

ALCHEMEA  
BOOK II  
A TALE OF AIR & ALABASTER



ZOZIMOS

ALCHEMEA PART TWO:  
A TALE OF AIR & ALABASTER  
BY ZOZIMOS

Special thanks to  
Turquoise Hostel friends & staff for giving me a place to finish this one.

This tale is dedicated to the people of Palestine.  
May the struggle end soon.  
May your stories be told.  
In Sha'allah.

“This is the nature of ego, that people perform their actions in ego.  
This is the bondage of ego, that time and time again, they are reborn.

Where does ego come from? How can it be removed?

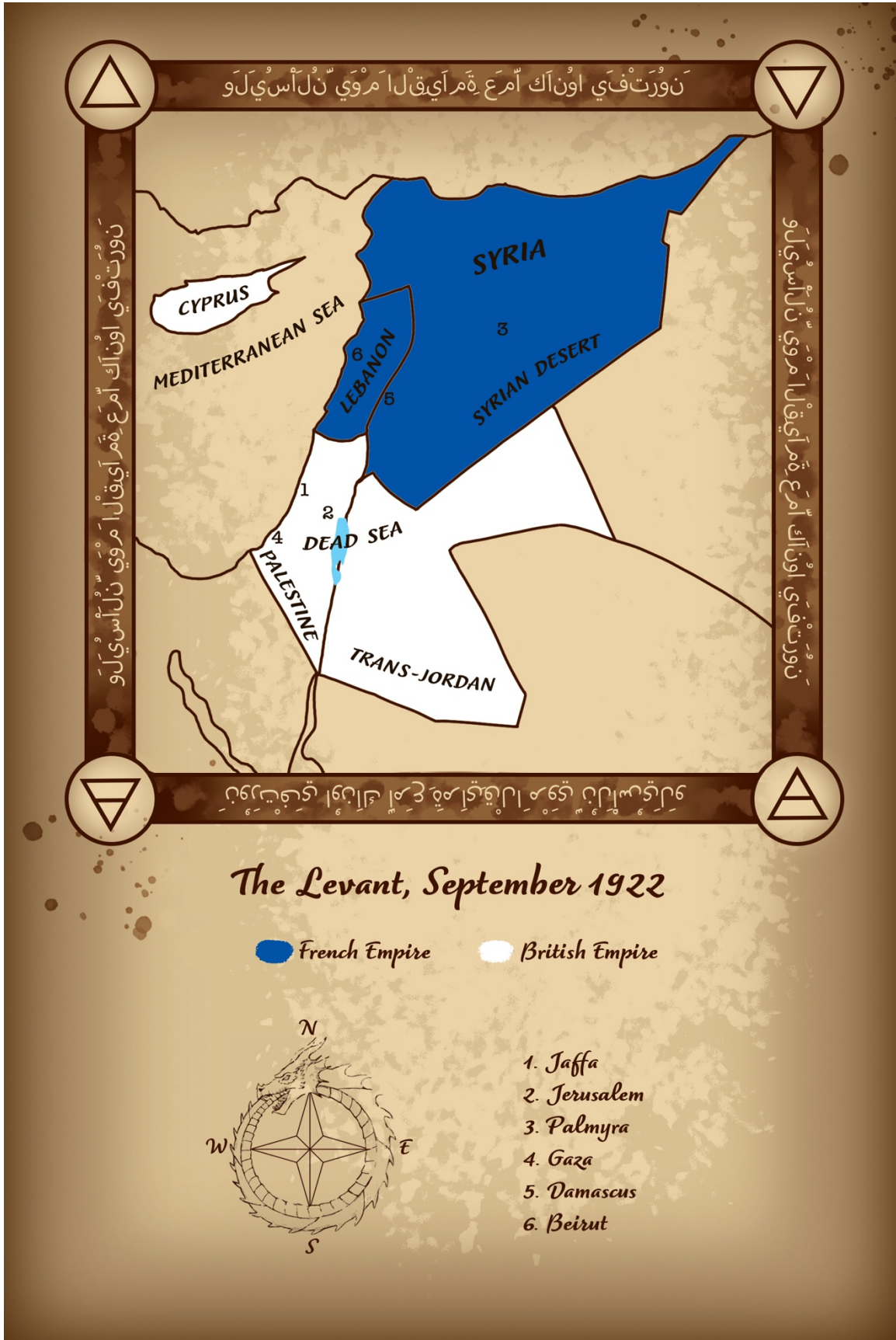
This ego exists by the Lord's Order; people wander according to  
their past actions.

Ego is a chronic disease, but it contains its own cure as well.

If the Lord grants His Grace, one acts according to the Teachings of  
the Guru's Shabad.

Nanak says, listen, people: in this way, troubles depart.”

- Guru Angad



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# I

## The Beasts Call Out

*Friday, September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1922*

*Jaffa, British Mandate for Palestine*

Sanwar gasped for air as he came out into the blinding white light of day. Sweltering heat buffeted his face as he fell out of the crate and onto the scorching limestone wharf. The air outside proved just as choking as the confines of the crate had been, where he had been trapped for the last hour.

The only reprieve was a blessed western breeze from the sea to cool his face, which was cut short when Jack flopped out of the crate and landed right on top of him.

The two extricated themselves from each other and the piles of Kalymnos sponges that Jack had spilled onto the docks. At least their captain had been kind enough to smuggle them in with something soft. Together, the two men returned the contents to the crate, and resealed the lid. Then, they scanned the quayside, assessing their new surroundings.

Jaffa stood before them, a labyrinth of sandstone homes and buildings stacked on top of each other, leading up a hillside like stepstones. At its crest, an old Ottoman clocktower stood like a great bastion watching the city. The white banner of Saint George and the Union Jack fluttered from its spire now though, replacing the argent crescent and crimson field of the Sultan.

The passengers from Jack and Sanwar's ship disembarked, showing their passports to British soldiers at the end of the gangplank. They were mostly Jews, conversing with their families in Yiddish, English, or Russian. Some were of the Orthodoxy, and carried their *shtreimels* in round, black leather cases. The soldiers stamped their passports and waved them through, a formal welcome to their new home.

Jack and Sanwar, of course, had circumvented such procedures. Nikos' man had made good on his word, and had delivered them safely to Jaffa Harbor without customs or questions asked. Now, they stood in the loading area, hidden from view by stacks of crates the crew had brought over from a dozen different lands.

The wharf was bustling as ever. Civilians went about their business. Soldiers hung around and smoked cigarettes by their posts. For the city's Muslims, the weekend had just begun, and today would be spent with family and away from labor.



“I wonder who you’re supposed to be...” Jack murmured.

Sanwar saw at once where he was looking.

A lone black car waited down at end of the quay, near to the main road. Despite the sunshine, the retractable was up, and Sanwar could not see any of the faces inside, just a gloved hand resting on the wheel.

“We should not linger here,” warned Sanwar. “Let us make haste to the train station. We should depart at once.”

“Aye. Agreed.”

They slipped around the other side of the crates and fell into an easy stride, traipsing the wharf as if they were just another pair of travelers freshly arrived. They made their way towards the streets without hurry, but still with purpose. Several trucks went past, either coming or going from the docks with cargo. Jack and Sanwar used the vehicles’ enormous frames strategically to disguise their movements.

One of the trucks however, did not drive past, but slowed alongside them. A man emerged his head from the passenger’s seat. He had a handsome face with an aquiline nose, and a white *keffiyeh* held back his long black hair.

*“Salaam-alaikum, Mistery MacGregor and Dhamija,”* he said in English. He spoke the language with only the faintest hint of an accent. “If you value your lives at all, please get in the car at once.”

“Sure!” Said Jack.

Then, he and Sanwar ran away.

They took off down the nearest alley. Jaffa’s cobblestone streets were a maze of narrow, shady alcoves and archways overgrown with vines of ivy, too tight for any vehicle to trail. The poor folk hung their laundry out above them from the windows of their low, square houses. Their elders sat outside their little doorways, smoking pipes and taking turns at backgammon. Everyone turned their heads as the two large, strange men went running past.

Eventually, Jack and Sanwar halted, sure that they had not been followed.

“Looks like we’ve got lots of friends in Palestine,” Jack remarked.

“Friends indeed,” Sanwar mused. Someone had compromised them. It could not have been Nikos’ friend, the captain, for he could have turned them over directly or killed them himself.

No, someone had been expecting them. Yet who could have known they would be here or that they were even still alive?

Regardless, it would be safer to travel in a crowd, so he and Jack diverted towards the nearest thoroughfare.

The streets were filled with locals who had just finished their *Jumu'ah* prayers. Many of the city's residents had gathered in the central square where the clock tower stood, crowding about the vendors' stalls and looking to start their weekend shopping. There were *halal* butchers, dried fruit sellers, spice merchants, and fish mongers.

Guarding everything, of course, were British soldiers.

Jack and Sanwar drifted into the crowd, though unfortunately they literally stood out in the crowd, being much taller than many around them.

It was not long before Sanwar heard Jack give an urgent whisper.

“Six o'clock.”

Instinctively, Sanwar's eyes went to the clock tower.

“No, it is five minutes to four, Jack.”

“I meant our six, damn it!”

Sanwar suddenly realized what he meant. Trailing behind them were a pair of tails. They were poor at being inconspicuous, or perhaps they did not care. They would only linger at a stall for seconds at a time before passing on, always moving far too quickly for a casual browser. Their faces were covered in black *shemaghs*, and they carried curved daggers on their belts in the Arab fashion.

From the corner of his eye, Sanwar noticed the daggers come out of the scabbards and drop to either man's side.

“Split apart,” he whispered to Jack, who followed without question. They broke away from each other, each examining stalls on opposite sides of the street.

Sanwar found himself at a spice merchant. The woman smiled at him as he perused her colorful displays. Mounds of pungent peppercorns, salt, cumin, and paprika lay out in a bouquet before him, stinging his nostrils with their burning aromas.

“Come, come!” The merchant cried in Arabic. “Are these not the most glorious spices that you have ever smelt? Which of them can I interest you in today?”

“Well, which is the hottest that you have?” asked Sanwar innocently.

He could see a man's shadow looming behind him.

He heard his footsteps drawing closer.

"This one here," the merchant replied, pointing to a bright red pile. "It is my own special mix."

"Perfect. Thank you."

"Hey!"

Sanwar snatched a handful of the scarlet powder, and spun about just as his attacker lunged in behind him.

He hurled the spices right into the assailant's eyes. The man swung his dagger once wildly and missed, then screamed and clutched his face. Sanwar used the distraction to kick him to the ground.

The crowd screamed and shrunk away as he landed hard on the cobbled street.

Jack meanwhile, had grabbed one of the famous Jaffa oranges from a nearby fruit stand, a good green under-ripe one, and threw it into the other man's testicles.

The second attacker fell beside his fellow, groaning in the dust.

The crowd screamed again when Jack and Sanwar drew their swords, and pointed them at their would-be assassins.

“Right then,” Sanwar demanded. “Tell us who has sent you.”

“Drop it!”

Everyone cleared away when the soldiers appeared. The order had been barked by a mustachioed lieutenant with a pistol in his hand. He and several rankers had arrived onto the scene in seconds, but more were rushing over from every side of the square.

“Drop your weapons!” The officer shouted at them again. “Drop them and explain the meaning of all this!”

Instead, Jack and Sanwar went running off again.

They wove in between the fleeing members of the crowd, and dodged behind a vendor’s stall whenever a soldier got too close. They were racing for the nearest alleyway, hoping to lose their pursuers in those narrow, shady streets.

Then, the clock struck four.

Somewhere in the distance, a high-pitched whistle blew.

The train was coming.

“That way!” Sanwar shouted to Jack. They veered northeast, going past a roundabout and down a long narrow street.

The soldiers were not far behind. Their footsteps thundered on the cobblestones. The lieutenant was spurring them on with the bark of his commands.

Up ahead, the street ended in a three-way intersection. If he and Jack could reach it, they cut left, and then cut again, losing at least some of their pursuers.

They were close to the station...

Tires shrieked against the cobblestones.

The black car parked lengthwise in the middle of the intersection, cutting off Jack and Sanwar's exit.

This time, the retractable was down, and Sanwar could see the men inside. There were four of them in black *shemaghs*, each one but the driver armed with Mauser C-96 machine pistols.

Jack and Sanwar skidded to a halt as the three men stood in their seats, and brought the short, detachable stocks to their shoulders.

With only a split second to react, he and Jack leapt apart as they opened fire.

Gunsmoke filled the air a moment later. The soldier who had been the closest on Jack and Sanwar's heels was mowed down instantly. The others, seeing their companion die, ducked to either side just as Jack

and Sanwar did, and took cover wherever they could in the alcoves of the nearby houses.

Sanwar was pressed against an alcove himself, trying to flatten himself as bullets rang out from either end of the street. The British with their rifles had nowhere near the output of their opponents, despite have five times the numbers. Automatic bursts drove the soldiers back, and filled the corridor with their mechanical cacophony. British resistance was simply pitiful. The soldiers' frantic bullets struck against the black car's doors and windows. However, the bullets strangely did not punch through, but simply flattened.

For a second, Sanwar caught a glimpse of Jack pounding against a heavy wooden door across from him, but he quickly vanished in acrid wraiths of pale white gunsmoke. The smell of sulfur was rancid in the air.

Sanwar tried his own door, but it was locked. There was no way out of this abattoir. Except one, he knew.

Sanwar uttered a prayer.

Then, he ran headlong across the street.

He had timed it for the silence of when the nearest man had to reload his Mauser. When that man began firing again, Sanwar was past him, and the next would be reloading, or so he hoped.



But really, Sanwar was sprinting across the street and hoping that the gunsmoke would disguise him, and that he would not be hit.

It was not so.

A rifle bullet cut his *dastaar*. Another grazed his calf. Stone pellets ricocheted into his side, but it did not matter.

His momentum was not slowed.

Sanwar's two-hundred-pound body hurtled forward and slammed into Jack's. The force of two large masses colliding with the door was enough to bring it down, in spite of its sturdy frame.

He and Jack crashed onto the floor of a living room, sending dust into the air.

"Aw fuck," Jack groaned. He shoved Sanwar to his feet. "Could have warned me at least..."

Sanwar ignored him.

A family huddled in the corner. They held each other and screamed as another bullet tore through their windows.

Sanwar looked at the broken door.

"My apologies."

"Come on, this way!" Urged Jack.

There were stairs leading to the roof.

The air above the gunfight was blessedly fresh when they came out onto the low, flat rooftop. Below them, the battle continued to rage, though little could be seen but muzzle flares in the smoke. The dying could be heard however, even over the hail of bullets.

The high-pitched whistle blew again.

Sanwar snapped his head to the north.

The railway was visible now. Passengers were shoving to get onboard or stay on as the train slowed to a halt at the station. They must have heard the gunfire. The train was hurrying to leave.

Sanwar gauged the distance. Two hundred yards. A sniper's shot away.

Without thinking, he kept running.

Jack yelped in surprise as Sanwar cleared the gap between their rooftop and the next, then acquiesced and followed after.

“What’s gotten into you today!?” He shouted before clearing the gap himself.

Sanwar hardly heard him. His goal lay ahead. They had to make it. That was all but paramount.

An engine roared beneath him. The black car swerved. They had seen him and Jack running away, and now pursued.

The car drove parallel to them in the street below. The men in the backseat fired their machine pistols as it went.

Gunfire strafed the ledge near Sanwar's feet. He banked left to avoid it. It took him farther away from the train, but out of the car's line of sight. Jack knew to do the same.

"Bloody hell!" Sanwar heard him shout as another bout of gunfire crackled overhead.

They leapt another gap.

The car swerved, then halted, the driver realizing that the street ahead was too small for him to follow. He reversed and sped away, looking for another way to cut them off. That bought them some time at least.

But it seemed in vain.

As the street widened ahead of Sanwar, he saw now that the train was leaving.

"No..." he panted, checking his speed before he went charging off the ledge. He stood at the edge of the roof, and listened as the whistle blew for the last time.

Smoke rose into the air. The train lurched forward on the tracks.

“We have to run and catch it!” Sanwar was about to say, turning to Jack, who was just behind.

When he turned, however, he saw flash of light from the clocktower.

He felt the shot before he heard it.

The momentum spun Sanwar back around. His feet tripped over the ledge, and he went hurtling off the roof.

He heard Jack scream his name.

A second later, Jack’s grip was locked around his wrist. The pain had not registered until Jack started pulling. He saw blood leaking from a gaping hole in his right shoulder, the same Jack was heaving to stop Sanwar from dropping twenty feet to the stones below. The sinews snapped as Jack pulled harder. That was when the pain set in.

Another shot clipped the stone besides Jack, but he did not let go. Instead, he heaved with all his might. Sanwar cried out as his friend yanked him back onto the roof. They fell flat onto each other, then Jack pressed his body onto Sanwar’s.

“Sniper. Clocktower.” He panted.

Everything was quiet for a moment.

Then, Jack threw Sanwar over his shoulder, and ran.

There were some stairs on an archway nearby. A third shot slapped the steps behind Jack as he padded down them. He ignored them, and turned down another set of stairs, knowing that the tower no longer had a line of sight on them.

Sanwar groaned. His body tensed. His breathing quickened and shallowed. He was going into shock, he knew. He had seen it happen before.

So this is what it feels like? He thought.

Jack was down the stairs, out into the street. There was little cover here. The railroad was across the way. The train was vanishing into the distance. There was shouting.

Through blurry, bleary eyes Sanwar could discern the shapes of soldiers running from all sides. Jack turned this way and that, making Sanwar dizzy, as he searched for an escape that did not exist.

The men were shooting, but not at them.

Tires shrieked again. The black car had reappeared.

It was driving towards them...

...until another car slammed into it.

The black car spun away, then drove off in retreat.

A truck emerged from the gunsmoke. It stopped in front of them, guarding them from British gunfire with its broadside. There was a familiar face in the passenger seat.

“I told you to come with me,” said the man in the white *keffiyeh*. “Get him in the back! Now!”

Jack rushed Sanwar into the cool darkness of the canvas-covered bed. There were others in there with them. He felt them cut away his clothes, and Jack’s strong hands pressed against the wound.

The last thing he remembered was a bright white light.

Then his world went black.

## II

### The White King Comes

*Friday, September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1922*  
*Jerusalem, International Zone*

“You really have come at the worst possible time.”

Colonel Ronald Henry Amherst Storrs found himself in a conundrum. He eschewed smoking, and yet Turkish tobacco smoke was suffocating him inside his furnace of an office. However, if he dared to open a window, then the room would be filled with the shouts of the protestors who had swarmed the streets outside.

