karkinos* before his congregation; the sailors and villagers of Delfini who crowded the narrow waist. “Yet, Kyriaki and our brave men were no common souls, so rather than send them back to the ashes and the dust of land, let us send them back to the first of God’s creations on this Earth; the Sea. Amen.”

The word was uttered throughout the deck.

Crewmen brought each casket to the starboard side. Of the near one hundred men in Eleni’s crew that had left Delfini just weeks ago, sixteen had lost their lives. Dozens more were injured, Nikos included. He leaned on his cane while the younger men shoved the weighted coffins overboard one at a time. A ricochet of rock had struck his calf during that night on the beach, yet against Jack’s expectations, his bitterness had vanished. He even looked to Jack with sympathy from across the crowd, tears filling his eyes as the fallen were laid to rest.

Kyriaki was buried last of all, her casket shrouded in the blue & white stripes of Greece's flag. Her sister did not break her stoicism as the men brought it towards the gunwales. As it slid towards the edge, Eleni touched the casket, and whispered something too soft to hear, but nothing more. With a final shove, they sent it over the side, where it crashed into the waves below, and vanished.

A line of sailors fired off a rifle salute, and the ship went silent. Their shots echoed across the harbor for minutes after.

Jack wiped away a single tear. Even for as many funerals as he had seen, he still struggled to cry.

Thursday, September 14th, 1922

Sequestered behind the villa in a shady grove, was a hidden section of Eleni's garden. Poppies grew there, red petals blooming around a shrine that the

Raissis had built beneath an olive tree long, long ago. It was of plain stone with a simple cross chiseled on its top, and it had engraved the names of many generations past. Nikos had added Kyriaki's name there himself, alongside the others.

She was placed beneath her brother Antonis, whose epitaph read 1894-1915. Her parents, Iannis and Anna, had died the year before. Her eldest brother, Spyros, just two years before them.

Jack had come this afternoon to read each name in order. There were so many that he wondered if even Eleni knew anything about them all. He dared not ask, however. Their welcome was thin enough already. He was surprised that Eleni had taken them back to the island at all after Smyrna.

A cool wind blew, shaking the olive boughs. It was as if Auster was giving him a strong reminder that he could not linger. Soon, the autumn storms would hit the sea, and travel would become more treacherous. Jack knew little in this world, he could

admit, but he knew when it was time to leave. Besides, he and Sanwar had other matters waiting for them. The Stone was calling him, and the desert with it. He had best be getting on. So he finished paying his respects, then plucked a poppy from the patch, and laid it atop the shrine.

He turned to go.

“What are you doing?” a voice accosted him.

Jack nearly jumped. Eleni had appeared from out of nowhere, hands braced against her hips, blue eyes weighing and assessing his every movement.

“Came to say my peace,” he told her, crossing his arms.

She closed the distance with him. “Who told you where this is?”

“Nikos.”

Her eyes narrowed in at him. “You do not deserve to be here. You killed her, Scotsman.”

“Suyun killed her.”

“But who led him to her!?” Eleni shrieked. Her sudden jolt in volume sent Jack’s heart racing, but he kept his wits about him, even as she jammed a long, accusing finger at him. “You.”

Jack’s tone was steady. “I had no choice.”

“Liar! You told Suyun where we were-”

“And you got him, didn’t you?” His attempts at patience failed him for a moment, and he snapped. Still, the surprising shift in tone gave Eleni pause long enough for him to catch his breath. He started again, more quietly. “He’s gone, Eleni, and Bakir too.”

“I don’t care! You let them kill my sister-”

“Jesus Christ,” he sighed. “Why would we help the Turks, and then betray them, unless there was no other choice?”

“Because you fight only for yourself!” She cried, tears seeping down her face. “Greeks, Turks,

Hospitallers, it doesn't matter to you! As long as you and Sanwar get what you want!"

"They had a gun to Sanwar's head," Jack said. "I suspect that if Kyriaki had one to hers, you would have done the same, Captain."

"No," she replied. "No, I would have died like a man, instead of living like a coward."

The warmth fled from Jack's blood.

"Then I would be burying you and your sister both right now." He spoke each word with icy diction, and let them hang frigid on the air before turning to walk away.

"I will die with honor, Scotsman," she called after him. "Fighting for my country. How will you die?" She drew herself back, and wiped away her tears.

Jack looked back to face her.

"That I don't know," he said. "But I do know how I'll live. Never will I betray somebody's trust when it is given to me, nor will I use them, and

pretend it's for anything but my own means. And I'll never fight with somebody like you again."

Eleni quivered. She could not stop the tears.

Jack only looked at with faded gaze. He had no pity for her anymore. He was too tired for that.

"Good-bye, Eleni."

With that, he walked away, and left her there to weep.

He spent the rest of the day on the beach alone. No one had wanted to speak to him, and he had nothing to say to them besides.

Only Sanwar was welcome to join him, and he found Jack sitting in the sand as dusk was settling.

"I understand that Eleni finally spoke to you," he said, taking a seat beside him. The two of them watched the sun go down.

“Spoke, did she? Accuse, more like,” said Jack.
“Did she say anything at all to you?”

“She tried,” Sanwar admitted. “But I have naught to say to her anymore.”

Jack nodded, and said no more.

They slept on the beach that night, side by side in the sand, staring at the stars.

In the early morning, they made their way back uphill. The villa slept, and only Nikos was already awake, washing his face in the garden’s fountain. He wiped his face and beard dry with a sleeve when he saw the two men approach.

“*Kali mera*,” He greeted. The old man gathered his cane from where it leaned against the fountain, and staggered over. “You slept down on the beach, yes? Eleni was looking for you.”

“She found us yesterday,” Jack assured him.

“No, no,” said Nikos. “She wanted to apologize. For what she said.”

“Very well,” Sanwar replied. “We are willing to listen.”

Nikos hesitated. “The Captain...has much pride. She told me she was sorry, but she...she cannot say these things herself, so I must say them for her. You understand, yes?”

“Indeed,” said Sanwar. “We understand, and we do not accept.”

The old man nodded.

“Still,” he said. “She wants to give you something. Will you come with me at least?”

To this, they did accept, and followed Nikos back inside. It was a strange and awkward thing for them to behold, witnessing the old sailor move so stiltedly where before he had sported a proud gait. He had been a bull of man, but now he was not taking to his new cane, and stumbled about Eleni’s parlor, desperately searching for this apparent gift.

Eventually, he found the items, and laid them out onto the fine glass coffee table.

The map, the diary, and their swords were waiting for them.

These, Jack and Sanwar accepted as well.

“We agreed that these should be returned,” Nikos said as they gathered their effects. “And the Captain admits that it was the right thing to take you back from Smyrna.”

“And does she admit that you shouldn’t have betrayed us?” The question was a hostile one, but Jack asked it plainly enough, without a hint of passion.

Nikos nodded. “Yes, and she wants- er, I convinced her to help you, one last time. If you wish.”

He and Sanwar agreed.

“I know a man on Cyprus,” Nikos explained. “A smuggler. I can take you there, and he can sneak you

off with no questions, no trouble with the Customs Office. We will leave today, yes?”

“Aye,” said Jack. “Can we leave right now?”

Thursday, September 21st, 1922

Larnaca, British Protectorate of Cyprus

Night was falling by the time the ship had gotten underway, and the island of Cyprus was a mere splotch on the horizon. It could not have been more than eight or so when it was fully dark. The days were swiftly getting shorter, Jack noted. At least here in the south, they would be more forgiving than Scotland. Highland winters were sordid things, with only six wee hours of light a day in the darkest months. He hoped that a Levantine autumn would be kinder.

These were the thoughts that swirled about inside Jack’s head as he leaned against the gunwales,

watching the quiet sea. Though the ship chugged steadily along, the main seemed not to move at all. Each mile of the wine dark waves looked exactly as the next. It was the perfect place for a mind to wander, which was why when Sanwar spoke at last, Jack felt as if he had woken a dream.

“No one has touched me since the War,” he said. “Save her.”

“Before the War for me...I’m sorry, Sanwar.”

“It was not your fault at all.” His friend shrugged. He leaned upon the gunwales to rest his mighty frame. He had been standing with perfect posture there for some time, but now he pressed down on his hands to hold his weight.

“But I bloody let her trick me,” Jack said bitterly. “And that was my own damn fault.”

Sanwar shook his head. “No. No, she lied. The wrong is hers.”

“Aye, well...we still failed. Lies or not.”