He thought better of it, and kept the window closed. Meanwhile, his guest kept puffing on a massive cigar held between an equally massive set of fingers. Storrs had no choice but to call upon his Nordic composure, and continue.

“As you can clearly see, the city is in state of uproar over the Mandate. How am I supposed to keep them all happy? The Arabs want their land back, the settlers want land for the themselves, the French want to squeeze every ounce of oil out of us, and the High commissioner wants me to placate all of them somehow! I’ve tried to encourage friendship between the races. Truly, I have. But if I give something to the Jews, then the Arabs call me a tyrant; and if I give

something to the Arabs, the Jews call me a traitor. I opened a chess club to foster peace between them with a little friendly competition, and all they did was throw it back my face. It really is the worst possible time! It truly is. And I haven't even mentioned the damned outbreak of Consumption that's been ravaging the city for months now. Already, I've got a dozen men of the garrison in quarantine. If it goes on for any longer, we'll have an epidemic on our hands. Really, this is the worst possible time!"

"Actually," said John Henry Saxon, stamping out his cigar in the ash tray. "I think the timing couldn't be better."

Storrs surveyed those pearly white teeth that Saxon was so fond of showing. Whenever Saxon smiled, Storrs' heart was filled with dread.

"How so?" He asked.

"Well, I've recently acquired some items that should be of use to you."

"Do I even want to know?"

"You wouldn't want to know how I got them," Saxon grinned. "But you would like to know that I've got two whole tons of medical supplies in my hold. Morphine and antibiotics included."

"I thought you were in the arms business not medicine."

"The Saxon Company unlimited is always expanding its enterprises."

Storrs coughed on a mouthful of cigar smoke.



“Anyway, the whole lot’s yours,” said Saxon.

“And what is it that you want in return?”

Saxon feigned being taken aback. “Ronny old boy! How you wound me! Isn’t it enough that I should want to help my friends?”

They had never been friends. Storrs had known the Saxons since boyhood, because everybody knew the Saxons. They had rarely played together; Storrs was almost ten years older. Yet, he had always been afraid of Saxon. No matter what game that young boy joined, he always seemed to win. Storrs leaned his sweat-stained brow on a palm that was just as sweaty.

“What is it that you want, Lord Saxon?”

“I want to make your problems go away, Ronny old boy. But.”

“But?”

Storrs feared the words that might come next.

“But,” Saxon continued. “You need to let me do things my own way.”

“Out of the question,” Storrs said at once. “The High Commissioner will never allow it.”

“I’ll speak to Lord Samuels...if *you’ll* allow it. I just need to know that I have support from you, old boy.”

Saxon extended forth his massive hand, bejeweled with a ruby ring. Storrs stared down at the enormous appendage stretched out before him. He tried to think of all the reasons to refuse, then thought of all the problems he would have to solve himself if he did.

Storrs accepted the hand and shook; or rather was shaken by Saxon.

“Excellent, Ronny old boy. You won’t regret a thing.”

Then why Storrs feel like he did already?

“Now then. No need to escort me out.” Saxon rose, and smoothed out his fine, cream-colored suit, and started for the door. “I think I can find my own way.”

As Saxon reached for the door, it suddenly swung open. Saxon slid gracefully to one side to avoid the aide as he came panting into the room. He nearly jumped in fright seeing Saxon smiling by the door frame, but quickly recovered.

“What is it, man?” Storrs demanded of the junior officer.

“Sir! There’s been an attack in Jaffa.”

Storrs blanched, and went silent.

“Don’t worry, Colonel,” Saxon said with a smile. “I’ll find out who’s behind it.”

“And how would you go about doing that?” Storrs barely managed to say.

“I already have an idea. Anyhow, I’ll see you at the party tonight.”

Saxon was out the door before Storrs could say another word. When he was gone, all the Colonel could do was sink his sweat-stained brow into both his sweaty palms.

Oh right, he thought.

He had forgotten all about the party.

Fatima watched the soldiers open the doors of the Capitol Building, and held her breath. They had been standing outside the them all day, staring at the protest like statues, but now they stirred and Fatima feared the worst.

The soldiers formed a line, and pushed back the crowd. Their discipline was good. None swung their rifles like clubs, but only used them to move certain troublesome members of the crowd away. Once those individuals had been repulsed, the others fell back as well, fearing they would meet the same resistance. The soldiers' conduct did little to improve Fatima's opinion of them though. A noble enemy was still an enemy.

Eventually, the soldiers cleared a path down from the steps of the Capitol. There, a car pulled round from behind the building, and parked itself. A moment later, another group of soldiers exited the building, and only then did Fatima see the reason for all of the sudden activity.

Eight guards escorted a tall man in a white suit and hat towards the waiting vehicle.

His was a well-known face in Palestine.

*“Saksun al-Sheitan! Saksun al-Sheitan!”* Many of the crowd chanted. “Saxon the Devil”. A fitting name for a man who had built an arms factory outside of the city last year, and sold its products to settler militias. Rumor was that he was storing more than rifles in his warehouse.

Saxon was hurried to his car, though the man himself took long, leisurely strides. His nonchalance only made Fatima hate him more.

The crowd must have had similar sentiments. Some of them hurled rotten food, others handfuls of their own dung. Unfortunately, Saxon was in his automobile before any of the projectiles could strike him, so they struck the doors and windows instead.

Then, the car sped off, leaving the protest far behind. Everyone shouted after it for a few seconds, but once it was gone from sight, turned their attention back to their original goals.

The crowd was incensed, though they were not surprised. The decision had been made months ago, although it had just taken the League months to officiate the inevitable.

Tonight, Britain would announce its mandate in Palestine. Tomorrow, they would formally be ruled by those who had been ruling over them for the past three years anyway.

Nothing could stop that decision now, but Jerusalem would show Britannia how it truly felt.

So the crowd went back to their chants and their signs; men, women, Muslim, Christian, Jew all united in their message. Though she was small, Fatima added her own voice to the clamor. Her timbre had the strength of four men twice her size, and she would not be silenced. No one could match her zeal, not even the whole damn British Empire.

Her voice was hoarse when a hand tapped her on the shoulder, and someone whispered in her ear.

“Hokmah requests you back at the *kasbah*. It’s urgent.”

Fatima knew better than to keep her waiting. Immediately, she melted back into the crowd, and slipped away without being noticed.

She made her way through the throng back towards the Muslim quarter, scurrying down the cobbled streets. Here, the buildings had yet to be repaired. Deep scars had been left behind where shells had struck. Bullet holes pock-marked every limestone wall. Storrs had promised to rebuild with “native Jerusalem stone”, to revive the ancient beauty of the Holy City. Some wounds however, would not mend so easily.

Fatima passed another house that was dragging a body out in sheets. Two men in masks carried it out to a cart, and added it to the others. Then, they changed the mark on the door from white to red; white chalk for quarantine, red for vacancy. Nearly every house on the street was marked in white. Some were marked in red. Fatima hurried on, not wanting to linger in a place of sickness.

Ibrahim’s house was towards the north side of the city, near the Damascus Gate. Fatima opened the side door with her key. As she crossed the courtyard, two men covered a truck in the garage, then pulled a gate down over it.

Hokmah was standing outside the house.

*“Shabbat Shalom,”* they said to each other.

“What is it? Has Ibrahim returned?”

“He has,” the old woman replied. Her otherwise kindly voice was grave. “But one of our contacts has been shot. They’ve stopped the bleeding. They need you to operate.”

“Show me.”

The patient was in the infirmary, already unconscious. Under normal circumstances, he would have been a big man with dark complexion, but the shriveled looking Sikh before her was pale and withered. Ibrahim was beside him, his white clothes now red with blood.

“He has lost much blood.”

“I can see that.” Fatima snapped on her mask and gloves. She grabbed a magnifying glass and calipers from the tray. Luckily, Ibrahim has already cut away the clothes around the wound. She peered inside the wound. “He is lucky. The bullet passed between the clavicle and scapula without hitting any bone.”

“So will he live?”

Fatima said nothing. She had learned a long time ago never to make any promises.

Clouds of dust blew over the corpses of Gallipoli. The bodies of his countrymen lay out in heaps across its hills. Hundreds of his brothers had been spent for Britain’s cause.

Yet even in death, they would not lie still. The wind caressed their blood-stained beards and brushed against their sweat-soaked uniforms.

Sanwar knew that he was in a dream when he saw their pale dead faces, it had been so long since that campaign; but he know also that this nightmare had once been real.

The day was hot, and yet a calm breeze reached out to comfort him. It carried with it a stench so sickly-sweet. He could taste it only his tongue when he breathed in, and gagged when he breathed out.

So Sanwar held his breath. After all, it would improve his aim anyway.

He stared straight down the iron sights.

He pulled back his rifle's bolt.

The next round he shot went right between the eyes of some Turkish boy a hundred yards away, right where Sanwar had wanted it to go.

He aimed his second shot.

This time, he was in the muddy fields of France, and the bullet pierced a German's helmet. Bright blood spewed out when it struck.

Then, he aimed again.

Yet, when he fired, the bullet struck his own shoulder. The muscles tore and the blood popped out as the round passed through him, a shockwave shuddering throughout his body. All the breath was drained from him. He found the wound annoying more than painful, for it felt as though an insect were

crawling in his skin. He wanted nothing more than to scratch and tear the skin away, but his hands went tense. His body spasmed, his fingers tightened into a grasp, then finally he shivered and lost control of all his motor function.

His body hit the cold bed of the truck, and was frozen still. He strangely knew that he was asleep, that this was all a fevered dream, a living nightmare; and that made it all the worse.

I will die today, Sanwar knew, and I bloody well deserve it.

Jack snapped awake.

When the hand that touched him recoiled, he at first thought it was a foe, but then he remembered where he was. They had brought him inside this massive house, and taken Sanwar to an infirmary. Jack had only been permitted to wait outside in the foyer while they operated. The rest he struggled to recall.

“My apologies, Mister MacGregor.”

This was a new voice; a woman’s voice, and an older one as evidenced by its softness.

He allowed his eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness. The old woman only carried a candle at her side, yet her features were clear enough to him from the beams of moonlight streaming through a row of horseshoe arches along the wall. Her wrinkled nut-brown face seemed kindly, and he was inclined to



believe that she was so, given that she must have stood less than five feet tall. Her hair shone snowy white even in the candlelight, and a silver Star of David hung gleamed around her neck.

“I did not mean to startle you,” she said.

Jack rose from his chair. His legs were stiff and a bit unsteady.

“Where is Sanwar?”

“Resting.”

This second voice was more familiar. Jack recognized its owner when he stepped out from the shadows and joined the woman’s side. It was the man from the truck, though he had exchanged his bloody, tattered clothes for a fez and a fine silk suit.

“Will he live?” asked Jack.

“It is likely, God willing.” He spoke good English. They both did. In fact, the old woman sounded almost native.

“It is now important that he rests,” she said. “Fatima has sealed the wound, yet it was of a great shock to his body.”

“Why are you helping us?” Jack demanded, perhaps a bit too harshly. He suddenly remembered his manners, and that he neither slept nor eaten well in quite some time. “Forgive me. I am not accustomed to such kindness without a caveat.”

The old woman only smiled at him. “No apology is needed, Mister MacGregor. You have had a trying day. In fact, I think all your life has been quite trying.”

Jack gave a rueful laugh. "Ain't that the truth."

"Please allow me to at least make a formal introduction. I am Hokmah. This is Ibrahim."

Ibrahim bowed his head to Jack.

"We are part of Kether," Hokmah said.

Jack knew the word at once.

"You're Alchemists?"

Hokmah gave him a little smile. "You know your *Sefiroth*, Mister MacGregor."

"Wouldn't have much respect for myself if I didn't."

The *Sefiroth* were ten symbols of Jewish mysticism configured in a tree that was meant to represent the aspects of the universe. These symbols were used in secret codes of Alchemy. Kether was the topmost; the crown.

"And now you can see that our interests are aligned," said Hokmah.

"Are they?"

"We have been aware of you for quite some time," said Ibrahim. "Rumors have been spreading since the War. Whispers of two men who had been asking many questions. Then in Egypt, you confirmed suspicions that you were indeed alive."

"Aye. And what else was confirmed?"

"That you are here seeking the Philosopher's Stone with the map of Sir Godfrey D'Amiens."

Jack tensed.

"How do you know about that?"

Hokmah smiled sweetly. “You had the map in your bag. And his diary, it would seem.”

Jack put his palm heel in his face. He had been such a fool. In all of this confusion, he had only thought of Sanwar. Now, he realized that all of his belongings had been left inside the truck.

Somehow, Hokmah seemed to know his thinking, and offered him a sympathetic smile.

“Fear not. We only wish to make a copy. They will be returned to you when you wish to leave.”

“So...you’re not going to keep me here?”

Ibrahim gave an amused half-smile. “You are guests in my house. You are free to leave once Mister Dhamija recovers. However, if you go beyond these walls, we can no longer offer you our protection. Most likely, you are wanted men by now.”

Ibrahim likely had the right of it. Given his and Sanwar’s distinct appearances, every soldier in the Middle East would know about them within a fortnight. And given how close Alexandria was to Palestine, the High Commissioner would be hearing from his uncle soon. The thoughts weighed heavy on Jack’s mind.

At last, he spoke. “I’m going to take a wee wild guess here. You lot want me and Sanwar to help you find the Philosopher’s Stone.”

“No,” said Hokmah. She only had smiles for him. “We want for us to help one another.”

“How?”

The scroll appeared from Hokmah's sleeve as if she had plucked it from the very air.

"You may have the map," she said. "But that is not the only clue one needs to find the Tower of Idris."

Even the name of it had weight. Clearly the map led to somewhere sacred, but had shown nothing of a tower. What other secrets were hidden in Hokmah's scroll? Housed inside a tube of bone and ivory, the answers were hidden from Jack's view.

"Let us work together," Hokmah offered. "And we might benefit each other."

Jack shook his head. "I won't decide anything until Sanwar's heard everything you have to say."

"Of course. Think of this merely as an introduction. I do not expect you to decide this moment, and not without sufficient rest."

Come to think of it, he was still exhausted, in spite of how long he had likely slept. The feeling suddenly hit him as well, and he did not respond to Hokmah right away.

"Well, you have some time to think on it yourself, Jack," said Ibrahim. He placed a firm hand on Jack's shoulder, and it was known then that the familiar address was meant in earnest.

Still, it did not make Jack feel any less alone. Without Sanwar, he might as well have been.

"Thank you," was all he managed.

Ibrahim nodded curtly, and re-adjusted his fez.

“Now, Hokmah will show you to your chambers. And, if you’ll excuse me, I have a party to attend.”

### III

## With Woeful Weal Untold

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.”

Storrs cleared his throat, and stepped forward into the limelight. He was otherwise fond of giving speeches, but only because the crowd was usually receptive to them. Tonight was a different matter.

“As the first military governor of Jerusalem since Pontius Pilate, I can assure you that managing this city has been no small feat. However, I do hope that my judgement has been keener than my counterpart’s.”

There was some polite, scattered laughter from the audience. The auditorium was completely dark, and the limelight hot and blinding, so Storrs could not even see who had actually appreciated his humor. Still, he continued speaking to the void.

“Yet, now I hope that you will accept me as your civil governor as well. For when tonight ends, tomorrow will bring a new dawn for Palestine. It has been a perilous road to travel since the Great War began. Many battles have we fought together to free the peoples of Arabia from their overlords, and many

have we continued to fight whence peace was achieved. Have we not been thus far successful? Who among us cannot recall seeing General Allenby ride triumphant through the Jaffa Gate? We swore that day that he was Richard the Lionheart reborn! Oh, how we harkened back to those days when peace and civility ran this city! Let us resume such harmony, between all races and creeds. As Jew and Arab have coexisted before, let us do so again with the fatherly guidance of Britannia's friendship! Today, a momentous decision has just been reached among our great allies in the League of Nations. Ladies and gentlemen, as of this auspicious hour, I have the honour to announce that the Mandates for Palestine has now officially begun!"

The lights came down on Storrs and went up on the audience as they applauded. That was the cue for the band to play. A triumphant crescendo swelled with Storrs' final vocal flourish. The woodwind section trilled as he descended from the stage into a throng of fellow officers clapping him good naturedly on the back.

He must have shaken a hundred hands by the time he finally escaped them. Major Ravinder Singh was there at the end of the throng, offering him a reprieve from social interactions and a much-needed glass of water. He was always a top-notch fellow, Singh,

even if he had been an enlisted man once upon a time. Like Storrs, he wore a red poppy pin upon the breast of his uniform in honor of the occasion.

“Good speech, sir,” said the Sikh with a wry smile. “Does this mean I’m out of a job then?”

Storrs laughed, and drank deeply from the glass. “Hardly, Major. The way things have been going with these protests, the Empire will still require military men in the city for a good long while.”

The Major commanded a half-strength sepoy battalion in the city, and Storrs would doubtless have use of them for peacekeeping duties in the coming months.

“Glad to hear it, sir,” Singh replied. “I’d hate to retire early.”

“The only thing I’d like us to retire early from is this party,” Storrs muttered. As the crowd began to mingle and refreshments were being served, he feared who among them would approach him. “Dreadful, sordid affair. Full of people I’d rather not-”

“Colonel Storrs. Just the man I was looking for.”

Storrs forced a smile as he turned around.

“*Sheikh* Ibrahim, so wonderful to see you again.”



The *sheikh* was less than pleased to see him, however. He had been a formidable ally during the War, and just as formidable an enemy in peace. The irony was that the man had to have at least an ounce of Aryan blood in him, for his skin was fair and his eyes were pale as moonstones. Those pale eyes peered at Storrs with an unrelenting gaze.

“I-I had hoped you might have come tonight in your *keffiyeh* and tribal garb,” Storrs continued. “It would be an inspiring sight for the people to see you in traditional attire. Especially, for newspapers back home!”

“I wanted to wear a suit. I also wanted to speak to you about-”

“Major Singh, how rude of me not to introduce my companion!” said Storrs. “This is the Sheikh Ibrahim Ramzan ibn Jawahir Taleb of Syria.”

“Just ‘Ibrahim’ is fine,” the *Sheikh* interjected. He gave Singh’s hand a single shake, before turning back to Storrs. “You promised me a meeting to discuss the outlying villages of Jerusalem before the announcement. I hear they are being incorporated into a settlement.”

“I distinctly remember your request,” Storrs confirmed. “However, the announcement has brought on many complications. I have had my hands completely full of late-”

“You told me that this matter was a priority.”