“We could not have saved Smyrna either, Jack.”

“Wasn’t even talking about that,” he said. “I was thinking about the Tablet. Even after all this shite, Saxon’s still out there with it.”

“Yes, he may be, but we have the map. We have direction-”

“And Saxon’s walking around with the power of God. Once he figures out how to use it, he could destroy the whole damn world.”

“As I can see,” said Sanwar. “The world is still here today, therefore he has not learned its secrets yet. That would mean we still have time.”

“Some.” Jack glanced down at the swishing waves. “The world may be here today, but it doesn’t look much different than it was the day before. Sure, a few wicked men are dead, but there’ll be far worse men to replace them tomorrow. We know how it goes. How it’s always gone...so tell me, what’s changed? Really.”

“Ourselves” said Sanwar.

Jack paused.

“The world will only change if we do,” Sanwar continued. “And you cannot change if you are dead. The world needs you, Jack.”

“Does it?” That seemed hard to believe, after the little that he had ever amounted to.

Yet Sanwar looked at him with starlight shining in his tourmaline eyes, and all those thoughts were calmed.

“I need you, Jack.”

Jack nodded, and wiped back the tears.

“Mera bhra.”

“Mo bhràthair.”

They pressed their heads together, and Jack kissed Sanwar’s brow. “I love you, Sanwar.”

“I love you, Jack...Are you coming below or will you be a while?”

“I’ll be awhile.”

Sanwar nodded, and gave a last embrace before going below. Long after he had gone however, Jack sat thinking of him, letting his mind drift back to years ago; back to days that he had all but forgotten...

Monday, November 11th, 1918

Flanders, Belgium

On the foggy morn, in the muddy fields of Flanders, Jack awoke. He unfurled himself from Sanwar’s side, careful not to disturb him. He covered him again in the trenchcoat they shared for a blanket, then reached over to their canteen, half-buried in the mud. Thankfully, it was near to full since it had rained all through the night, though that had swelled the waters below them another foot

higher, and had left Jack and Sanwar itchy, cold, damp, and coated in the muck.

Jack took a drink. One small sip brought stabs of pain to his stomach. What little food they had shared ran out days ago. Yet, his thirst insisted stronger than the pain, and so he drank, then nursed a small amount down Sanwar's throat.

It was pitiful to see him like this. He was a huge man, stronger than Jack by half, but days in this bombed out crater had made him worn and haggard. Jack guessed his own appearance wasn't much better, though the water in this ditch was too murky for him to see his own reflection.

He was spared of that pitiful sight at least, but that of Sanwar, he could not bear. It was shameful, knowing their circumstance was all his doing, and what was worse; it could not be undone. He had felt this way the first day down here, yet his company had been quick to decry it when Jack had voiced these feelings.

“Preposterous!” Sanwar had said. “I have risked myself with the intention of saving you, and now I shall see you out of this alive.”

“Bollocks! Why’d you even risk your arse for me in the bloody first place!?”

“Is there a prerequisite for wanting to help one’s fellow man, or will plain humanity suffice?”

“You’re just going to die here with me,” Jack had huffed at him, but Sanwar had none of it.

“I will see you through this,” he had vowed. “And that is final.”

There was no more arguing to be had after that. As the hours wore on, they grew deathly silent to save their strength. Sanwar scanned the crest, waiting for an opening when they could flee.

Yet, the chances had been few. Ragged gunfire continued throughout the day, sporadic, but never fully ceasing. At night, No Man’s Land became alight with bombs and shells, cutting off hopes of

escaping under the cover of darkness. It had rained the whole time besides; sometimes drizzling, sometimes a downpour, yet always miserable. After days of wasted hopes, Sanwar had finally slumped into despondency. Not even someone as stout as he could last so long.

“Jack?” he had asked. It had been the first word said in days.

“Aye?”

“Should I not leave this place alive-”

“You will-”

“Should I not,” Sanwar had gone on, ignoring him. “Then there is something that I must ask of you. Something that you must find.”

“Anything.”

Jack would never forget the way his friend had looked at him. “The Philosopher’s Stone.”

“How do you know about that?”