“And it is. And I will find an alternative time for our meeting as soon as possible...Oh, if you’ll excuse me. I think that something requires my attention over there-”

“Storrs...? Storrs!”

A large, boisterous voice dashed all hopes of his escape, and it belonged to an equally large and boisterous man.

Abner Chaim Weiss cut off Storrs’ retreat like a brigade of Turkish cavalry. The man was only middling in stature, but had an enormous build. His meaty arms were the size of ham shanks, and were crossed in front of his hogshead chest. Even in his tailored jacket, Weiss looked more like a boxer than a banker.

“*Shabbat shalom*, Mister Weiss,” Storrs greeted him.

“Spare me the decorum, Storrs. I need an answer.”

“What answer?” asked Ibrahim, gliding over to them.

“Mister Weiss, have you met the Sheikh Ibrahim Ramzan ibn Jawahir Taleb of Syria before?”

“Just ‘Ibrahim’ is fine.”

He and Weiss did not shake hands.

Instead, Weiss grimaced beneath his thick black beard. “I help fund this damn War, and I was promised something in return. That plot of land in the desert. Has the High Commissioner declared it mine yet?”

Storrs had brought the matter to High Commissioner Lord Samuels, and had been deferred. He had brought the answer to Weiss every time he asked, and had been berated. There was no more putting it off. He needed an answer now. Only there was one issue...

“The land is on French soil,” came a rich, husky voice from behind.

“Oh dear Lord,” Storrs said beneath his breath.

*Mademoiselle* Chantal Tournai-Blanc puffed on the end of a long and spindly cigarette holder as she appeared. The young woman was long and spindly herself, standing nearly six feet tall in her heels. At

twenty-three, she was the image of youth and beauty; porcelain-skinned, copper-haired, and adorned in a short, narrow, sparkling blue-sequins flapper dress that Storrs heard were “all the rage” these days. Goodness knew that the young miss probably had made these things “all the rage” herself. Her father owned half the oil in the world.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” Chantal said airily. Her French accent was melodic to the ear, and her words were venom to the heart. “I hope that I am not interrupting anything, but I could not help to overhear certain matters being discussed.”

Weiss skipped all formalities. “So, the land’s been promised to you as well, eh?”

“Not promised, no. It belongs to me. It is on French soil. My father has already paid for it. All the High Commissioner needs to do is recognize these things.”

“And where is this land, exactly?” asked Ibrahim.

Chantal looked the *Sheikh* up and down. “Who is this?”

“M-Mademoiselle Tournai-Blanc,” Storrs stuttered. “May I introduce to you the Sheikh Ibrahim Ramzan ibn-”

“Just ‘Ibrahim’ is fine. And my people have lived upon this land for many centuries, so I think this concerns me as well. Where is this land of which you speak?”

“It’s nowhere important,” Weiss said, patting Ibrahim on the shoulder. The gesture was anything but friendly. “A little measly patch out in the middle of the desert.”

“On French soil,” Chantal added.

In truth, the patch of land straddled the border of French Syria, and British Trans-Jordan, so nothing was as conclusive as the Mademoiselle treated it.

“If it is so measly, as you put it,” asked Ibrahim. “Why then do you want it so greatly?”

“The bloody bollocks on this bloke,” Weiss bristled. “I want it because I can do whatever I bloody well like with my money. Does that answer your bleeding question, eh?”

“It tells me everything about you,” said Ibrahim. “But does not answer my question.”

“The land belongs to France,” Chantal declared. “And therefore, it belongs to my family.”

“The land was promised to me,” Weiss countered.  
“And therefore, it’s mine, love.”

The two stepped forward, and glared at one another.

Somebody save me, thought Storrs.

“Ronny, old boy! Good to see you!”

Somebody else, thought Storrs.

At six feet-four inches tall, Saxon towered over everyone in present company and probably the entire auditorium. He held a glass of champagne in one massive hand and a Turkish cigar in the other. His slick blond hair glimmered almost as brightly as the pearly smile that he wore. He sauntered over to them with grace of both the physical and social varieties.

Storrs cleared his throat. “Good evening, Lord Saxon. Allow me to introduce-”

“Mademoiselle Chantal Tournai-Blanc,” Saxon finished for him. He took the maiden’s hand in his, nearly engulfing it, and kissed her delicate, bejeweled fingers. “Your father has done business with us in the past, and pleasant as his company was, I much prefer yours already.”

Chantal's porcelain cheeks turned a little more vermilion. "Your reputation precedes you, my lord."

"And yours hardly matches your beauty, mademoiselle."

He let the words linger before moving his attention to Weiss.

"And Mister Weiss, so good to see you again," he said, giving the man a powerful handshake. "I've been away from London for a time, but I sleep well knowing that the interests of Saxon Enterprises are safely in your company's hands."

"You are kind to say so, my lord. The Weiss family bank has stayed in business so long because of that security."

"I have no doubt." Saxon then, turned to Major Singh. "Major! Glad to see you've stayed on. I think you're overdue for a promotion."

"You are kind to say so, my lord."

"Not kindness at all. I recognize talent when I see it." He gave another pearly grin. "And I think that the War Office will too, soon enough."

"Yes, hopefully soon. Thank you."

Finally, Saxon turned to the *Sheikh*. “I think the only one I don’t recognize is you, my good man.”

“Er, may I introduce-” Storrs began.

“My name is Ibrahim. I fought alongside your nation during the War. Now I am trying to determine the fate of my own.”

“I hope you used a Saxon rifle while you were fighting,” Saxon said with a smirk. “Anyway, I think it’s in order that I introduce my fellow. My friends, this here is Sergeant James T. Taggart, my Head of Acquisitions.”

Storrs now noticed that a second man had accompanied Lord Saxon, this one far less debonair than his compatriot. In fact, Storrs would have politely described him as hideous. Scars lined his weather-beaten face, pieces of his ear were missing, and his nose looked as though it had been broken in several places a few times over. Even in a smart tan suit with a black silk tie, the man’s wretchedness could not be hidden.

“Sergeant?” asked Chantal, blowing smoke into the air. “Did you fight here in the East during the War?”

“No ma’am. Dublin.”



“Now then,” Saxon said, clapping his hands together. “I couldn’t help but overhear that we were all discussing a little business, were we?”

“Yes, but this is hardly the setting,” Storrs tried to interject. “I suggest we all reunite in my office this coming Monday-”

“Nonsense, Ronny, old boy!” Saxon clapped Storrs hard on his back, knocking the breath right out of him. “Informal settings make for the most relaxed business. Now, I understand there’s been a little confusion over some land out in the Syrian desert.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Weiss muttered.

“Which is why I suggest a fairer way to settle the matter.”

“Go on, Lord Saxon,” Chantal urged. “Which way?”

“A game,” he said. “In fact, a race. You and Mister Weiss will set off on the same day. Whoever arrives at the allotted territory first can claim it.”

Storrs blanched.

“How would you determine the winner?” asked Chantal. Her face was aglow with intrigue.

“Right, and what do you get out of this?” Weiss demanded.

Saxon had the answers straight away. “Mister Taggart and Major Singh will be assigned to each of you to act as referees. I hope you don’t mind me using Major Singh, do you, Ronny old boy?”

Storrs was speechless.

“I’ll also outfit you both with rifles, supplies, and Bedouin guides,” Saxon continued. “And as for what I get out of it? A share in the profits. After all, why else would you drag yourselves all that way unless there was plenty of oil to drill?”

Weiss smiled. “Yes, exactly. Plenty of oil.”

“So, shall we say I receive ten percent of the winnings and we have ourselves a deal?”

“Absolutely not!” Storrs had finally regained his senses. “This is outrageous! Preposterous! The High Commissioner would never approve!”

“Actually, he approved of it after we spoke this afternoon,” said Saxon. “Thanks again for putting me in touch with his office, Ronny old boy. He thanked me profusely for helping you all out of a pinch, and loved the idea.”

“I too love this idea,” Chantal exclaimed, accepting Saxon’s hand again.

“And I wouldn’t mind a little wager,” Weiss added, shaking hands with Saxon as well. “When would the games begin?”

“I could have both you supplied by the first of October. Let’s start the month off properly, shall we?”

“So soon,” Chantal said with glee. “I like this even more, my lord.”

“As do I,” said Weiss. “Nothing like the competitive spirit, eh?”

“Nothing like cutting through the red tape,” Saxon returned, which made both Weiss and Chantal very happy.

Storrs was not so happy, though. In fact, he could only stand there absolutely gob smacked as Weiss and Chantal walked happily away. Major Singh politely excused himself, and Mister Taggart went searching for a drink. Ibrahim had already vanished some time ago, Storrs realized, which left only him and Saxon together.

“Glad you could see things, my way,” said Saxon, beaming down at him. He placed a colossal hand on

Storrs' shoulder. "Like I said, all your problems will go away."

Storrs had nothing left to say.

"Will you, excuse me, Ronny old boy?" asked Saxon, finally releasing his grip on Storrs. "I think I see some very old friends."

Saxon sashayed his way over to where a pair of clergymen, of all people, were waiting. Their sable robes clashed with Saxon's white dinner jacket, but they seemed to be get on pleasantly enough after a moment's conversation.

Storrs, however, was getting on with nobody. Now utterly alone in the middle of this crowded auditorium, he could only hang his head and sigh.

Pontius Pilate had it easier, he thought.

When Sanwar opened his eyes, the bright light of morning nearly blinded him. The first thing he saw once his eyes adjusted was Jack sitting in a chair at his side.

"Glad to have you back," Jack said.

Sanwar rubbed the crust from his eyes, and sat a little straighter in bed. His arm twinged when he did so, and almost refused to move.

“Easy now.” Jack placed a pillow behind Sanwar’s back, so that he could sit more comfortably, then eased him back into a seated position.

“Where are we?” asked Sanwar. His memory was a haze, and he felt quite lightheaded. Looking around the room even made him somewhat dizzy. Still, he saw that they were in an infirmary with rows of empty beds. Sunlight streamed in from lines of arched, and bounced off the linens, giving them a soft, wondrous glow.

Jack answered Sanwar’s with one of his own. “How specific do you want your answer to be?”

“You know that specificity is one of my virtues,” Sanwar replied, more than slightly perturbed. After all, he was owed at least an explanation. He could hardly remember a thing, and now here was, convalescing after being shanghaied off to God only knew where.

Jack frowned at him, however. “Well, I ask because I can’t give you as much specificity as you like. The broad answer is, we’re in Jerusalem. The slightly

less broad answer is, we're in the house of some bloke by the name of Ibrahim."

"Goodness, that is indubitably vague," said Sanwar. His arm twinged again when he shifted in his seat. He grimaced.

"Careful," Jack soothed. "You took a thirty caliber round to the shoulder. Didn't hit bone, but your muscles were torn to Hell. If they didn't get you here fast as they did and operate, you would have lost the arm at best. They've got you bloody loaded full of morphine right now."

Sanwar looked down. With his left hand, he undid a loose white shirt in which someone else had dressed him. Beneath the right sleeve, he saw the bandages wrapped all around his shoulder.

Then, he remembered.

The bullet pierced him again. A shockwave rippled through his body. He watched the blood squirt out of him a second time, and recognized that he was falling. Time slowed. He fell, and as he did, he at last felt the bullet rip through his flesh. And not just his flesh, but the flesh of hundreds. Every shot he had ever taken, he felt again. When the bullet struck a heart, he shuddered. When the bullet punched clean through a

helmet, he heard it ping and felt it too. He fell like a feather on a breeze, but his mind was fast as lightning. Every kill, every shot, he lived and saw and lived and saw, and felt again.

“Sanwar?”

Sanwar drew breath, and snapped to attention.

He realized now that Jack had called his name twice already.

“Forgive me,” he said.

Concern was etched into Jack’s brow.

“I should call the others. They’ll want to know that you’re awake.”

Jack hurried off without another word.

Sanwar watched him go. Then, he was alone.

Curious, he thought, the pain in his arm was gone.

Jack returned a few minutes later with several others. The man Sanwar recognized from Jaffa as the one in the truck. His recollection was vague at best, however, and it took him more than a moment to remember.

The women were new to him. The first was an older woman, kind of face and short of stature. The other was far younger, barely in her twenties, and far more severe.

Burn marks marred the right side of this second woman's face. The skin had wrinkled and paled where some chemical had seared her flesh. She was unsmiling already, but this visage made her all the more forbidding.

The older woman was first to speak. "Fatima has done good work, I see. You are looking well, Mister Dhamija."

The younger woman, Fatima presumably, did not react to the compliment.

Her elder though, assumed Jack's seat at the bedside. "My name is Hokmah. These are my pupils, Ibrahim and Fatima."

"We know much about you, so there is no need for introductions" said the man, Ibrahim. "However, I was hoping that I could introduce myself in Jaffa under better circumstances. I was there to receive you."

"Forgive me," Sanwar returned coolly. "Jack and I possess little fortune with our allies."



“Understandably so,” Ibrahim replied. “Your enemies are many. Someone tried to kill you in Jaffa. We do yet not know who. Now, you are wanted by the British Army after causing trouble there.”

“Not that we wanted to start any,” Jack muttered, rolling his eyes.

“Regardless, we wanted to bring you here,” said Ibrahim.

“And where might here be?” asked Sanwar. “Other than Jerusalem. Broadly.”

“This *kasbah* belonged to my forefathers,” Ibrahim explained. “It lies near the Damascus Gate on the north side of the city. During the War, this room was converted into a military hospital wing. It has remained so until we quarantined it after the outbreak of Consumption. However, we clearly have need of it still.”

Sanwar touched his bandaged shoulder. “I thank you, but I must inquire as to why you have done all of this?”

“They want our help finding the Stone,” said Jack. He then explained the conversation he had the night before with Ibrahim and Hokmah about Kether, the Tower of Idris, and the scroll. Somehow, Sanwar had

known what this was about in his heart already. It was always the Stone.

When Jack had finished, Sanwar sat quietly for a moment with an eyebrow raised. “So, you wish for us to come with you into the desert and retrieve the Stone. First, I would very much like to know your motivations for this crusade. Then secondly, I would very much like to see this scroll.”

Ibrahim smiled. “Our motivations? Free Palestine. Stop Saxon.”

Jack darkened. “You never mentioned anything about Saxon.”

Again, Ibrahim smiled. “We have a common enemy, I see.”

He crossed over to the nearest window, and stared out into the distance. It was then that Sanwar thought him noble in his bearing, the way he stood straight as an arrow with his hands resting on the sill. Though he smiled often, there remained gravity about the man. His eyes were sharp and penetrating no matter which words he spoke, as if he were always searching for an answer.

“Lord Saxon arrived just yesterday,” Ibrahim continued, stroking his dark beard. “But already he has

made a deal with two of our enemies, and I suspect all three know of this place in the desert. Saxon has transformed this whole matter into some sort of ridiculous game!” He then told them of the race, and finished with his recounting by saying, “The land they speak of is likely the place to where your map leads.”

“But how would they know about the Stone, I wonder?” Jack asked. He ran a finger across his mustache. “Bloody queer, isn’t it?”

“Saxon’s here in Palestine, two other rich and powerful people know about the Stone, someone tried to kill us, and they say that they have been following us since Alexandria at the latest. The entire diegesis is queer, let it be known,” Sanwar pointed out.

“We needed allies,” Hokmah put simply.

“And Saxon complicates our goals,” added Ibrahim. “The man’s warehouse could equip an army of settlers.”

“Imagine him with the Philosopher’s Stone,” said Jack.

“I want to see this scroll before anything else,” Sanwar interjected. His wound was starting to itch, and it was rather trying on his patience. His customary politeness would be sure to vanish swiftly thereafter.

As requested though, Hokmah produced a bone and ivory case from what seemed to be the very air itself. Her grip was surprisingly steady as she unscrewed its lid. With no small amount of delicacy, she laid a piece of vellum out on Sanwar's lap.

A tear ran along its topmost edge, but otherwise, the scroll was in pristine condition. Normally, medieval ink would dry and age into a faded brown, yet this page's was richly black.

Sanwar examined the script. He could not read it, but he certainly recognized its orthography. He raised a puzzled eyebrow.

“It is called, ‘the Language of Birds’.”

It was Fatima who spoke. Sanwar had almost forgotten her presence, as she had said nothing this whole while. Her voice possessed a deep, rasping quality. “It is the same language written in your diary. It was first documented by Jabir ibn Hayyan.”

“Jabir ibn Hayyan!”

The name belonged to the most famous Alchemist of the Arab world. Jabir had been a master polymath during the eighth century, with hundreds of manuscripts attributed to his name. Some even claimed him to be

the grandfather of modern chemistry. Now, Sanwar's intrigue won out over his suspicions and his pains.

Fatima continued, impassive. "The scroll speaks of Jabir's secret laboratory. A laboratory he writes, at the top of the Tower of Idris, hidden in the Mountains of the Crescent Moon."

"A cursed place," Ibrahim added gravely. "And a three weeks' ride into the desert."

"Aye, no one ever hides their valuables some place nice," said Jack. "Or bloody easy."

"It was here that Jabir claims he made the Stone." Fatima scowled at Jack for his interruption. "And there we will find it. I fear no curse. God protects me. But I disagree with my teacher's choice. I do not trust you. Either of you. And I think you should not journey with us."

"Thank you for your honesty, Fatima," Hokmah said sweetly. "But the map and diary are theirs. And we have need of their help."

"I also have trepidations," Sanwar concurred. "And of course, there is the matter of my impairment. However, I will accompany you no matter what the cost."

“You have a week to regain some of your strength,” said Ibrahim. “Strength enough to ride at least. Everything begins upon the First.”

“He will slow us down,” Fatima argued. “He is injured and cannot fight.”

“You are not a fighter yourself,” was Ibrahim’s wry response.

Fatima glowered. “You need me to translate this diary. You need an Alchemist, not just a fighter.”

That was precisely the answer Ibrahim had wanted. “And therefore, it would be better to have two, even if Mister Dhamija cannot fight. As long as he can ride in a week’s time that is enough for me. And you will be there to attend him if need be. Will he be well in time?”

Fatima did not respond at first.

“Will he?” Ibrahim pressed.

“Well enough to ride, yes,” Fatima said vehemently. “If he rests enough here. But I will not be able to do much more if he injures himself in the same way again.”

“I was not anticipating such recreations,” Sanwar returned.

“Then you’ll have three Alchemists, and another fighter in me. As long as Sanwar’s looked after, I’m in too,” Jack declared. “Though I don’t fully trust you lot none myself, I’ve got to admit that if you’re against Saxon, then you’re already more friend than foe. Besides, you’ve shown us a bit more courtesy than we usually get. So far, that is.”

Will said courtesy continue after we have found the Stone? Sanwar wondered, but voiced none of his concerns. Still, they needed a guide through the desert. There was no possibility of Jack and Sanwar doing it themselves.

“Then it falls upon you,” said Hokmah, turning to Sanwar. “What will you decide?”

Sanwar looked down in thought. All eyes were on him, but he could not rush his answer. The correct choice of words was paramount.

He stared at his arm. The itch was still in his shoulder, but he lacked sensation below the elbow. He tried to flex his fingers. The grip was weak, but he could manage the motion, even if they tingled with numbness.

Then, he looked at the iron *kara* on his wrist. The warm metal caught a glint of sunlight as he turned it.

He had his answer then.

“Kether has saved my life,” he said at last. “And you have saved Jack’s as well. In the best possible scenario, I would have lost my arm without your aid. I do not contemplate the worst. All I know is that I owe you a debt. Perhaps it can never fully be repaid, but I think that joining you on your quest is the most apt substitute I can arrange. We will go.”

Ibrahim clasped his hands together. “God be praised! Thank you.”

Fatima peered at them both. “Very well.”

“Now that it is decided, I suggest that we let him rest,” said Hokmah. “Even you, Jack.”

“Of course, ma’am. I’ll see you soon, *mera bhra.*”

“*Mo bhrathair.*”

The others vacated the room, but the old woman lingered.

“Do you know which day is today?” asked Hokmah, once they were alone. She folded her hands together, placing them inside the long flowing sleeves of her white gown.



It took Sanwar more than just a moment to recall. “September the twenty-third by my reckoning. Has it only been a day?”

“Yes, but it is also *Rosh Hashanah*, the new year, and a day of rest. So, rest now, Sanwar. Struggle will come soon enough. You must be strong for when you meet it.”

Again, she produced something from seemingly thin air. It was a bready loaf, golden brown and wrapped in cloth, which she undid for him.

“Honey cake,” she told him. “For sweetness in the coming year.”

Sanwar removed a piece with his left hand and ate it. Its taste was rich and sweet, and reminded him that he had not eaten in a good long while when his stomach rumbled. It also reminded him of something else.

“We are given *kada prashad* at the *gurdwara*,” he found himself saying. “A sweet pudding similar to this.”

“I am familiar,” said Hokmah with a gentle smile. “May its flavor be ever in your mind this year.”

Then, she rose to leave.

“The rest of the loaf is yours. I made it just for you.”

## IV

### Behold! His Pale Horse

*Saturday, October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1922*

*Northern Border of Trans-Jordan*

Wind swept the desert like waves against the shore. The sun arose before them, a crimson sphere glowing down upon the waste. Its light revealed an empty land, which stretched further than the naked eye could see; a swathe of empty sand where no man should rightly dwell.

This was their road.

It had taken a day longer than expected to arrive here. Sanwar was not yet well enough on the last day of September, and so their company was delayed until the first of October.

From Jerusalem, they had boarded a train to Trans-Jordan disguised as locals. Ibrahim had given them fake documents and proper clothes to wear, though Sanwar kept his *dastaar* tied beneath his *keffiyeh*. Most British soldiers could not tell the difference between Indian and Arab, and most Arabs said nothing about the matter, so Sanwar's guise allowed him onto the train without issue.

Even Jack was so sun-tanned by now that he very much looked the part of a Bedouin warrior in his tunic and *shemagh*. There were almost a dozen other Bedouins around him as a smokescreen as well. These were Ibrahim's most trusted men and personal escort. They had followed him into Damascus when the War was over, and while the other tribesmen had returned to their homes afterwards, these happy few had chosen to remain at their *sheikh's* side. Still, Sanwar overheard each man longing for the desert when he listened in on their conversations. Perhaps he was mistaken though, as he could not always discern their dialect.

Their leader was his distant cousin, a man of fifty named Hasan. Of all the men though, he was by far the most energetic, and he laughed often with them or Ibrahim. His long gray beard was turning snowy white, but he retained all the vigor of a younger man.

He joked even now as they sat on camelback, waiting for the dawn to break; something about being far from Englishmen.

The others laughed. They still had energy even after riding through the night. Hasan had bought the camels when they had reached a little village near the border, and Ibrahim commanded that they ride at once. It was already the evening then, but the *Sheikh* insisted there was no more time to waste. The enemy was already ahead, though he vowed his men were faster.

Yet, none of them would dare to skip his morning prayers.

“We must beg God for a safe journey, *In Sha'allh*,” Ibrahim explained. “It is bad luck not to do this.”

“Will we stop to pray five times a day?” Sanwar asked him.

“Once a day will be permissible by His grace,” said Ibrahim. “For he understands our circumstances, and avows our noble cause. So, we will only pray at *fajr* each day at dawn, and then no more.”

Now, that time had come.

The sun still rose, and was not too bright yet. One could stare into the scarlet sphere without fear of being blinded. This was the right hour.

Everyone dismounted their camels.

Prayer rugs were taken from the beasts, and laid out on the sand. Each man removed his shoes, and made sure his face and hands were clean.

Ibrahim gestured to a pair of empty rugs that had also been laid out. “You are welcome to pray with us, if you wish.”

“Do you even believe in a god, Englishman?” Fatima asked Jack.

“I believe in all of them,” Jack responded with his typical roguish grin. “I also believe you mistook me for someone else.”

“He is Scottish,” Sanwar reminded her, as gently as he could.

Fatima scowled anyway, the gesture Sanwar reminding of just how young she really was.

The company turned southeast towards Mecca.

Without an Imam present, it was Hasan who led the call to prayer, as he had the most knowledge of the *Qur'an*, even more than Ibrahim. He stood now at the head of the group, and called out in a clear, plaintive voice.

*“Allahu Akbar.”*

They began with their arms held out in front of them at ear’s height, making the intention from the heart. The movement was difficult for Sanwar still, so he raised his right arm as high as he could. Next, they crossed their arms with right over left, and Sanwar remembered to keep his fingers closed together as his right hand went over the opposite forearm.

Fatima, he noticed, had genuflected in the sand. Eyes shut, she held in her tiny hands a silver crucifix, and murmured holy words of her own.

Hasan’s singing moved on to the following section. They undid their arms, then placed their hands upon their knees and bowed. Again, Sanwar moved as far as his aching shoulder would permit him.

Once Hasan had recited the necessary words, the company lowered themselves to their mats, then

prostrated themselves upon them. Two times, they placed their brows upon the earth in reverence with hands placed firmly on either side of their head. Sanwar only bowed his head, for his body protested, though there was no protest from his fellows. When Hasan had completed the passage, they arose once more.

This sequence was then performed a second time. However, this time they ended in a seated position for the remainder of the prayer. Hasan sung the final words, and they were at last permitted to stand. Fatima finished her prayer at nearly that same moment.

Jack came over from his mat and helped Sanwar to his feet. No help was needed in Sanwar's estimation, but Jack insisted.

"How are you managing?" He asked.

"Sufficiently," Sanwar replied, perhaps a bit too curtly.

He was then assisted onto his camel by Omar, his driver. Without the use of his arm, someone else was required to man the creature's reins. Omar had assured him that he was the best rider in his clan. Sanwar, however, was reserving judgement.

At last, they set off into the desert. Ibrahim gave the order, and as if of one mind, the camels marched forward into the waste.

Already, Sanwar missed the city.

It had rained the day they left Jerusalem. It had only been a gentle pour, but Ibrahim had assured them it was good luck. Sunlight had broken through the cloudy skies once they were at the station, and cast a golden ray upon the Temple Mount. He recalled how brightly the Dome of the Rock had shone that morning; how radiant it was upon the hill.

From the window of their train, he had kept it in his mind as the land went flying by. He could believe this was the land of milk and honey. Verdant fields filled every valley. Olive groves and grape vines lined every passing rocky slope.

Here in the desert though, was a cloudless sky and no shade from the blazing sun. No green things grew, save little, bony shrubs. Milk would curdle in this land, and honey would surely turn to dust.

By mid-morning, Sanwar was soaked in sweat. The moisture ran down his neck and armpits, and gave his bandages an ungodly itch. He bit down upon his *shemagh* just so that he could resist the urge to claw at it.

No one seemed to take any notice of his pains. Fatima sat with her nose buried in Godfrey's diary while her driver did all the steering. The Bedouins conversed amongst each other, laughing at jests that Sanwar had no doubt required more context than he possessed to be understood. Jack meanwhile, was



towards the head of the column, out of earshot. Strangely, even talking to him seemed repellent at the moment. He did not feel like speaking at all, to anyone. In fact, all he did feel was hot, itchy, and thoroughly out of place.

He allowed his thoughts to wander instead.

It was almost painful to do so at first. Everything seemed jumbled at first, and hazy. Yet, eventually they did recall a few glimpses from the past few months; glimpses he had not the time nor space to recollect until just now.

He was on that islet in the Aegean again, languishing. Thirst tore at his throat. The sun beat down. It all seemed so surreal, so feverish to think about. Eleni had left them there.

Eleni.

He could not find it in his heart to hate her. He could not find anything in his heart for her, in fact. In fact, he felt nothing now.

Then, he tried to remember the last time a touch had warmed him.

Seven years, it had been.

The thought was interrupted by another, though.

His hands were bound, but he held a pistol in them. Bakir stood within his front sights. Sanwar saw the flash, and felt the gun kick. He watched as blood spurted from Bakir's eye. He watched as blood spurted

from another Turk's eye, not Bakir, but a soldier in the trenches of Gallipoli. He heard the shot, felt the rifle butt slam into his shoulder, and watched as red mist sprinkled out the backside of the young man's head.

There came some uproar from throughout the caravan, which drew Sanwar's attention back to the world at present. He looked about at his companions, trying to discern what had been the source of the commotion.

Hasan and the Bedouins were talking about him. He did not hear exactly what was said at, but it brought Omar good cheer. The driver chuckled, and his back rumbled with laughter against Sanwar's chest.

"They are not deriding you," said Ibrahim in English, coming alongside him and Omar.

"I know." Sanwar had just caught a smattering of the conversation. "Hasan asserts that I would make an excellent Muslim."

Ibrahim grinned with a perfect set of teeth. "He says you pray quite well. He insists that you convert! Why convert him, Hasan, when he is already one of us!?"

He shouted this reply in Arabic at the others, drawing another uproar.

Hasan, however, always had to have the last laugh it seemed.

“What about the Englishman?” He shouted back. “He is pretty good at it too! He could be our new *sheikh!*”

This was a bit more derisive, and of course, directed at Jack.

However, Jack only smiled at the jeer.

“*Shukran, effendi,*” he shot back in Arabic. “But you forget I’m Scottish.”

And now the last laugh was on Hasan. The company guffawed at his expense, Hasan most of all.

It was still imperfect, but Jack was learning the language rather quickly, Sanwar observed.

When Ibrahim’s laughter had subsided, he returned his attention back to Sanwar. “So, you can speak Arabic?”

“Some,” Sanwar replied. “For there are many Muslims where I originate.”

“And where do you ‘originate?’” asked Ibrahim with a grin. He placed a playful inflection on the word, amused by his usage of the word.

“India.”

“Yes, but wherein?”

“Punjab. It is a northwestern province.”

“Yes, I recall. This is the homeland of the Sikhs. Is it beautiful?”

Sanwar smiled wanly. “Very.”

“Perhaps one day, I will look upon it with my own eyes.”

“It is quite dissimilar to this,” Sanwar diverted.

“The desert you mean?” Ibrahim could not help but laugh. “Few places are quite like this. Punjab has lots of rain! And greenery!”

“It does indeed.”

For some reason, Sanwar struggled to envision Punjab. He knew that it rained, and he that the land was flat and green unlike this rocky, hilly place, but queerly, he could not see it in his mind’s eye at all.

“Your Arabic is quite good,” said Ibrahim, changing back to the original subject with a mercurial ease.

“Though a little formal, I must say. You only speak the Classical variety. Our dialect is different.”

“Where did you learn English?”

“From an Englishman, of course,” Ibrahim returned almost automatically. “But more specifically, I had some tutelage as a boy. I was perfect for when my people allied ourselves with Britain. I was chosen to treat with British officers as we fought together against the Turks. You speak it quite well yourself! If I were to shut my eyes, I would mistake you for a proper English gentleman with sunburnt paper skin and a thin mustache.”

“I interpret this to be a compliment?”

“The highest!”

“Well, I studied at Oxford just before the War, so perhaps that is the explanation.”

“Is this where you discovered your love of Alchemy?”

“It was a love of mine since boyhood,” Sanwar explained. “I had a book about it then...and dreams...And how came you by the Art?”

Again, Ibrahim smiled, as he did so often. “It discovered me, so to speak. Hokmah had approached me after the War. I confess that I know little of this craft, that is Fatima’s talent. And I did not believe much in it back then, at least first. But Hokmah had other needs from me.”

Sanwar raised a curious eyebrow. “Such as?”

“Connections. Contacts. Information of the comings and goings in our region. Political insight. And if needed, fighting men.”

“She fears another war will come.”

“She knows another war will come,” Ibrahim corrected. “Is it not obvious? War will always follow empire, especially when they decay. War will always follow men who want to take and not to ask.” He sighed heavily. “I was too late in seeing one war arise. I shall not let it happen again.”

“One man alone could not stop that atrocity,” said Sanwar. He meant the words to comfort, but instead, he felt horrified when speaking them. And guilty.

“No, this I could not stop, but something else? Yes, I could have done much more,” he said. “I wasted away my younger years debauching in the nightclubs of Europe, living *haram* with drugs, and girls, and drinks, and sodomy. My afternoons I spent flying aeroplanes, my evenings sailing yachts, and my mornings recovering from the night before. All the while, my father believed that I was getting an education, and I suppose that I was in a way. This was my life. Until I became a new man. Now, it is no longer.”

Sanwar considered the *Sheikh* and how his expression had grown solemn. “What incurred such a change?”

“My father was *sheikh* before me,” said Ibrahim. “And the Turks had him strangled in his sleep when they thought he might align our tribe with Britain.”

“I am truly sorry.”

The *sheikh* could only shrug. “I loved him dearly, and I knew that I would assume his fallen sword one day. I would have liked that he lived to be an old man, though. Anyway, killing him made our tribe fight anyway. I am only glad that my father did not live long enough to see what became of our ‘victory’. Now we are told that we cannot lead ourselves into our self-same future.”

“You wish for an Arab nation then?”

“I care not for nations anymore,” said Ibrahim. “Only peace. Neither seems to belong together.”

Sanwar nodded in agreement.

They rode in silence for a time as the swelter of the desert grew.

The caravan did not stop to rest until the mid-afternoon. They took shelter in what little shade they could find beside a gigantic rocky mound. Lunch was simple fare; dates, nuts, and flat bread. They sat on rocks and ate them gratefully, however.

Sanwar had not wanted to stop, citing that they were already behind schedule, but his concern was quickly overturned.

“It is too hot to journey on,” Ibrahim explained as they ate. “We must wait until twilight to continue, when the sun is lower. Go on like this, and the heat will kill you.”

That gave them a few hours to rest, eat, and relieve themselves. The Bedouins laid out rugs in the sand and slept on them. Sanwar could find no such comfort for himself, especially when the ground was full of rocks.

Instead, he busied himself by surveying their surroundings. There was naught else to do after all. He rummaged through the loose stones at his feet, and tossed them lazily with his good arm. They were dusty, white, and grainy to the touch, not much to look at all, but something stopped Sanwar right he was about throw another.

He lifted this one to the light, and peered at it.

Ponderous little shells were imprinted in its surface, clumped together in a curious patchwork.

“Fossiliferous limestone.”

It was the first time Fatima had torn her eyes away from the diary all day. Now, she could not take her eyes off of him.

He had not noticed her sitting on a rock just two feet behind him. Yet, there she was. Her left eye gleamed at him, hard and black as jet, while the right was pale and clouded. He knew that it was blind, but somehow, he felt as though it was the one who watched him most.

“Fossiliferous limestone,” Fatima repeated.

“Otherwise known as Calcium Carbonate. Sedimentary rock. Frequent deposits in this region. This sample appears to contain brachiopods-”

“-From the Cretaceous Period,” Sanwar finished.

“Though that is simply my own speculation.”

Fatima turned her gaze back to her reading again.

“This valley is likely littered with these fossils,” she said, no longer interested in him. “They are millions of years old.”

“Millions of years,” Ibrahim laughed. “You speak as though it were yesterday!” He looked down at the piece of rock in Sanwar’s hand. “God said that this desert was a great ocean long before the Prophet, and



that it stretched across the entire world. Now my eyes tell me this is indeed true.”

“No man can know for certain,” Sanwar said.

Ibrahim just shrugged at that remark and laughed.

“That is not what faith is for.”

The *sheikh* turned back out to face the vastness of the desert.

Sanwar simply let the stone fall from his grip, and it clattered on the ground.

There was something else beneath the stones.

He brushed a few aside and held it aloft.

Bleached bone and empty eyes stared back at him.

No flesh remained on this dry, cracked, human skull.

Sanwar did not recoil from it.

“Bloody Hell,” uttered Jack. He had been lounging half-asleep on the rocks beside Sanwar, but now he was fully awake.

“An Armenian,” said Ibrahim, glancing over his shoulder. “Hasan tells me the tribesmen still find their bones occasionally. During the War, the Turks drove them here by the thousands to die. This poor soul had made it far.”

He said a quiet prayer.

Fatima spat a curse.

“The Turks were murderers,” she growled. “And the British are no better. They think they have the right to say which land is theirs!”

Her accusing gaze was cast on Jack.

“We’re no friends to the Turks ourselves,” he sighed.  
“Nor the British.”

Fatima scowled at him then stormed away.

“Someone’s got a bloody bee in their buttocks,” Jack remarked once she was out of sight.

“Forgive her,” said Ibrahim. “She forgets herself sometimes. She likes not strangers, and white men even less.”

“Perfect.”

“Forgive her,” Ibrahim said again. “She has seen too much. When first she came to Hokmah, she was but an orphan on the street.”

“Ah.”

They turned to see where she had retreated; a rocky shelf some yards away. She sat there alone with her face buried in the book.

Eventually, all three men fell silent.

Sanwar gently placed the skull on a nearby rock.

“I do not like this place,” he said at last.

“Fear not,” said Ibrahim, looking to the sun as it waned lower overhead. “Soon we will ride.”

That evening, they struck camp in the shadow of a dune. Sentries were posted on its high ridgeline while the others raised their tents. Since Sanwar could not

assist them, it was an ideal moment for Fatima to replace his bandages.