Sanwar gave a wane smile. “When I was a boy...I had a dream. At first, I was alone in darkness. I could hear water dripping somewhere far away. I heard a voice as well...a man who spoke my name. I could see him, but not his face. He sat beside a pool, where he offered me a cup. I drank of it...but the water tasted like blood. He then held out a sword in one hand...and in the other, a book. He gave them both to me, before he vanished.

“Then, I found myself in the desert, walking towards a distant tower that reached the sky. There were voices on the wild wind, calling me...calling my name. My ancestors. Around me, were the bones of men long dead...their swords rusting in the waste. Suddenly, I came to a passage leading underground. Something warned me not to go inside, but I went anyway.

“I had the sword in my hand somehow, hot as flame and bright as moonlight. A great serpent waited for me there, resting on a nest of golden

treasure. It had one head that split into two, then three. I struck them down...each of them, and from each head sprang forth a figure.

“There was a king in scarlet from the right...a queen in ermine from the left. Between them was a child dressed in gold...they held something in their hands...a mighty stone, glowing red and beating like a heart. Then I saw myself, staring back at it, but it was no longer I...not truly...just a shadow of a man...and then I awoke. The next day, I found my book on Alchemy, and I have been searching for the answers ever since.”

“I’ve had this same dream before,” Jack said at long last. “That was the Stone you saw.”

They were quiet for a time, until Sanwar spoke again. “I wonder what it means.”

“Wish I knew,” said Jack. “But something tells me you need to get out of here alive so that you can find out.”

“We will find out together,” Sanwar promised.

“Aye then, we will,” Jack agreed, for he had no strength in him to argue with the man.

Afterwards, they slipped back into silence once more. The conversation had been welcome, a distraction from the hunger for a while, even if it did not last. Jack was certain they would starve. He cursed his own stupidity, not having checked his pistol first in trenches. Had it been loaded, he would not have gotten this poor man to risk his life for him. He would have been dead. He would have died a coward’s death, and his family would have been disgraced, but none of that would matter to a dead man anymore, now would it? It would have been simpler that way, but Sanwar...he could not allow a man so brave to die for such a craven fool as he.

The thought occurred to him, however, that there was a pistol on Sanwar’s belt. It felt like a betrayal at first, to reach for it, but Jack became assured when his stomach rumbled. He had vowed

to see Sanwar live. Should he find food somehow, there would now be fewer mouths to feed. He would alleviate this man of the burden that was called Mad Jack MacGregor.

A noise from above snapped Jack into alertness. He fumbled with his cold, cracked hands to pull the pistol free from Sanwar's belt. He aimed it just in time as a figure appeared at the crater's edge.

Jack pulled back the hammer with a heavy click.

The man put up his hands. "*Ich habe keine Waffe! Erschießen mich nicht! Bitte!*"

Jack lowered the gun, seeing that indeed, this soldier carried no rifle, nor pistol on his belt; not even a knife. No, he looked to be a weary youth, perhaps no more than twenty, with big dull-eyes that peered down at him from beneath his *stahlhelm*.

"What do you want...?" he called back hesitantly, struggling to remember his German.

"The War is over. You can come out now."

“Bollocks.”

“No, truly!” The man insisted. “It is over. My country just surrendered. They’re signing the armistice agreement this very moment.”

“Jesus Christ...Sanwar...Sanwar...”

Frantically, Jack began to shake Sanwar back awake. The big man let out a groan, from both being half-asleep and half-alive.

“Yes, get him awake,” the German encouraged. “Then, you and your friend can get some coffee. *Gut, yes?*”

Jack wanted to cry. “*Ja, ja, sehr gut...*”

The man threw down a rope, and brought them back to the German trench. Jack had never been so grateful for rationed coffee in his life. It looked like shit, but it tasted like heaven. He and Sanwar cradled the hot tins like they were gold, and sat beneath the dugout on lofty thrones of empty supply crates as their clothes dried by the fire. The

Germans made for them a veritable feast of hard bread, wrinkled sausage, and brackish water of the finest vintage; all of which the two took happily amidst the sea of conversation between the laughing soldiers, sucking them down despite the ache it caused their stomachs.

Their rescuer, they learned, was named Wasserman and was the platoon sergeant. He had been acting commander for over a month now, since the battalion had not yet replaced their last lieutenant. He was a cheery youth from Gütenbach in Baden-Württemberg, who hushed his men with easy confidence as the radioman begged everyone for silence.