Thankfully, Sanwar's *thawb* unbuttoned, so that he did not have to lift his arms above his head to remove his shirt. Beneath the clothes, bandages wrapped around his shoulder and across his chest. They were no longer as tight as they had been that morning, and were discolored from sweat stains.

"You should not have come," she chided him, unwrapping the gauze. "Use your arm too much and it will not heal properly! You should be resting! Not risking infection."

Sanwar said nothing.

He must be here. That was manifest, and nothing could change it.

Fatima pulled away the bandages. Underneath, Sanwar's flesh had paled and wrinkled somewhat. The stitches were scabbing over, and a violet scar had already begun to form around them.

"It is clean still," she asserted after an inspection. "But you must keep it out of the sand."

"I do not anticipate doing the contrary," Sanwar responded dryly.

As Fatima redid his bandages, he had a question come to mind.

"Where did you receive your training?" He asked her.

She stared at him with her cloudy eye while keeping the other focused on the task at hand.

“Pulling bodies from the street.”

“You were a medic?”

“Of a kind, yes. You are done now.”

She tied off the ends of the gauze, then sharply turned and walked away.

“No doubt known for your bedside manner,” Sanwar mused to himself. He watched her go before downing his daily dosage of morphine with a swig of water.

They all ate under one main pavilion, sharing from collective bowls and platters. Dinner was an array of rice, bread, and much to Sanwar’s distaste, roasted camel. Still, his hunger and his courtesy obliged him, and so he ate the flesh as well without a single voiced complaint. Internally however, he cursed his name.

After the meal, the Bedouins cleared away the platters, and brought out instruments. Omar and Ibrahim each played an *oud*, a squat stringed instrument like a lute, while two other men blew upon the long wooden *ney*. They sat cross legged on the carpet as the others lounged and listened. Jack put his back to Sanwar’s so that each could lean upon each other, and Sanwar could relax without laying on the sandy ground.

The four musicians then began their song. Its melody was darkly sweet, and each man knew his harmony. Strings strummed in tandem, and the notes seemed to dance upon the air.

Suddenly, Ibrahim began to sing. At first, he wailed so mournfully that Sanwar thought he was in anguish, but when no others reacted, he returned to the performance.

The wailing had become true singing now. Ibrahim's voice was high and breathy, pleasant to the ear. His eyes were shut throughout the song. He appeared not to need them, for his fingers knew the strings as easily his own hands, and he stayed so perfectly in tempo that he could have played all the parts himself.

The song went on for some time, long enough that Sanwar had almost forgotten where he was by the end of it. Yet when he looked around, the sky was dark where it had been glowing orange just before, and the sweltering heat had been replaced by algid breezes. Sanwar drew a camel blanket around himself.

There was no applause for the performance, only silent nods of satisfaction. The men put away their instruments, and lit a fire in the center of the tent. Then, they all departed, leaving Jack and Fatima alone with Ibrahim and Fatima.

"I hope that our hospitality has been generous," said the *sheikh*, once all had vacated.

Neither Jack nor Sanwar could deny it.

“Good,” he went on. His countenance was much more solemn than had been over dinner laughing with his kin. “We must now discuss our quest.”

Fatima laid out the scroll, the map, and Godfrey’s diary close enough to the firelight for everyone to see.

“I have been translating the diary all day,” she said. “Though I have made little progress. Only thirty pages.”

Jack whistled. “Jesus. Sanwar and I barely got through thirty sentences.”

Fatima glared at him.

“How dare you take the Lord’s name in vain!?”

“That is enough Fatima,” Ibrahim interjected. “Jack, will you apologize?”

“Er. Yes...sorry.”

Fatima’s glare did not relent, although eventually her interest subsided, and she turned back to the items at hand. She took the diary, and opened it to a bookmarked page.

“Godfrey recounts traveling through these lands in the year of our Lord eleven hundred ninety and his discovery of the tower,” she explained before reading from the book. “For over a fortnight, we had journeyed in this godless land. When we reached the defile, our Saracen guides abandoned us, and there was no choice but to venture on alone. The mountain

proved an arduous climb to its peak, from whence we spied that this was no mountain but a mighty basin, stretching far below. Traversing its bounds was dangerous, for the tower was guarded by all manner of Lucifer's most vile servants; dragons. Yet, by the grace of the Lord, we reached the donjon of the Tower of Idris. Within, we found the Eagle's Seal. Beyond it, lies what we seek."

For a moment, they sat in silence, taking in this tale. A chill wind caused the flames to flicker, and Sanwar to draw the blanket tighter around himself.

"This defile is somewhere here, I believe," said Ibrahim at length, and pointed to a section on the map. His finger hovered over a line of labyrinth of hills carved into the alabaster. They were just below the shadow of the mountain where the tower was marked. "It is said this placed is cursed. The tribesmen say that the *afrit* haunt these hills. They are the worst kind of *jinn*, spirits of smoke and fire."

"Monsters, we've seen before," Jack said, showing them the scars where the chimera had cut his arm. "I'm more concerned about this 'Eagle's Seal'. What is that?"

"A symbol upon the door of Jabir's laboratory." Fatima's voice still held a tinge of disdain, but she showed him Jabir's scroll nonetheless.

There, near the bottom of the page was a drawing of a white eagle with a crown upon its head. With wings spread wide, the noble bird blew fire from its beak.

“A white eagle devouring flames, according to both Godfrey and Jabir alike,” said Fatima.

“There is nothing else describing this?” asked Sanwar.

“The page is incomplete,” she told him. “Perhaps more was written, but I have not the full description.”

“Riddles and more riddles,” Jack groaned. “I’m going out on a limb here, and saying that this is some sort of Alchemical formula. Usually that’s how this works, knowing Godfrey.”

“But what compound must we formulate?” Sanwar wondered. He was asking himself more than anybody else, really.

“Eagles, dragons, and bloody demons.” Jack yawned, and stretched his arms. “Guess we’ll have to think on it. Tomorrow, though.”

“Yes, tomorrow,” Ibrahim agreed. “Now, we must all take rest for a long ride ahead.”

Yet, Sanwar could find no rest.

While Jack had fallen straight to sleep the minute they retired to their tent, Sanwar struggled to find the same respite. He lay back on his blanket, staring at the canvas, waiting for sleep to take him, but it would not



come. Exhaustion permeated every fiber of his body, and yet he lay awake, his mind a dizzying race inside his head. Nothing could quiet it. Around and around, it spun inside his head, an incessant, whirring buzz ever stirring at his thoughts.

Desperately, he shut his eyes to be rid of it.

He opened them again.

The crosshairs were in his eye. He was staring down his rifle scope.

A cold wind blew across the muddy fields of No Man's Land. The chill unnerved him, but Sanwar had learned to ignore it. Any motion would reveal him to the enemy.

Underneath his canopy, he surveyed the German line. All was quiet. They had become wary to lift their heads above the trenches after so many of their fellows had fallen back into the mud without one. Many of them, Sanwar had put down himself.

Every night, he changed location. Under the cover of darkness, he would move his canopy further down the line, and disguise himself among the refuse. Sometimes he was a scrap of brush, other times, he lay hidden in the burned-out craters.

Today, he was buried among the corpses. It was not his ideal location, but his last canopy had been spotted. Here, hidden amongst the dead, he could watch the

line without fear of notice though. The smell no longer troubled him at all. Besides, the wind was at his back.

There came a whirring overhead.

Aeroplanes soared among the pale gray clouds. They were German planes, and there came a whistle as the bombs began to drop.

Sanwar used the bodies as makeshift sandbags. Yet, the explosions that came were pitiful, more like popping, fizzing sounds than bombs. When he ventured a glance, he saw why.

A strange, sickly fog had filled the air. A horrid smell soon followed. The shells they had dropped were not bombs at all.

They were gas canisters.

Sanwar did not panic. He had not gas mask, so there was no escape. He could not outrun the gas. In fact, he did not want to.

However, the gas was moving away from him.

A forceful gust of wind had pushed it back, back towards the German line.

Screams turned into hacking coughs. Cries for help were stifled. A patch of fog had coated the enemy trenches in silence and an eerie haze.

Sanwar raised an eyebrow. The Germans had done his work for him.

Then, he heard the moans.

At first, he thought it was the wounded, until he saw dark shapes coming through the cloud. They ambled forward, stepping out into the light until he saw that they were blind and covered in oozing sores and pustules.

He tried to run, but suddenly the corpses all around him snatched his arms, and held him fast in place.

They moaned at him. Begged at him. Clawed at him with pale and lifeless hands. They were German bodies missing jaws, eyes, faces. They were riddled with holes, and mangled to no end.

Yet, Sanwar could not escape them.

From the smoke, emerged the rider. Astride a flea-bitten horse, he rode out of the debris with a rifle in his hand. His uniform was cloaked in ash. His helmet was adorned with a crown of barbed wire. Both man and beast wore gasmasks, and Sanwar could not see their eyes beneath.

The rider stopped and gazed down at him.

He slung his rifle, then someone handed the banner of the Union Jack, torn and soiled by the blood and mud and grime.

“I’ve been looking for you, lad,” the rider rasped in a hollow empty voice. “Didn’t think you could just run off and leave us, did you? We’ll never let the old flag fall. Carry on.”

Sanwar screamed as the frenzied hands of the dead dragged him into the earth.

He awoke gasping for air.

Or rather, he witnessed himself doing so.

No longer was he in his own body.

Surely, he had died.

His soul floated above his chest, while his heart raced inside of it. He was inches away from his face, staring down at it. Had he died? Was this what had awaited him all these years instead of paradise; to be bound to the Earth and imprisoned by it?

Yet, Sanwar realized he was not dead. His heart slowed, and his breathing steadied eventually to a more even rhythm. His chest rose and fell. He was breathing, and thus he lived.

Though the night was cool, icy sweat poured down his brow. Sanwar wiped away the moisture.

He looked about the tent.

The night was quiet, save for a gentle breeze rustling against the door flap. Jack still lay undisturbed in his blankets.

Carefully, Sanwar rose and stepped around him to exit the tent. The chill of the desert night was welcome to his searing cheeks, a brumal kiss to sober him. The sand sifted beneath his airy footsteps as he stepped out into its embrace.

Sentries patrolled the dune, dark and silent shadows beneath the waning crescent moon. Elsewise, no other soul was present.

Sanwar tread away from the tents, and turned his back upon the guards. A sharp ledge lay at the other side of the camp, opposite the dune. Endless wastes continued in the valley where it fell away.

A figure stood at the precipice, *tharwb* and cloak billowing in the breeze. Sanwar would otherwise have thought him to be an illusion, for the man seemed not to move at all.

“Trouble sleeping?” asked Ibrahim without turning to face him.

“Nightmares,” he said.

Sanwar took Ibrahim’s side to see where he was looking. Yet, there was naught of interest below, only rock and sand.

“Were there crumbs beneath your bed?”

“Pardon?”

“That was one of my grandmother’s stories,” Ibrahim said with a thin smile. “If there are crumbs beneath your bed, then the *afrit* will visit you at night, and haunt your dreams.”

“I would rather that were the case.”

“You have memories of the War, then? Things that happened to you.”

“Things I have done,” said Sanwar.

Ibrahim nodded.

By now the night had cooled Sanwar's burning skin, and he felt the chill. He shivered.

"Twenty-two men I have killed in battle," said Ibrahim, after a long while.

Sanwar paused. "Ninety-five confirmed kills."

"*Wallah*," Ibrahim swore. "You were—"

"An army sniper," he finished.

The silence hung over them again. Then, the *Sheikh* broke it by drawing his long, curved sword. Each Bedouin rider carried a similarly shaped blade along with a carbine, but this weapon was far more ornate than usual.

The hilt was ivory inlaid with pearl and the guard was silver-steel, but Sanwar was far more entranced by the blade. Dark ripples ran down the length of it, and glinted softly when Ibrahim turned it in the moonlight.

"Damascus Steel," he uttered, gently placing a palm against the flat. "A technique lost to time. This blade has been carried in my family for generations. It is called, '*Nasim*'."

He turned the hilt to Sanwar, who accepted it with his left hand, and gave it several strokes.

He was less practiced with his left arm, but still proficient, and the blade was almost weightless in the hand. It was not as curved as Sanwar's sword, only towards the tip, yet it cut just as facilely, as if slicing

through the very air itself, and he was hardly giving it his full strength besides.

After a moment, Sanwar returned the blade. He already tired from the effort. At least the activity had warmed him some.

“You have a fine technique,” Ibrahim remarked with a smile, and slid the narrow blade into its sheath.

“My own blade is forged of the same steel,” Sanwar replied. “It is named, ‘*Cadarama*’, ‘*The Crescent Moon*’.”

“I have seen you carry it. You bear it honorably.”

Sanwar looked away.

“What were you looking at before I came?” He asked Ibrahim.

“The desert.” Ibrahim turned back to face it. “My father brought me here as a boy to hunt, to learn the ways of our ancestors, and not just the ways of the cities. When I cannot sleep, I come to look upon it.”

Sanwar gazed out at the emptiness beyond. “It is a harsh place; desolate, surrounded by death.”

“Perhaps,” said Ibrahim with a smile. “Or perhaps it is a place where life persists in spite of these things.”

He placed a warm hand on Sanwar’s.

“I think that I must retire,” he said. “Perhaps soon, you should as well. May you have pleasant dreams, Sanwar. *In Sha’allah*.”

And so, he took his leave.

Sanwar watched him go, the warmth still on his hand. When Ibrahim had gone, he turned back and stared out at the desert once more.

The days thereafter were hard going, but not as hard as they had been the first. Sanwar found himself enduring the heat after a time, and that his wound was less tender than before.

Nights were short. The company arose hours before dawn, rested during the hottest part of the afternoon, then resumed travel until several hours past dark. This had all taught Sanwar how to sleep on camelback.

After nearly ten days had passed, their water dwindled, yet Ibrahim assured them of resupply. There was a well along their route, housed inside an ancient temple. According to Ibrahim, the place was named "*Dhul Al-Qarnayn*", and was rumored to have been erected during the reign of Alexander. The tribesmen had drunk from its endless depths for generations, and Ibrahim promised there would be plenty of water and even small game in the shade of its palm gardens.

Jack had learned some of the Bedouins' songs, and sang with them as they rode. Occasionally, he would grace them with a Scottish tune, usually "*The Twa' Recruitin' Sergeants*", which made Ibrahim smile and Fatima grimace. Sanwar tried to remember some



Punjabi songs, but none came readily to mind, not that he felt inclined to sing.

At midday, they came within sight of the ruins. Though wind and sand had worn much of their faces away, many columns and statues yet stood tall on the horizon. Beyond them grew a grove of palm, where doubtless the temple garden and inner sanctum would have stood. Around the outside of the temple were lines of broken walls, some as low as chest height.

A stretch of clear unbroken ground led to these walls, giving them a perfect view of its magnificence. Upon seeing it, Ibrahim gave up a cheer.

“Fill your canteens and your bellies! We rest here until tomorrow!”

The Bedouins added their voices to the call. Even Fatima cracked the whisper of a smile.

Sanwar had no strength to cheer, but sighed in deep relief at the prospect of resting his weary feet and a long, cool drink of water.

That was when the first shot rang out.

## A Dark Pall Gathers

Whiffs of gunsmoke erupted from the ruins. A ragged volley burst forth. The muzzles flashed first, then came the cracking shriek of rifle bullets whizzing by, before finally the gunshots themselves were heard.

Men were running about the labyrinth of stones to find a position and add their rifle to the fusillade. The caravan was at the edge of range, but already Hasan's left arm had been grazed and another man hit, even if many rounds went wide.

The Bedouins steadied their beasts, and rushed into a staggered line. Hasan, ignoring his bleeding arm, joined Ibrahim's side. The *sheikh* drew *Nasim*, and thrust it at the enemy.

With a scream of challenge, the Bedouins charged.

The line lurched forward at an awkward trot at first, but swiftly gained its speed. Though not as fast as horses, the camels had impressive speed. Their great long strides propelled them at the enemy, and they growled at the flying bullets instead of being turned away.

Sanwar held onto Omar with his bad arm as their mount pounded along the sandy ground, and used his left arm to draw his own blade.

Some of the Bedouins had swords drawn too, but many opted for their carbines. They clutched both reins and trigger in one hand, while using the other to steady the weapon. Many of the shots they fired went wide, but they did not need complete accuracy, just enough to keep the enemy's heads down as they covered the distance between them.

Whoever held the ruined wall continued to fire back. Bullets howled past Sanwar's head. One man beside him was wrenched from the saddle by a chest shot, and dashed his head against the earth when he fell. A shot cracked, and Fatima slumped over in the saddle, but Sanwar had no time to dwell on her.

Ibrahim let out another cry.

*"Allahu Akbar!"*

*"Allahu Akbar!"* The others cried.

Jack shouted something out in Gaelic louder than all of them combined, and waved *Lann Dhearg* above his head.

Sanwar turned his blade towards the enemy, and found his own cry escape his lips. *"Bole So Nihal!"*

The camels thundered forward. They kicked a cloud of dust into the air now that they had reached full speed. The charge had cleared half the distance already, and the gap was shrinking even faster.

The men on the wall became visible; white men dressed in dark vests and shirtsleeves. Their numbers were double that of the Bedouins it seemed, but that

deterred Sanwar not at all. He would charge these ranks, and fight with shot and steel.

The line was nearing now.

Omar was laughing, cheering wildly with every yard of ground they gained. His sword was in his hand, twirling and shining in the Sanwar.

The scent of sulfur was thick in Sanwar's nose.

Then, a bullet struck his camel square in the jaw, and he and Omar went crashing towards the earth.

Jack's camel cleared the outer wall, easily the lowest of the three that lined the temple. When he did, he leapt down from the saddle, and flattened himself against the sand. Crawling on his stomach, he made his way to the middlemost wall, which stood about chest height. A section of it was missing stones, so he let go of *Lann Dhearg*, unslung his carbine, and used it to prop the barrel as he fired at the enemy.

Their attackers had retreated to the innermost wall. It was the tallest of three, standing just below the shoulders, and the defenders used it and the columns for cover as they blasted down on Jack.

A shot came dangerously close to him, spewing sand into the air when it struck the ground. Jack rolled back behind cover, blinking heavily to clear the debris from his eyes.

He glanced about once he could see again. Through teary eyes, he saw that most of the Bedouins had reached the outer walls as well. Some lay dead or

wounded in the sand, but the rest had scattered to whatever piece of cover they could find. Chips of stone blew away as each enemy round slapped into those walls. The Arabs responded when they could even poke their heads out, but a single one of their rounds was matched by three or four from the enemy.

Jack gave the defenders a few rounds of his own, however, in spite of the odds. They were trapped. Attempting to run would make them easy targets for getting shot in the back, and staying put would mean being worn down eventually. The only way forward was to find a weak point, and attack. There did not appear to be any yet, so Jack would just have to make one for himself.

His magazine emptied, he dipped behind cover once more, and loaded in another.

Suddenly, Ibrahim was beside him!

The man was pumping back his carbine's bolt, and squeezing off another shot while Jack reloaded.

"Aye! Where'd you come from?!" Jack shouted.  
"Wait. Never mind! Who's shooting at us!?"

"I do not know!"

"Alright!" Screamed Jack, and fired off another round.

"How many?" Called Ibrahim above the clangor.  
"Can you see?"

"One fewer now," said Jack, ducking back behind the wall.

"We must go forward!"

“I know!”

At least they agreed on that. However, no opportunity had presented itself. The enemy line was too well covered, and their fire was too heavy.

“Right flank!” Shouted Ibrahim.

Jack wheeled around.

Several attackers were scurrying about the broken ground, hopping from one piece of cover to the next. They were trying to get around Jack’s position, since the wall only protected him from a single side. His flanks and rear would be exposed if he allowed them to get into such a position.

He didn’t.

Jack’s first shot took one man in the guts. His second sent them back behind a fallen column.

He and Ibrahim then diverted their fire towards the right, working as a skirmish pair. While one man reloaded, the other protected him, so that there was always a steady stream of fire.

Both men lay flat, trading fire with this new threat. Jack had caught a glimpse of them. They were fair-skinned. Many had beards, and wore shirtsleeves and dark vests. He thought he heard them swear in Yiddish.

“It’s Weiss,” he growled to Ibrahim, who only nodded, and fired off another round.

“I have no ammo left,” the *sheikh* said a second later, and threw the weapon down. He drew a pistol instead, and kept shooting.

Jack did the same once he was empty too. Things were bloody desperate, but at least he preferred pistols. They had less of the range and power of a rifle, but they worked perfectly well in a close-quarters scrap like this.

He fired off a round from the Webley in his grip, the familiar kick and scent of sulfur bringing back his confidence.

Jack no longer desired a hero's death, but if it happened to him, he would make it the most damn heroic that he could.

“Eat lead and sand, you piece of shite!” He laughed, and fired at his enemies with wild, triumphant glee.

Sanwar rolled over in the sand.

The fall had only dazed him for a second, though thankfully not long enough for him to twist free from the saddle.

Omar had not been so lucky.

The proud Bedouin lay pinned beneath the camel carcass, its massive frame crushing down upon his chest. He had only gotten one leg out of the stirrup when all its weight had fallen on him.

Now, he was buried beneath his steed, bright sword in hand. His lungs let out a few last gasps of air, and his eyes rolled back white, but Sanwar had no time to comfort him.

Though his shoulder ached, he ignored the pain, and crawled through the sand to where the animal lay.

Despite his body's protestations, he reached underneath its body, and found the butt of Omar's carbine. With both hands, he tugged, and pulled the weapon loose.

He used the camel's corpse as cover, laying the gun on top of it, and staring down the iron sight.

He surveyed the field.

The charge had left him long behind. By now, the Bedouins had reached the outer walls, and were pinned down by heavy resistance from the enemy. On their right, a small group of attackers were attempting to flank the position, but temporarily were stalled by return fire.

It would not hold long.

Sanwar checked his bearings.

He was approximately one hundred yards from their position. A carbine had less range than a full-length rifle, but at this distance, it would suffice. The wind was blowing only lightly and on his left cheek.

He compensated for these factors, distance and wind, by training his weapon slightly high and to the left.

He would vacate the flank first, then work his way through any officers and sergeants after that.

With thumb and forefinger, Sanwar snapped back the carbine's bolt, chambered a round, aimed, and fired.



Ibrahim fired off his last round, before fumbling for his bandolier. He only had three rounds left, and jammed each one into the cylinders of his revolver while the bullets ripped overhead.

Jack started reloading a second later, trying not to drop each round as he popped them in.

There were only a few seconds' lull in their continuous fire, but a few seconds was more than enough.

Before Ibrahim could even load in his final cartridge, one of Weiss' men had stepped out from cover, and aimed his rifle at him.

The barrel pointed straight at Ibrahim. The man was steely-eyed as he held his breath, and put his finger on the trigger.

Then, his head exploded in a burst of gore.

A shot had come from somewhere in the rear, and had torn right through his temple.

The body dropped to the sand without reaction.

The other men turned and fled a moment later as a second man was shot in the back.

Jack grinned, wild-eyed. "Sanwar."

Ibrahim looked back to the enemy's center.

Weiss was there, bellowing over the confusion as his men continued to fall. Shots came from every possible direction, but always found their mark. Any man who put his head above the wall was sure to lose it. Some who ran were felled as well, but Weiss grabbed his men by the collars and shoved them on.

Ibrahim aimed for him, but the shot was long and missed. Then, the Jews vanished into the interior of the temple, out of the deadly sight of Sanwar's sniping.

Ibrahim saw the opportunity at once.

He snatched *Nasim* from the ground.

The moment was now.

"Charge!"

Sword in hand, he leaped over the wall, and ran straight after them. Jack was right there with him, screaming with his straight-bladed Scottish sword, and the others were just one step behind.

The Bedouins rushed over the walls, and through the archway where Weiss' men had fled. Inside was a roofless antechamber. Some of Weiss' militia had made it up some stairs to a parapet on the far wall, but the rest were still on the floor when Ibrahim collided with them.

His first blow struck the nearest man across the jaw, knocking him aside. His second was parried only just in time by the rifle stock of another.

The men on the parapet tried to aim at Ibrahim, but their fellows were in the way. The others tried to rush him in a melee, but soon there were a dozen more Arab warriors all around him, shrieking and wailing.

Ibrahim snarled at his foe, then turned his wrist over. The flicking motion brought the curve of his blade around the rifle, allowing Ibrahim to thrust in at an angle. The fluid motion caught the man off guard, then right in the heart with a deadly stab.

Before he fell, Ibrahim had found another opponent. This was one of Weiss' Bedouins, dressed head to toe in black, his face obscured by a dusty *shemagh*. He must have been a rival tribesman to have accepted English gold so readily. He would make a worthy foe.

Yet, when Ibrahim swung at him, he seemed uncertain with the weapon. He parried the initial blow with a hanging guard, but riposted awkwardly with a chop powered from the elbow, where he should have sliced with the whole length of his arm.

Ibrahim defended the blow, then demonstrated proper technique by slashing him across the eyes. He fell to his knees with hands clutching his face, blood leaking through his fingers.

That exchange had been a disappointment, but Ibrahim had plenty more foes to choose from, for when he looked about, he saw that he was totally surrounded.

No one had noticed Fatima.

When the bullets had started flying, she had slumped over in her saddle as if she were dead. She leaned forward against the neck of her camel with one hand hanging limp, but discreetly kept the other on the reins.

The ruse had worked, for no one had fired upon her as she banked her camel to the right. They must have either thought the beast had fled without its rider, or were too distracted by the incoming charge to notice.

In any case, she had made it all the way around the enemy position uninhibited. Gunfire cracked in the distance, yet she did not concern herself with such things. Ibrahim could distract the enemy. She had her own objectives to accomplish.

Fatima straightened in the saddle, and slowed her camel to a walk as she finally approached the right side of the temple. There was the same network of broken walls here, though totally unguarded of course. Beyond them was what appeared to be the main entrance. It was a yawning archway facing southwards. Beside it stood the stump of an ancient column, to which Fatima lashed her beast before she snuck inside.

She entered into a crumbled antechamber, whose walls had been reduced to little more than ankle height. Where there would have been a doorway wide enough to fit a dozen men abreast, was instead just empty space. Through it lay a central chamber, filled with statues, a garden, and the well.

Towering palms grew in clusters around the well, as did rings of greenery and shrubs. Two score of camels were fastened to their thick trunks. Fatima had known they would be here; no host could travel through the desert without the beasts, and they would need to be watered somewhere after all. If they had found this place, then they would have found the well.

A single guard watched the animals, or rather, he should have been watching them, but the clangor of battle had turned his attention elsewhere. Along the

western wall, a set of steps led to a parapet lined with columns. Armed militiamen were there among them, though their focus was on the other side of the wall, where the screams and gunfire sounded. No sign of friend or foe could yet be seen, but the guard, who looked even younger than Fatima, had hands white knuckled on his rifle stock.

The foliage allowed Fatima to creep around him much easier. Furthermore, his back was already to her, and the sounds of gunfire disguised her footfalls. Even if he had not been so distracted, she knew that she still could have snuck past him, as she did so often around the Jerusalem garrison. To them, she was just another ugly beggar girl on the street. No one looked at an ugly girl. No one wanted to look at an ugly girl.

When she reached the first camel, she undid its hitch. Bedouins tied them in such a way that while the camel could not escape, the knot could be undone with a single tug of the rope. So, Fatima went right down the line untying each beast in turn. She feared that their resistive grunts might give her away, but thus far, the young sentry had noticed not a single thing amiss. He did not notice as some of the animals drifted away from the clutch to graze a little, he was so engrossed.

As she worked, she ran a hand inside the saddle bags. Weiss' men were fighting, but she was hoping that an extra pistol had been left behind. Alas, none were present.

However, one of the bags contained a whistle. It was a simple brass tube on a chord with a ring to fit the finger. She had seen its make before, carried by British cavalrymen.

It would work even better.

Fatima pocketed the instrument, and finished untying the rest of the clutch. Once finished, she circled around to the northside of the chamber, and crouched behind a fallen slab of stone. She made certain one last time that the camels were facing the archway.

Then, she put the whistle to her lips.

Suddenly, there came a cry of alarm.

At first, Fatima thought she had been discovered, until a group of men appeared on the parapet.

They were soaked in sweat and blood, and shouted down to their fellows on the other side of the wall to follow them. A few trained their rifles, only to be rushed by Ibrahim's loyal Bedouins. A vicious melee then ensued upon the wall.

Fatima could have cheered for them just then, but quickly remembered her purpose.

She glanced back at the guard. The young man, seeing his fellows suddenly in danger, ran forward to join them on the parapet.

In doing so, he gave Fatima the golden opportunity. She blew the whistle hard.

Halfway up the steps, the guard jerked round, but it was too late.

The startled camels howled in fright, and ran.

The fight had turned into a bloody mess. Weiss could hardly tell what was happening anymore.

The Arabs had chased him from the outer walls into this chamber, but their attack had been overzealous, and now found themselves surrounded.

Yet, Weiss would hesitate to say that he was winning.

Completely trapped, the Arabs were fighting even harder. Some of his men had managed to fix bayonets, but those weapons somehow seemed pitiful against the Arab swordsmen. Those curved scimitars flashed in the sunlight and came back bloody.

Weiss had pulled a few men back to the parapet, but they could only look on helplessly at the press below. If any man were to fire into the melee, they would just as likely kill friend as well as foe. So, they were little more than a reserve now, waiting until the Arabs broke through the line.

And they would break through. They fought like the devils they were, it could not be denied.

There were two of them in the center of the fighting, who were especially fiendish.

One was huge, taller than most of Weiss' men. He wore a red sash around the waist, and wielded a strange straight sword unlike the others. However he had come by it, the man was deadly with the blade, and

strong. One cut from him hewed an arm off at the shoulder.

The other man wore white robes streaked with scarlet gore, and was bloody righteous in his killing. His long, thin scimitar whirled and slashed as he barked out orders to his men in their awful, guttural language.

The two men fought back-to-back, guarding one another against any attack coming from behind.

Weiss found them infuriating.

Carefully, he aimed his rifle, and hoped that a sudden break in the action would give him a clean shot. His aim was on the big man. He would be the easier of the two to hit, and Weiss did not want to waste his chance.

Weiss did not have to wait long.

The two Arabs had cut a man down, and opened a gap in the line. They had also cleared a path for Weiss to shoot.

He grinned.

Then, something jostled him, and his shot went wild.

Bloody Taggart!

The hideous Scotsman had been on the parapet beside him, but must have stumbled on a loose stone, because the damn fool bumped into him and cost Weiss the shot.

“You bloody *goy!*” Weiss blustered at him. “If we fucking win, I’ll bloody circumcise you with a rusty spoon!”



“Sorry,” Taggart mumbled in a way that suggested he was not.

There was no time to dwell on that *schmegegge*, however.

The Arabs had exploited the gap, and were through.

The men on the parapet rushed to intercept them on the steps, but the leading Arab slashed at the first man to reach him, and cut open across the belly. The man fell ten feet, and landed hard against the dusty floor below.

Taggart redeemed himself somewhat by wheeling around immediately, and pumping a shotgun slug into the Arab’s chest as retribution. Blood exploded from him as he was thrown aside, but it was not enough to slow the madcap charge.

Seconds later, the others were up the steps and swarming the parapet. Weiss turned his rifle around, and grabbed the barrel to wield it like a club.

An Arab rushed at him.

The man was a graybeard, but quicker than he looked. He dodged Weiss’ initial swing, and closed the distance in a blink.

Yet, Weiss was fast himself, and brought the weapon back.

The man caught the backswing with his offhand before it had gained its full momentum, just as Weiss anticipated.

He released the rifle, then thrust a hand to jam his attacker's sword arm. He caught it high, and grabbed the wrist to lock the hand in place.

Before the man could counter, Weiss yanked him forward, and at the same time, threw a straight hand punch to the chest. The sharp, twisting motion only added to power to Weiss' already formidable frame.

Bone crunched beneath his fist.

The Arab fell away with a shattered ribcage, but Weiss made sure to finish the job by stomping on his face with a hob-nail boot.

Fury burned inside him as he reduced the man to pulp. Silently, he cursed the Arabs. He had to fight them for an inch of land, and he had to fight for an ounce of water. He was tired of their ilk, and he would win this skirmish. Even with his losses, Weiss still had enough numbers to overwhelm the remaining Arabs.

When the old man stopped moving, Weiss sought another foe. Something brushed against his shoulder, and he spun about, ready to strangle the man who touched him, but saw that it was Samuel. The lad was pale with fear. Why was he not with the camels?

"Mister Weiss! Mister Weiss, sir!"

"Speak, damn it!"

The young man spoke.

"The camels! The camels, sir!"

Weiss grabbed him by the arms.

"What is it with them!? Bloody spit it out, lad!"

He saw what Samuel meant a moment later.

The camels were flooding out of the archway in a cloud of dust. The enormous, stinking beasts pressed and shoved each other just to escape, but it hardly slowed the momentum of the stampede. In seconds, the whole damn caravan was flying out into the open desert like bats from the gates of Hell, and with them all of their food, supplies, and water.

Weiss' heart sank into his balls.

Then, he exploded with rage all over again.

“Stop them! Retreat! Run! After them! Now! Stop the camels, God fucking damn it!”

Taggart echoed the commands.

The militia broke and ran.

Weiss was the first one out of the temple, barreling headlong into the desert and swearing with every stride.

The antechamber had become a charnel house.

Sanwar stepped over the severed limbs and fallen bodies, uncaring if blood and dirt caked on his boots, because there was already plenty of blood and dirt on them already.

He had watched the camels stampede from a distance and Weiss' men go running after them, and had only just now entered the temple. All was quiet after the blare of guns and dying men had gone, save for a solitary whimper, barely audible.

A gentle breeze caressed his face as Sanwar trudged over to the dying boy. He was truly a boy, barely into

his twenties. He had dark, curly hair and the whispers of a beard upon his sunburnt face. His eyes were childlike, the size and color of turquoise beads. A silver star hung loosely around his neck.

The boy had his hands clasped over a leaking wound in his guts. A sword thrust or a bullet had caught him just below the ribcage, though the result had been the same.

Sanwar clutched his own wound. Firing the carbine had burst the stitches and reopened it. His shoulder was bleeding heavily. The arm was going numb, so he had to draw the pistol from his belt with his left hand. At least there was no way that he could miss.

The boy wept silently, and shook his head.

Sanwar paused.

He thought better of it, and stored the blood-stained pistol back in its holster.

It would be wiser to save the ammunition, he thought, and found a knife on the young man's belt instead.

The boy tried to twist his head away as Sanwar placed his hands on it, incurring more blood to seep from his wound.

“This will be easier,” Sanwar told him, and he finally became still.

When finally he calmed, Sanwar tilted his head forward, and cut his throat.

Thirty seconds, and it was over.

He let the knife fall to the stone, and left the bodies behind.

The survivors of his company were on the other side of the parapet, clustered around the well. Jack was among them, thankfully, but they were few. Only Ibrahim, Fatima, and a pair of the Bedouins remained standing.

Jack ran to hug Sanwar immediately, but Sanwar stopped him with his good hand.

“My arm.”

“Jesus...”

Fatima ignored the blasphemy, and instead turned her ire unto Sanwar. “You ruined my stitching!”

“He saved are lives, damn your eyes!” Jack shouted back.

“So, I did nothing, then!?”

Sanwar had no desire to be involved in this.

“Enough.” Ibrahim’s tone was level. His voice was hoarse. “We are alive. We must thank God for that.”

“Omar is dead,” said Sanwar.

“As is Hasan,” Ibrahim replied.

Sanwar had seen the old man lying on the parapet, his face a mess of gore.

Ibrahim drew a deep breath, and continued. “As are most of my kin, save for three wounded men who can no longer ride. Damn Weiss.”

Sanwar drew his pistol again. “Very well.”

At once, Ibrahim took the gun away from him.

“I should be the one to do it,” the *sheikh* insisted.  
“They will forgive the deed if it is I who does it.”

Sanwar nodded.

“Better a bullet than the buzzards, I suppose,” Jack muttered to himself.

Ibrahim stuffed the pistol in his belt, and turned to face the others. “Weiss’ camels will tire eventually, then he will catch them. Our own fled to the north. They cannot be far, but I pray there are enough for all of us who live. Drink now, and fill as many canteens as you can. Be quick! We must ride at once. We journey north into the hills where they will not follow. We will ride until nightfall, now be quick!”

He left them brusquely, and went back to the antechamber. They then went about just as he instructed. Jack and the Bedouins removed discarded canteens from the bodies and drew buckets to refill them, while Fatima tended to Sanwar’s wound. She drew some water from the well, and used carbolic soap to clean away the sand that had already filled the wound.

“It will be impossible to keep this clean now!” She growled, and scrubbed hard into him. “You were a fool to come.”

Sanwar said nothing.

Statues of twisted deities long forgotten watched them as they worked. There were a pair of giant, horned creatures relieved in the columns on the

parapet, who looked down on Sanwar as Fatima redid his bandages.