“They’ve finished signing...” the man relayed back, pressing his ear in closer to the machine. “The agreement is in force...effective...forty minutes ago.”

“Get your ears checked, Schwarz,” joked one of the men.

“No, I’m serious! We’ve been out of the war for almost an hour.”

“*Scheiße*...It’s not even noon.”

“Early enough for me. Still got those schnapps, Sarge?”

“Not enough for how you drink, Schwarz.”

The dugout burst into commotion. That was exactly when Jack fell dead asleep in Sanwar’s lap.

By afternoon, the men were out of the trenches, smoking burnt out roaches, and playing football with each other. The fog still hung about, but joyful voices could be heard ringing out on down the line. Once they had been fed and rested a little more, Wasserman escorted Jack and Sanwar out of the trenches, where the other men were at their play.

“Well, I think that we must get you back to your side,” he said, taking off his helmet, and running his

hands through a shock of golden hair. “I can accompany you across.”

Jack translated the message back to Sanwar. The two men exchanged a look.

“We’re not going back,” Jack said at length.

Wasserman’s puzzlement washed over him. “You do not wish to return home?”

Jack glanced back at the fog. “Nothing left to return to.”

The soldier paused a long moment, but nodded eventually. “I understand...then it was a shame that two brave British soldiers died in that crater over there,” he said, pointing at where he had found them. Wasserman offered them his hand.

“Gentlemen. It was a pleasure. Too brief, but a pleasure all the same.”

Jack and Sanwar both rejected the handshake, and hugged him together instead.

“Good luck,” said Wasserman when they released him. “I wish there was more that I could do for you.”

Sanwar asked Jack to translate something.

“There is actually. You haven’t got a spare grenade, have you?”

It was given to them, albeit with some confusion. Jack and Sanwar then removed their hats, their jackets, their dog tags, and threw them into the crater.

“Are sure you want to do this, Sanwar?” asked Jack, staring down at the pit below.

“Most positively. Are you?”

“I’ve been ready since before the War.”

“Then, so am I.”

Sanwar did the honor of popping out the pin of the grenade. Yet, before he tossed it in, Jack raised a hand.

“Wait.”

Sanwar kept a firm hold on the grenade’s lever while Jack ripped the ring from his finger.

He threw it in as well.

“Now.”

The crater erupted like a geyser after the grenade was thrown in. Men turned their heads to watch the water shoot into the air, then cascade down in a shimmering spray. Then, they went back about their business, paying neither man any heed as they made their way down and over the German trench.

“Say,” said Jack, helping Sanwar go over the opposite side. “What day did they say it was?”

“November the Eleventh. My birthday.”

“Bollocks,” said Jack, as Sanwar helped pull him over next. “Today’s mine...how old are you?”

It took Sanwar a moment to recall. “Today would make me twenty-eight, and yourself?”

“Twenty-Eight.”

They burst out laughing.

And they kept on laughing all the way through Belgium, as together, Jack and Sanwar walked right over the German line, and vanished into the mist.

Thursday, September 21st, 1922

Larnaca, British Cyprus

Jack caught himself smiling.

Those had been strange days for certain, but where would he ever be without them?

Without Sanwar?

In that very moment, he was decided.

Jack MacGregor would live; not for Scotland, not for the Stone, and not even for himself. He would live for his best friend, and that would be enough.

Aye, he'd die one day, but fuck the world until then.
He would deal with it and all its misery tomorrow.

For now, he was decided.

A cool night breeze kissed his face. He realized that something was inside his shirt pocket. Removing it, he saw that Eleni's flask was still in there, forgotten by the Turks and even himself. Not a drop of that Glenmorangie remained however; it was all bone dry.

Jack tossed it over the side.

As he leaned against the gunwales, staring out at the gentle waves bathed in the light of a full white moon, he softly began to sing:

Do you remember the promise made me?

The tartan plaidie, the silken gown?

The ring of gold with thy hair and portrait?

That gown and ring, I will never know.

Fhir a'bhàta, na hóro eile

Fhir a'bhàta, na hóro eile

Fhir a'bhàta, na hóro eile

O fare thee well love, where'er you be...

Thursday, September 21st, 1922

The Turquoise Coast, The Republic of Turkey

“Here’s to your new victory.”