Jack was watching him as well. Sanwar could not tell if his expression was one of fear or pity. Either way, his friend regarded him with queerness, and said nothing to him all the while.

Sanwar could not react to it.

Something else had captured his attention.

The light was darkening, though it was only past midday.

He looked back over the wall.

A storm was coming from the west.

## VI

### As Spirits Sing Sadly

His arm was shrieking.

Fatima had increased his dosage of morphine, but it had done little more than remove the edge. The sharp pain had become a dull one instead. Sweat dampened his bandages beneath his arm so much that they no longer stayed taught, but sagged and loosened. He was lucky that he and Jack shared a camel, otherwise he might have fallen from the saddle.

Sanwar said nothing to the others. He had not the strength, he told himself, for the sun was too strong and he was too weak. There was no time to stop besides. Ibrahim had commanded an unrelenting pace, and so an unrelenting pace they would keep.

They moved faster now that their caravan had shrunken and the six survivors had double mounted onto just three camels, but it never seemed fast enough for the *sheikh*, who rode at the head of the column and constantly spurred them on.

“Quickly now! *Imshi! Imshi!*” He cried even as they came in sight of the rolling hills. Every few seconds, he would glance over his shoulder again.

Through bleary eyes, Sanwar saw the source of his agitation.



The sky was darkening behind them. Gentle breezes had become a whipping gale. A wall of dust was steadily approaching from the horizon.

“Is that a bloody sandstorm!?” Jack called out to Ibrahim.

“Yes! Now, faster!”

His blood-stained *tharwb* was beating in the wind as he led them on. He tried to keep one hand over his *shemagh*, but it blew open too easily, so he ignored it and left his face exposed.

Sanwar squinted, and tightened his own face covering with his good hand. Sand tossed about the air, and stung at his eyes. The wind whipped at his cheeks. He could only bow his head to protect himself.

Ibrahim was leading them towards a rocky patch of hills on the horizon, perhaps two hundred yards away. These would offer some defense against the elements. They were little more than slanted mounds of stone and sand, but they could shield the caravan from the brunt of the oncoming winds.

“Hurry!” Ibrahim cried.

The storm was already overtaking them. Only Ibrahim was visible now. The two men riding behind Sanwar had vanished into a sea of whirling sand. Fatima clung to the *sheikh's* back as he rode in between the hills.

Jack spurred the camel after them.

It was an alien world riding amidst the rocky red slopes. A hellish orange sky billowed overhead as the

sun was blotted out from all existence. The world seemed to simply end at the edges of one's sight. The winds had turned to gales, and slammed against the stone like siege artillery. Sanwar then doubted if the walls of this ravine would even hold against the wrath of this storm, and feared that they would crumble instead, burying him alive in stone and sand.

Ibrahim had reached a steep slope, and lowered his camel to the ground. He jumped down into calf-deep sand, and shouted something to the others, yet over the howl of the wind, Sanwar could not hear a word of it. Somehow though, Jack had understood, and jerked their camel towards the hill.

Jack shouted something back to him over the clangor of the storm, but Sanwar did not hear that either despite being so close.

No, there was another voice that called to him; a fell voice on the air that knew his name.

*Sanwar.*

Sanwar turned back to see who had spoken, yet there was naught but a swirling vortex of utter blackness behind him.

*Sanwar.*

There were shadows in the air, deeper than the darkness; wicked faces wiling in the wind.

*Coward. False one. Murderer.*

*Only fools and liars believe that they are heroes.*

*You belong in here. With us.*

*Liar.*

They spread their wings like evil grins, and cackled at him in mockery.

Sanwar began to tremble. He wanted to cry out, “No!”, but the words were caught inside his throat and choked at him. He released the sound as a gasp instead, when his camel bumped against the ground.

“Aye! Hold on! I’ve got you!”

Suddenly, Sanwar felt himself being hoisted into the air. He looked down at Jack, who had heaved Sanwar onto his back, and was now carrying him up the hillside. Ahead of them, Ibrahim was doing the same with Fatima, who had latched onto his shoulders. The two men were trudging up the hillside towards the mouth of some great cave above, the only nearby source of shelter.

When Sanwar looked back down the hill however, the shadows were gone.

He shut his eyes.

The last sounds he heard were Jack’s heavy breathing as his back pressed against Sanwar’s chest, the pelt of sand against stone, and only the faintest laughter on the wind.

The cave was wonderfully cool, and guarded from the onslaught of the storm, though occasional spats of dust were still tossed inside. Outside, wind pounded against stone and sand skittered about, but inside, it was almost silent.

“This is where we would shelter sometimes on long journeys during the War,” Ibrahim told them, once he had caught his breath. “It should be safe enough for us to outlast this storm. *In Sha'allah.*”

Fatima clambered down from his back, so that he could assist Jack in lowering Sanwar down. They found the flattest stretch of rock they could that also far enough from the cave mouth, and laid him there.

She took the chance to survey the interior. They were near to the hilltop, so the save did not go back very far. It was just spacious enough for the four of them. With six, it would have been more crowded. However, the two remaining members of Ibrahim's guard were nowhere to be seen, and Fatima did not expect they would ever be again.

Although the roof was at a comfortable height for her, Jack and even Ibrahim were forced to crouch. They hunched their way over to her, and knelt beside Sanwar's unconscious body.

“He's feverish,” said Jack, testing his brow.

“Stand aside.”

Fatima inspected the man's shoulder.

It was as she feared.

“His wound will be fully infected soon.”

She peeled away the last of Sanwar's pus-stained bandages, and tossed them out of the cave. Jack clutched his nose as he she did.

“Jesus.”

Normally, Fatima would have scolded him for that, but presently, her attention was fixed on Sanwar. Dirt had crusted around the wound. The flesh would soon change color. It had reopened during the firefight, and once reopened, it was thus more susceptible to foreign agents. She was surprised that it had taken this long.

“Without proper medical attention, the limb will need to be amputated,” she determined.

“If you amputate him here, he’ll bloody well die faster!”

“Also, more than likely,” she replied.

Jack grabbed the dying man’s good hand.

“So, there’s nothing we can do for him?”

It was a foolish question, thought Fatima. Was it not obvious?

“No,” was all she said.

Jack hung his head, and for a moment, Fatima felt guilty.

However, Ibrahim interrupted the silence. “The camels will endure the storm, yet we cannot. Unfortunately, I could only carry so much water up the hill, and no food.”

He laid a pair of waterskins down on the cave floor. One had been his own, and was already partially drunk.

“How long will the storm last?” Jack asked. His voice was hollow.

“It will end tonight, *In Sha’allah*,” said Ibrahim. “But it will end when God chooses, and not before. We dare

not venture out again. The sand can tear the skin away so easily.”

“And what about our quest? What happens when the storm over?”

Ibrahim paused.

“When it is over, we will decide. For now, we must rest.”

The *sheikh* followed his own advice, by pressing himself against the wall, and sinking down to a seated position. Even though his white robes were now a filthy brown, the man still kept his back straight and his chin high. He sat with perfect stillness, and said no more.

Jack tried to follow his example, but simply chose to lay beside his friend.

Fatima found some space closer to the mouth. She did not need much. Exhaustion had beset at the mere mention of rest, yet somehow, she could not fall asleep right away. Her body ached. She could not find a comfortable way to sit, yet it was not the stone that prevented her. After some minutes, her eyes were open again.

She looked back at the others. Jack was motionless on the floor. Ibrahim remained almost as he was. Yet, his mouth was moving slightly.

At first, she thought that he was talking in his sleep, until she leaned closer and heard him praying. His hand was placed on top of Sanwar's as he repeated the words again and again.

Fatima crawled closer to the three of them, and curled herself into a ball at Sanwar's feet. She listened to Ibrahim's prayer repeat and repeat, letting it slowly lull her off to sleep.

The great tall grasses of the wide green fields swayed gayly in the breeze. Treetops wavered, their leaves bristling against each other. Last night had been a rain, but the sun was shining now, drying off the earth. The moisture cooled the air, so that the day was pleasant, even during this season. Children played in the wide, dirt roads, splashing their feet in its warm puddles. Farmers walked past and smiled at them. Women were out hanging the clothes, singing as they worked.

Sanwar watched them all through a window. He saw himself, a boy of eight, sitting at a desk with his hands laid out in front of him.

His tutor was staring down at him, her eyebrows scrunched into a disapproving glare. He noticed every detail of her; her thin white hair tied back into a bun; her thin red lips twisted into a frown; the long stout yardstick clasped behind her back.

"Good morning, Master Sanwar. How are you today?"

"I am well, Madame Barlow, and yourself?"

"Quite well," was Madame Barlow's instant reply. She spoke the words with automatic disdain. "Please recite the English alphabet for me."

Sanwar did so. He said them every night before he went to bed, at his father's behest.

"Very good," said Madame Barlow when he was finished, unimpressed. "Now do the same, but backwards."

Suddenly, his mind went blank. He only knew them forwards!

He did not know how to begin, but Madame Barlow's eyes were burning down at him, and he knew that he had already taken a second too long to respond.

Sanwar swallowed, and began.

"Zed..."

"Continue, Master Sanwar."

Her contemptuous inflection indicated to him that his hesitation had been too long.

"Y...*Lalaa*..."

In his nervousness, he had recited the Punjabi letter inadvertently.

The yardstick struck down across his knuckles.

Sanwar did not recoil, despite the stinging blow. Madame Barlow required that his hands must always be visible upon his desk. Failure to comply would result in a blow across the cheeks instead. His parents had given her permission to use whatever methods necessary to teach him, and so the woman would never be punished for striking the heir.

"That will not be uttered here," Madame Barlow reminded him yet again. "This classroom is for English only. Once more from the beginning."



So Sanwar held back his tears, and continued in spite of bloodied hands.

“My pleasure, Madame Barlow. Zed, Y, X, W...”

“And what is your company?”

Now, Sanwar was a man standing in uniform before his father. He stood head and shoulders above him, but still his father never diminished in the presence of any man.

“What is your company?” His father asked again.

“B Company, my lord.”

“And whom will you serve?”

“My Country and my King.”

“Very good.”

Then, Sanwar was standing once again on the beaches of Gallipoli, surrounded by the men of B Company. Their eyes rolled back, not one of them would ever move again. The wind caressed their blood-stained beards and brushed against their sweat-soaked uniforms.

They had fought and killed and died for King and Country. Sanwar had seen to that.

Jack awoke in darkness. First, he snapped out the kinks in his neck and then in his back, both of which echoed in the cave. When his eyes had adjusted, he looked down at Sanwar beside him. His friend’s breathing was labored and shallow.

Ibrahim’s canteen was nearby, so Jack eased some into Sanwar’s mouth, then lifted and tilted his head so

that it ran down his throat. Afterwards, Jack finished what little was left inside the skin.

His bladder urged him over to the rear of the cave, because there was nowhere else. The storm raged on through what must have been the night, because the sky had darkened even further outside. Sand pattered against the stone, and the wind continued to moan.

Jack undid his trousers beneath the *thawb*, and let loose the stream. He could barely see its color in the gloom, but the smell was stronger than usual and burned a little, so it stood to reason that it was darker than it should be.

“Aw fuck.”

Head bent, Jack stumbled back towards his “bed”, until he noticed a blotch of shadow near the entrance. Only after a long moment did he realize that it was Fatima, for she was nowhere else to be seen.

Jack approached her carefully, and took a seat beside her.

“Did you sleep any?”

She stared out at the storm. “Some. My dreams awoke me.”

“Aye.”

“I have not dreamed in years.” Her cloudy eye moved right and left, as if searching for something out there in the swirls of dust.

Jack stared out as well, wondering what she was looking for, but all he saw was the dust.

“It was a British shell.”

“I’m sorry?” He said.

“The thing that gave me this.” She turned to face him, showing her scarred face beneath the cowl of her headscarf.

“What happened?”

“My family owned a soap factory in Jerusalem. We made lime soap. During the war, the Turks ordered that we made medical soap as well. When the British besieged the city, an artillery shell struck our factory while we were working. I was standing near the quicklime kiln. Our stores exploded on impact. My family died instantly, I was told. Vaporized.”

There was nothing Jack could say.

“I was a beggar until Hokmah found me,” she went on, unaffected by his silence. “From her, I learned everything that I now know. It seems that all of that knowledge will be squandered.”

“You think we’re all going to die here?”

“Yes.”

Jack gave a rueful grin. “And just when I started wanting to live. Funny, I suppose.”

Fatima did not laugh.

She only sat, and watched the storm whip past.

Finally, Jack spoke again.

“I had a wife when I was about your age. Last time I saw her was before deployment to France.”

“Is she dead?”

“No, but she might as well be. She’s very far away. In a place I’ll never see again most likely. Well, definitely not anymore.”

“Where?”

“Home.”

She nodded.

“I suppose we hope or fear that things will always be the same,” said Jack. “Until we have nothing left.”

This time, Fatima did not agree. She shook her head and said to him, “Some things we can never lose.”

Jack paused, and looked back at Sanwar.

“Aye. You might be right.”

“Yes,” she said, looking where he was. After a good long while, she smiled. “But perhaps I was wrong about something else.”

“What was that?”

She looked at him, all the while cradling her crucifix in her tiny hand.

“I think now, we will not die here.”

Sanwar’s dreams were filled with water.

He remembered the day, as a boy of thirteen nearly fourteen, when his father was away, and he ran out to a stream deep in the forest. The forest had always been his favorite place, he could spend days there if he wanted, but it seemed like there was less and less time for it now that he was getting older. Still, this day belonged to him.

The stream was heavenly bliss. He drank from its waters and played about in its flow. It was an early summer's day, before all the springs had fully warmed, and so its coolness felt all the cooler. This was his domain. He knew all the plants and animals of the forest, birds and butterflies especially, in both their common and their Latin names. He picked mangoes from the trees, and headed down to where the stream became a waterfall and there were vernal pools to bathe in.

In the hills were hot springs for the winter days, but down here at their feet was cool serenity. Sanwar stripped down to his *kachera* and *khalsa gatra*. He submerged into the water, letting it cleanse and overtake him.

He arose with a grin, and breathed not just fresh air, but a sigh of relief. It was such a perfect day. He wished that Samreet, his younger sister, were with him, or even little Jogandar to share in its marvelousness.

Yet, Sanwar was not alone.

Twigs cracked in the brush, and Sanwar froze. He feared that he had awoken some animal from its slumber, until he heard footsteps. Then, he was truly afraid. Perhaps it was a bandit in the woods or worse...one of his father's servants sent to find him.

It proved to be neither.

A tall, white man emerged from the growth, looking haggard despite his fine clothing. He used a cane to push the brush aside as he made his way to the water's

edge. Hurriedly, he dropped to his knees and drank from it. The man then noticed Sanwar in the pool and was nearly as startled as he was.

“I’m sorry to disturb you,” he said in perfect English, and backed away to show he meant no harm.

“No, good sir, it is I who has disturbed you,” Sanwar returned, and rose to leave the pool at once.

The man raised a hand to stop him, then gestured to the water. “Please.”

Sanwar conceded, and returned to the pool. The man then tore off his shirt, hat, and shoes, and joined him on the far side. He immersed himself fully underwater, then emerged with his own a sigh of relief.

Sanwar thought him strange. He seemed much more candid than all the other white men Sanwar had met, and completely unconcerned with his demeanor around the boy.

“It’s not much farther to town, is it?” The man asked eventually.

Sanwar shook his head.

“That way,” he answered timidly, pointing east.

“I’m grateful, thank you,” the man replied, and it seemed he meant it. “I’ve traveled a good long way, you see, and there’s farther still to go.”

“Where are you going?” Sanwar ventured. He figured the question was innocent enough to ask.

“West. I have some business to attend there.” He said this as if he had any business traipsing about the

woods, yet Sanwar did not question him about it further.

Instead, his attention was drawn to the man's cane, propped against the tree trunk. It had an ebony staff with a silver head in the shape of a serpent. The serpent's eyes were inlaid with sky blue gemstones that sparkled in the sunshine.

“Shouldn't you be at home?” The man's question drew Sanwar's attention back to him. “It will be dark soon. I'd reckon your parents will be worried about your absence.”

Sanwar looked above. Indeed, the light was fading, and it would take a few hours to get back to the manor. He had hardly noticed how swiftly the hours had passed by.

“They worry for my absence, yes, but not for me,” Sanwar found himself saying. Immediately, he realized the slip of his tongue, and directed the conversation elsewhere. “You must be hungry, sir. There are some mangoes there by the trees. Please have one.”

“I don't hunger easily, but thank you. That is kind of you.”

The man pulled himself onto the shore, and accepted a ruby red mango from underneath the tree. He produced a knife from his clothes pile, and peeled the fruit.

“This is an ancient forest,” the man said after a bite. He gazed among the towering boughs. In the twilight, they took on an eldritch quality, and there was a

meditative stillness about the air. “Filled with secrets man has not yet learned or was not meant to know.”

“I often visit it in my dreams,” Sanwar found himself saying too much again, yet the words did not seem his own. He stared off into the darkness of the underbrush. “I see a great red light coming from the hilltops as if a fire is burning deep within.”

“Do you see a Stone as well?”

“Yes,” Sanwar replied in Punjabi, then realized the question had been asked in the language first. How did this stranger know it?

He turned around at once to ask him, but nobody was there.

Sanwar searched about, yet the man was gone. All that remained of him was a little book, resting beneath the tree where his clothes had been. Sanwar exited the water and approached. Its title was inlaid with gold leaf on red leather pages:

*Alchemy.*

If it were not for this, Sanwar would have thought the man never existed all, for he could not recall a single thing about him, not even his face.

A great light awoke Sanwar. Even with his eyes shut, its brilliance shone true. When he opened them, his vision was bleary. Sanwar wiped away the scaly crust around them weakly with his good hand.

He barely had the strength to pull himself into a seated position against the cave wall. Both arms ached,



yet it was the right arm stung to even the faintest touch and reeked of gangrene. Dizziness set in once he had stopped moving. He felt strangely cold despite the heat. His ashen throat stabbed at him with every breath.

His companions were motionless around him. Ibrahim lay beside him, and Jack and Fatima were sprawled to one side, breathing weakly. Outside, the light suggested it was early morning, but already the heat was mounting, even in the coolness of the cave. They were alive, but for how much longer? How long had it already been?

He reached for the discarded canteen next to Ibrahim. The lightness of it betrayed its emptiness. However, Sanwar would fight for meager drops if it would ease his burning throat.

Limply, he tried to unscrew the stopper with one hand. After nearly a minute, it came undone, and he pressed the muzzle to his cracked lips. Only air came out to dry his mouth even further, followed by a few sad tears of water; the last of the canteen's contents.