“And to the health of a new nation. *Sherefe!*”

John Henry Saxon and the Turkish Minister of War clinked their glasses together. It was an excellent glass of Scotch whiskey, and it always went down smoother on the rocks. Saxon swirled around the ice expectantly when he finished. A servant then refilled their drinks, and brought over the cigar box. Saxon was offered the first pick.

“A little gift for our celebration,” the Minister smiled. Once Saxon had started smoking, the Minister puffed his own. “Our finest tobacco. Reclaimed from Smyrna itself!”

Saxon tapped out a bit of ash. “The flavor’s excellent.”

“Thank you, my lord.” The Minister bowed his head. “You know your tobacco. This brand is an acquired taste...just as the Republic has now acquired a taste for Saxon Arms.”

That brought a smile to Saxon’s lips. He rather enjoyed this little Turkish fellow, even if he had forgotten his name the minute he had walked aboard his yacht.

“Just the *apéritif*.” He blew some smoke into the air. Behind them, the fire crackled in the hearth. “But perhaps you and the Pasha would like to see a full list from the Saxon vintage.”

“Absolutely.” The Minister was practically rubbing his hands together. He named off every item on his fingers. “Pistols, rifles, artillery, machine-guns, biplanes, tanks...”

“Name your price, and I’ll tell you what it buys you.”

“Ten million in golden *lira*,” he said without hesitation.

Saxon grinned. “Well for ten million golden *lira*, you can buy the wrath of Allah, my friend.”

“Then it is a deal?”

“Beyond a shadow of a doubt.”

The two men shared a laugh and then a toast, then consummated everything with a handshake. Saxon’s palm nearly engulfed the Minister’s entire hand, but the little Turk shook it vigorously nonetheless.

“I am so glad we could make another arrangement, Mister Saxon. Kemal Pasha will be most pleased with this.”

“Pass my own compliments onto Mister Kemal as well.”

There came a message from the servant then, which she whispered into Saxon’s ear.

“Have him wait just a moment,” Saxon told her.

She nodded, and exited the room.

“Is everything alright?” the Minister asked.

“Quite so,” Saxon replied. “My Head of Acquisitions has just returned from some important business. I have much to discuss with him.”

“Oh, then I hate to be an imposition...” The Minister nearly rose off the sofa.

“No, no imposition at all,” Saxon assured him. “It’s I who doesn’t want to keep you.”

The Minister gave him a curious glance, at which Saxon grinned.

“Now that business is concluded, my friend,” he explained. “I thought you might want to move on to pleasure.”

“Oh?”

“There’s a pair of girls and some champagne waiting in your cabin. Compliments of the house.”

The Minister stroked his white mustache. “You have made a sweet deal even sweeter, my Lord Saxon. *Teshekkürler!*”

Saxon tipped his glass to him, and had a servant to show the man to his quarters. When the Minister was gone, Saxon called in his next piece of business.

“Evening Taggart,” Saxon greeted him as the Scotsman stepped in from the night.

“Evening, m’lord.” He threw himself down on the sofa opposite, lounging in the spot where the

Minister had just been, and poured himself a whiskey.

“So, what news have you got for me? How fares our friend, the good Doctor?”

“Progress is good.” Taggart bobbed his head to show approval, perhaps at both the news and his first taste of the whiskey. “He’s making headway with Tablet. Says he’ll be having something to show for it soon.”

“How soon?”

Taggart shrugged. “Within the year. By his word.”

Saxon leaned back in his seat, and took a drag from his cigar. Within the year. That was sooner than he thought, sooner than the Doctor had said initially. Still, it could not have come soon enough.

“What about the drugs?”

“On the way to Haifa as we speak.”

“Excellent. Seems you’ve really earned your whiskey, Taggart.”

Taggart grinned, and took another sip. “Well, maybe I can earn another, sir. I’ve got some more news...I saw MacGregor.”

Saxon sat straighter. “Where?”

“Saw him on Delfini...three weeks back? Rumor had it he was hanging around Smyrna. Might be that he died there in the fire.”

“No.” Saxon rose, and crossed over to the mantle. “He’s alive. We would know if Jack MacGregor were dead. I suspected not even the desert would be enough for him...”

He could hear Taggart shifting in the leather seat. “So, what do we do about him, sir? Him and that brownie boy’s trouble.”

“Oh, don’t you worry, Taggart. We’ll see them soon enough,” said Saxon, stroking the ring upon his finger. “Now leave me.”

As usual, Taggart did as was told.

Saxon stood there alone awhile, staring down at the simmering flames. It was entrancing, the way they danced and flickered. He wondered if the first man to wield its power so many eons ago believed it was a living thing, a creature of its own cast down from the heavens. A foolish notion perhaps, but it brought a perfect smile to his lips, as did the thought of seeing MacGregor once more.

“So, the game’s still on then, Jack old boy?” he murmured. “Then, let the hunt begin again.”

He threw the last of his whiskey into the flames. It sputtered for a moment, then erupted in a flash, even brighter than before. The fire had new life. Saxon could not help but be enthralled.

He decided for himself right then that indeed it was alive. For how could it be otherwise? How could it not be living when it raged so wild, so hungry, and so burning red?

Historical Reference & Author's Note

To my knowledge, there is no secret tomb beneath the cistern of Smyrna Castle, nor any conspiracy by the Knights Hospitaller to reclaim the fabled Philosopher's Stone. That much at least, is fiction. However sad I am to say that zombies, chimerae, and magic of inordinate power do not exist within the confines of this reality, I am happy to admit that most of what I have written has a basis in history rather than fantasy; and yes, that even includes the Philosopher's Stone.

The Stone is no concoction of my own. Many may know it from the first entry in the "Harry Potter" series, but its true origin comes from the very real and ubiquitous philosophy of Alchemy, which was the predecessor to our modern scientific method for centuries. For countless Alchemists, creating the Stone was the ultimate goal of the Art, and it remains in mythic status among practitioners to this day.

Some believed the Stone to be a physical mineral, others a liquid, but many agreed that it was a compound of unique properties that could ultimately be synthesized in a laboratory setting. This pursuit led to the discovery of countless significant chemicals throughout the ages, though alas, none of them were the Stone itself.

The Hellenistic Period (c.320-30 BC) was one of the greatest periods in the history of Alchemy. In this time, Greece had spread its influence across the Mediterranean, which included its wealth of scientific knowledge. So expansive was this influence, that even the Romans upheld Grecian traditions after their eventual conquest of the region, allowing Alchemy to propagate into further centuries; which leads us to the Knights Hospitaller.

Although the Knights have little to do with Alchemy itself, they are an inseparable piece of Greece's history. As Eleni and Bakir have each described, the Knights controlled significant

territory throughout the High and Late Medieval Periods (c.1100-1500), particularly the Islands of the Dodecanese and the Ionian Coast of Turkey. Cementing their reputation from the Crusades, the Hospitallers were major players in the politics of the day, though often they are overshadowed in our popular imagination by their more famous brothers, the Knights Templar. Both were significant religious and military orders in their own right, but I felt that the Hospitallers have not gotten nearly as much attention in media as they deserve. In fact, unlike the Templar, the Hospitallers still exist today. Known now as the “Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem”, the Knights have shed their military image, and returned to their more humble origins as a religious charity organization.

Medieval Greece is a fascinating, often neglected setting. While the Classical Period receives the most recognition in our culture through its ancient myths, I wanted to capture the magic of the Greek Medieval

Period in some way. It was a time of clashing empires, scientists and spies, ardent knights, and cutthroat pirates flooding the high seas.

No character embodies that spirit better than Eleni, in my opinion. While smuggling was not an enormous part of the Greco-Turkish War, I think she really embodies the daring, swashbuckling swagger of the Greek identity at the time. However, there are some mistruths surrounding her addition to the storyline.

For one, there is no such place as Delfini in the Dodecanese Islands. It is entirely fictional, though heavily based on the real and nearby island of Patmos, which is famous for being the site where Saint John wrote the Book of Revelations. I spent a month living there in the summer of 2016, and can easily say that its beauty was the direct inspiration for writing this story. Two years later, I would do further research by traveling to Istanbul and the southern coast of Turkey, where I was subsequently taken in by a

nightclub owner. Despite the region's modernity, much of the old Greek influence remains in the culture, architecture, and language of the people living there. Still, the rivalries remain, though in both countries, I can attest that I was met with overwhelming hospitality.

As for Eleni's bottle dancing, some may recognize it more as a Jewish tradition than a Greek one, and I know of no island that claims this style as their own. That said, it was a dance that a Greek friend of mine would famously perform at weddings, and is my small homage to her.

What is an undeniable fact is that the Dodecanese swapped places on the map a number of times in the twentieth century; going from the Ottomans to the Italians in 1913, then later the Germans to the British during World War II. Only in 1947, were the Islands finally returned to Greece after centuries of foreign control. For the sake of the story, I have simplified things, and said that only little Delfini was given back

to Greece after the conclusion of World War I, when in actuality no members of the Dodecanese were.

These changing borders did bring about problems amongst ethnic populations, which was a direct cause for the story's backdrop of the Greco-Turkish War. The conflict began in 1919, almost immediately after the Great War ended, as an attempt for Greece to reclaim its former territory from the failing Ottoman Empire, and incorporate ethnic Greeks into its burgeoning nation state. This was all of course, ignoring the fact that Greeks and Turks had intermixed with each other for centuries, and the concept of a singular identity based on language, ethnicity, religion, or place of birth was a puzzling one to many of them. Regardless, the war was fought anyway, with both the Greeks and the Turks inflicting horrible atrocities upon each other in the name of creating their new nations. Meanwhile, the powers of the time, Britain, France, and Italy waited

eagerly for a victor to emerge, so that vulnerable territory could be seized.

I used Bodrum as a centerpiece for this conflict, even though its role in the war was largely insignificant. Its Hospitaller castle was abandoned by the Italians in 1921, and never used as military grounds again. However, having visited the city in 2018, I wanted to find a way to include it into the story. While the castle was never used as a death camp, the Greek, Assyrian, and Armenian Genocides were all too real. Evil as Suyun was, his viciousness is a poor comparison to the true atrocities that were committed. Over the course of a ten-year period, the systematic termination of Christian minorities within the Ottoman Empire resulted in the death of an estimated two million people. These acts would go on to inspire the processes used by Hitler and the Nazi Party in the following decades, amongst other groups, and included horrible scientific experimentation.

Both the war and the genocide culminated with the Great Fire of Smyrna. Having routed the Greeks at the Battle of Dumlupinar, the Turks marched towards the city on a warpath. The Greek Army, seeing their defeat, abandoned it to their mercy, resulting in one of the most heartbreaking episodes in modern history.

Entering Smyrna on September 8th, 1922, the Turkish Army secured their victory, but went on to pillage the city anyway. Under the orders of their movement's mastermind, Mustafa Kemal Pasha, the Army set fire to non-Turkish sections of the city, beginning on September 13th. Smyrna burned for nine days straight, and the death toll while unclear, numbered at least 10,000.

After that day, the war was essentially over, and at a conference in Lausanne, Switzerland, the Republic of Turkey was announced as a new nation. Drove of ethnic Greeks and Turks living in either country were forcibly deported to the other in a massive

population exchange between the nations as part of a concession deal. Kemal Pasha would go on to become the supreme leader of his new, almost exclusively Turkish, ethno-state, and would receive the famous moniker of *Atatürk* (“Father of the Turks”). He remains enormously popular in Turkey today, and is lauded as the creator of a secular nation and defender of women’s rights. A city, and even the airport in Istanbul are named after him. His victory at Dumlupınar is celebrated as a national holiday.

Smyrna has since been renamed to Izmir, and is the third most populated city in Turkey.

Meanwhile, the Turkish government continues to deny that these genocides ever occurred to this very day. For them and many others, this event is just the past; something that happened a very long ago, and is now forgotten.

For others, it is their undeniable present.

During the war, a Turkish prisoner was awaiting judgement on the eve of his execution when a Greek soldier allowed him to escape. For this act, the young soldier was punished to the same fate by his commanding officer, yet survived because the bravery of his wife, who pleaded at the officer's feet to spare her husband. The commander was so moved by her that he agreed, but on one condition; the soldier and his family were to be exiled to America, never to return to Greece. So, the family fled, and the soldier began his life anew.

His name was Kyriakos Raissi, and he was my great-grandfather. My life exists because of mercy; the sparing of the prisoner, then his own life in turn being spared. I am proud that he did not hate the Turks, and neither do I.

I only wish for mercy to be found for the all souls of the two million victims and their ancestors.

And there cannot be mercy without justice.

Zozimos

August 30th, 2021