Sanwar let his arm drop, and the empty waterskin fall away.

It was hopeless, he knew.

He shut his eyes again.

Suddenly, they snapped wide opened.

In his delirium, Sanwar had failed to notice that the sun was shining.

The storm was over, and that meant that their camels were down the slope with skins full of fresh clear water drawn from the well.

Sanwar wanted desperately to shout and wake the others, yet his mouth was far too parched and his voice had vanished from him. In desperation, he tried to arouse Ibrahim beside him, but only succeeded in eliciting a groan with a flaccid brush against his side.

No, Sanwar would have to go himself.

He wheezed an ashy breath at the realization, and flopped onto the floor. Skin scraping against the cool stone, he crawled for the entrance with his good arm.

It took ten minutes for him to travel thirty feet. When at last he neared the entrance, voices sounded below.

There were many of them, speaking indistinctly. In this state, Sanwar could not perceive if they were speaking English or not. He inched forward a step before stopping himself, and slowly spinning himself back around. He rotated on his good hand back towards Ibrahim's body, crawled back another thirty feet to find what he needed, then rotated again and crawled to the entrance once more.

This time, he exited. He needed to see.

So, Sanwar dragged himself out into the swelter. Above, the sky was clear and blue as could be. Below, troops of men trudged through knee-deep sand on camelback in a train that stretched back several dozen yards. Some had dismounted to guide the animals

through the narrow gully, while others were combing the hillside where Sanwar was.

Sanwar groaned, and eased forward to see them more clearly. They were dressed in khaki uniforms with a white kepi hat and coif to shade them from the sun. Several used their rifle butts like walking sticks to journey up the slope, with a few more scouring the hilltops at its base with rifles trained. They were also guarding Ibrahim's camels, and therefore, all of the water.

By no coincidence, Sanwar's sword and pistol had been left behind on their mounts as well, which had led him to take Ibrahim's instead.

With his good hand, he aimed the weapon to the clear, blue sky. Fingers trembling, he squeezed the trigger.

Sanwar dropped his arm in sheer exhaustion as he heard the shouting from below. It no longer concerned him. He reckoned that if he died, at least the others had a chance, and so, he shut his eyes at last.

## VII

### Of the Deal Bespoken

The French had bivouacked beneath a high arching overhang in the ravine. Progress had stalled due to the capture of the four prisoners, and so the soldiers had reluctantly made camp.

These were no ordinary troops, but the *Le Légion de Syrie*, as designated by the white kepi upon their heads. They were hard men; mercenaries, criminals, and broken souls who now knew no other life than soldiering. They were of all creeds and colors; white men, Africans, and others- it mattered little as long as they could fight. Ibrahim had faced them once before, when France fought Syria two years prior. They were a fierce company, and their word to any employer was as good as gold. Chantal had no doubt used the best of her connections just to have a platoon of them at her disposal.

She had also a number of Bedouins with her as well. Many were from a rival tribe, those who had chosen to sell their souls to France. They stared at Ibrahim as a pair of legionnaires led him and Jack through the camp and towards the main pavilion. Several of them spit at him, but Ibrahim paid them no heed. What was a traitor's spit worth, anyway?

No, he was more fixated on a group of Bedouins whom he did not recognize. They were fewer than the rest, and curiously looked past Ibrahim as he went by them. One of them did not show face, nor even his eyes, as he covered his entire visage in a black *shemagh* and a pair of round dark glasses. Ibrahim did not trust a man whose eyes he could not see, and a chill ran down his spine as this stranger's unblinking gaze followed them to the tent. Thankfully, the legionnaires then shoved him and Jack inside and shut the flap behind them, and the stranger was seen no more.

It took of a few moments of heavy blinking to adjust to the shadiness, but once accustomed to the gloom, Ibrahim surveyed the tent's interior.

*Mademoiselle* Chantal Tournai-Blanc sat at a great long table in front of them. Her pouty, little chin rested on a set of long, folded fingers, as she regarded each man contemptuously. On that table lay the scroll, the map, and the diary, all taken from their camels.

Behind her was a tall, thin captain with an equally thin moustache; the commander of the legionnaires who surrounded this tent. He only carried a revolver on his belt, but it was more than enough to defend against two half-dead, unarmed men.

After a cursory inspection of her subjects, Chantal crossed to stand in front of the table. She wore a pair of white shirtsleeves with the cuffs rolled back to the elbows, and khaki jodhpurs equipped with shiny knee-high boots made from soft red leather.

Of course, no riding outfit would be complete without a riding crop, which she flicked out and pointed in Ibrahim's direction.

"My guides tell me that you are *sheikh* of another tribe," said Chantal in almost an accusatory manner. "They say that you can speak French too."

"Yes."

"Pardon me?"

"Yes," said Ibrahim again.

Although the legionnaires had given them all water upon capture, it had been minimal, and his voice was weak from dryness still. However, even if his words were softly spoken, he retained an upright posture while addressing the heiress.

"Was I so...forgettable?" He continued, a bit more strongly this time. When her face twisted in confusion, he explained. "We met in Jerusalem... perhaps a fortnight ago...or longer...before this whole...façade. My name is Ibrahim."

Chantal paused and recollected.

"No, I do not remember you," she declared at length. "But that is not important now, because you want what it is I want."

With her riding crop, she brushed aside Jabir's scroll to reveal a second piece of parchment underneath. It was nearly identical to the first, although it was torn along the bottom edge rather than the top. This scroll had also a different illumination from its twin; a shining chalice drawn in cinnabar and goldleaf.

“The Grail,” Chantal said with reverence. “The treasure in this desert greater than gold, whether it is black or any other color. You. Weiss. You both want it for yourselves.”

“I do not want it for myself,” said Ibrahim.

“This matters not to me. All that matters is that you want it.”

She looked down at the objects laid about the table, carefully inspecting each of them with long, delicate fingers.

“How came you by these things?” She asked, finally.

“We’re bloody Alchemists. Unlike anyone around here apparently.”

Jack’s intrusion almost caused Chantal to fall back against the table. Her great doe eyes opened wide as plates and scanned the massive Scotsman up and down, while her mouth quivered in disgust. At last, it settled on some words for him.

“How dare your servant speak to me like this!? And in French no less!”

“I’m not his servant, and you’re not an Alchemist,” Jack returned. “And I’ll tell you to blow it out your arse in French, Arabic, or god damn Hieroglyphics if you’d prefer.”

The man’s gall was astonishing. Somehow, Jack was just as bellicose in a half-dead state as he was fighting off Weiss’ militiamen. Ibrahim could hardly help from smiling.

“You insolent fool,” Chantal sneered. “Kill this whoreson for me, Pierre.”

The captain drew his pistol, but Ibrahim stepped between them. Jack’s bravery had become suddenly infectious, and Ibrahim found that the initial shock of his revealed identity had won them some initiative.

“It would be unwise for you to kill him, *mademoiselle*,” he warned, putting up his hands.

“It was unwise for you to step in front of him,” Chantal shot back. “*Capitaine* LeRoux. Kill him, then the servant.”

Jack sighed at that address, but Ibrahim kept his wits.

“You are lost,” he said.

The captain hesitated, which told Ibrahim that he was right.

“You know not what you say,” Chantal diverted.

“No, you are lost.” Ibrahim’s confidence was growing. “Or else you would not have come this way. Even with the sandstorm, you should not have been marching this far north. And you were marching in the wrong direction when you found us...”

Chantal bristled. In an instant, she had the alabaster map snatched into her hand.

“Well, I have your map now, so it does not matter! I will find the tower, and then the Grail once we are there.”

“Will you?” Jack’s tone was as insubordinate as it was incredulous. Yet, his voice was rising in strength, as if



building off Ibrahim's momentum. "Because you've only just got your hands on another piece of that scroll. You don't even know about what's waiting for you when you get there."

"I will find out for myself."

"Very well," Jack shrugged. "But what happens when you run into one of Jabir's puzzles? I don't know how you translated your scroll, if you even did, but another Alchemist would be useful to have. Every laboratory I have witnessed has been laden with puzzles and traps that only we can solve. Why throw that away, especially when you can have four Alchemists instead of one?"

Ibrahim saw that Jack had included him in the number, even though his knowledge of the Art was minimal at best. The Scotsman had done it to spare his life. Ibrahim only hoped that it would work. He decided to add his own contribution to ensure that it would.

"Please spare us, *mademoiselle*, and we will serve you even after the Sto- the Grail is in your hands. We will forever be your humble servants."

"Servants?" Chantal scoffed. "I need to make you into slaves so that you learn obedience." Then, she paused for a long while. Finally more collected, she raised an eyebrow. "Four Alchemists, you say? I think you meant three."

"Three?" Asked Jack.

Ibrahim panicked internally, worried that they had been caught in a lie. But how could she know?

“That wounded man will die,” Chantal corrected. “Soon enough. Then you will be three.”

“Yooou must save him!” Pleaded Ibrahim. “He can be of use to you! He is the best of all of us!”

“I must do nothing,” she said, resuming her seat at the table. “Yes, he may be of some use in the future, but until then, he will be a burden and I must therefore cut my losses. LeRoux, send these fools back to their tent.”

“But wait-!” Cried Ibrahim.

But Chantal did not wait. Instead, she went right back to her papers as *Capitaine* LeRoux threw them out into the heat.

When the prisoners were gone, Chantal eased back into her chair and sighed. The sooner the Grail was in her hands, and she was out of this horrendous country, the better. She hated the heat, she hated the desert, and she hated Syria, yet she had to show these Arabs that she was man enough and that a white could master their ungovernable land as well as they. Until then, she had to endure all this drudgery.

At least she had a few small comforts. There was an ice chest in the back of the tent, which she opened to fill a silver cup with frosty white chips. She added water to the cup and drank it gladly. In the desert, ice was as precious as gold.

Lazing back in her chair with drink in hand, Chantal gazed down at the map. It was made of gypsum or some such thing, and beautifully rendered. A detailed layout of all the Levant's natural features was carved into its surface. Near to the center was a great peak.

Rothstein had mentioned a mountain, but had said little else about geography. No, Chantal's concern had only been the Grail.

She was hoping that Weiss would lead them there. The Bedouins knew their way through the desert, until it came to these hills. They avoided coming within ten kilometers of the mountain for fear of wicked spirits, a childish notion. Yet, Weiss had seemed confident. When she learned that he wanted this land for himself, she had become suspicious and her suspicions were confirmed by the Doctor, who claimed that Weiss had come to him as well.

She was hoping that the Jew would lead them straight to the mountain, but they had lost his trail when the storm came. It mattered not anymore. Perhaps Weiss had a better map, or perhaps he did not. Now Chantal had one in her possession. If she moved quickly enough, she could get there ahead of him. These prisoners would not slow her down. She would see to that.

The tent flap opened a moment later, and *Capitaine* Pierre LeRoux re-entered. She smiled whenever she saw him. Her father had bought these soldiers for her, but she had made certain to choose the handsomest

among their officers. All of them had skill in battle, but she needed more than that.

“The prisoners are secured, my lady,” he reported dutifully.

She loved it when he called her that.

“Excellent, now come here.”

Ever obedient that one. He came to her at once, and she pressed her body against his, and slid his hand down between her legs.

“We cannot leave until tomorrow,” he said. “It is too late to break camp.”

“What will we do until then, I wonder?” She teased.

He tried to kiss her, but she pulled away. He would have to work for it. She turned to the map instead, and stroked it with her hand.

“Soon, an Empire will be born.”

“Our empire, and you will be my queen,” said Pierre. He did not wait at all, but began tasting her cheeks and neck. His hands started searching all over her body.

Chantal smiled. It would be her empire.

Charlemagne, Napoleon, and the Crusader kings had all had one thing in common: they had died.

The Grail would change that. Anyone could build an empire, but even the greatest would fail eventually after its ruler was gone. It might take years or it might take centuries, but it always would in the end.

Chantal would not make that mistake. She would live forever, and so too would her dominion. Wealth and power were limitless with the Grail already, but

eternal life would ensure that they would always be hers.

More importantly though, she would be young forever. She no longer needed to fear her mother's fate. Men would always desire her. Pierre would make a nice lapdog, but there would be plenty more after him. She would play along with it for now.

"You are not yet king," she told him. "Until then, you are under my orders. You shall not forget it."

"Never."

"Good. Now kneel before your queen."

He knelt.

It was a good thing Pierre was tall, because his face was at the perfect height.

Someone cleared their voice.

Pierre jumped to his feet. Chantal spun around, and smoothed out her shirt. A shadow loomed outside the tent flap expectantly. Chantal was about to call him in, when she remembered to button her trousers again.

"Enter," she commanded once she and Pierre were decent, although the response had taken a suspiciously long amount of time.

Major Singh certainly wore suspicion when he entered. Chantal already did not enjoy his face. It was plain, honest, and dark, but as his eyes moved between her and LeRoux, she resented its smugness more. Besides, he hardly even spoke any French.

"I trust that I'm not interrupting any important strategic discussions," he said.

“Not at all. *Capitaine* LeRoux and I had just decided to remain here for the evening,” she replied, quickly switching to English.

“Very good, ma’am. If that is indeed decided, then I would like to discuss another matter.”

“Speak then.”

“I just came from the prisoners’ tent. You must give immediate medical attention to the wounded man.”

“And why *must* I?”

“Because he is worth more to you alive than dead.”

“Is he?”

“You heard about the attack in Jaffa? He was responsible. The British government will reward you handsomely for his return.”

“I would imagine they would hang him just as soon as he was given back,” Chantal yawned. “Besides, whatever they could pay me would not be enough to carry him around for so long.”

“Then give him to Lord Saxon,” said Singh.

“Saxon? Why?”

“They’ve long been enemies, this man and Saxon, ever since they were in school together. He has been nothing but a thorn in Saxon’s side for years.”

“Saxon and that miserable wretch studied together!? Ridiculous.”

“If you were able to speak to him you would see that he is educated,” countered Singh. “And if you were to deliver him to Saxon, I am certain it would be worth your while.”

“Is that so...?”

The Major smiled. “Yes indeed, *mademoiselle*. I think he could offer you something very generous in exchange.”

Sanwar lay motionless while the maggots did their work. Surgery had been too risky, so the company doctor used a box of the larvae instead. The wound had first been drained of pus and cleansed, so that the tiny white grubs could consume the necrotic flesh. All the while, their host lay sweat soaked and bloodstained on the stretcher.

Fatima had been permitted to stay with him while Jack and Ibrahim were being questioned, and she had been permitted again while Sanwar was in the medical tent, provided she behaved herself. Perhaps it was permission, or simply relegation. In any case, the French had refused any of her medical assistance, or much acknowledgement as a matter of fact. The man guarding her mostly avoided any eye contact with her, but she was used to that by now.

The surgeon seemed competent enough, at least. Thankfully, he had reconsidered his initial notion to amputate. It was likely, given their environment, that it would only worsen Sanwar’s condition. For some reason, great care was suddenly being taken to keep him alive. Fatima tried not to question it.

She had decided that Sanwar was a good man. As much as she wanted to, she could find no fault in his

conduct or Jack's for that matter. They had each fought bravely, and shown their loyalty. There was no denying it. Besides, they were all in this great mess together, and there was shirking from their commitments now. They had no choice.

Perhaps she had been too quick to judge them. It was almost instinctual at this point, as the world had been so quick to judge her.

Either way, it was hard to see Sanwar like this. She had watched so many die before her on the streets of Jerusalem, that she had thought herself numb to death by now. But those lost souls had more often been given the mercy of dying quickly, even if their deaths had been violent and painful. Yet, Sanwar had always seemed so proud, so noble in his bearing, that it pained her to see him as he was now; pale and nearly skeletal, barely moving as he lay dying in the heat.

She had treated his wounds before, but it was one thing to die from a wound endured in the heat of battle and another to linger in agony over days or weeks until the end finally came. He deserved to have died with his sword in hand or as an old man, surrounded by loved ones in a great big house. Perhaps many whom Fatima had seen die deserved the same.

"That is all I can do," the surgeon said, removing the maggots and tying off the last of Sanwar's bandages. He had said it more to himself more than anyone.

It was the best that could be done, Fatima knew. The wound had been festering for too long. Only his



body could defend him now. Only his body would decide if he would live or die.

The surgeon washed his hands in precious water, then left the tent. As soon as he was gone, a pair guards appeared escorting Jack and Ibrahim over to the stretcher.

They both apologetic looks to Fatima before taking their place at Sanwar's side. Wordlessly, they stood beside him for a good long while, their hands laid gently on his arm.

It was strange, the unspoken honor between men.

At last, the silence was interrupted when someone cleared their throat. A new man had entered tent. Like Sanwar, he was a Sikh, though the tip of his beard was whitening with age. It took Fatima a moment to place him as Major Singh, commander of an Indian unit garrisoning Jerusalem.

Apparently, Jack recognized the man as well, for he was also taken back.

"Ravinder...?"

The Major gave him a curt nod.

"You must be MacGregor."

"I am."

"How is he?" Singh had already turned his attention to Sanwar. He stood by his side, and took the wounded man's hand in his.

"Weak," answered Fatima. "He may survive...but it is likely he will not."

"He must live, *In Sha'allah*," Ibrahim swore.

“They should have treated him sooner,” Singh replied after a moment, then released Sanwar’s hand and sharply turned on his heels to face the exit. He stopped at the door however, and addressed them all. “Tomorrow, we resume march. You two men will carry him. You will tend to him and see that he survives.” That last remark was aimed at Fatima, before the Major strode straight out of the tent without another word.

“How do you know this man?” Ibrahim asked Jack when he was gone.

“I don’t,” replied Jack. “Not personally, at least. But he and Sanwar knew each other during the war. They were friends.”

“Friends...? I see.”

“He is Saxon’s creature,” Fatima warned. “Here to ensure his interests.”

“What interest does Saxon have in keeping Sanwar alive though?” Jack wondered.

“What do you mean?”

“Last time Sanwar and I met Saxon, he left us to die,” he explained. “Now the French have changed their mind about saving him. Only Ravinder would have contested it, which by extension means Saxon wants something with him.”

“Whatever it is, he will not have it.” Vowed Ibrahim. The *sheikh* had grown very dark indeed as he said the words. A chill blew down Fatima’s neck and arms when he did.

“Sanwar must first make it back to Jerusalem alive,” she countered, gathering her wits again. “And we must make it to the tower before that. Until then, no vengeance will be available to us.”

At that, Ibrahim fumed and turned away from her. He got that way sometimes, but only when he was impassioned about something. She knew because she often did the same.

“We should let Sanwar be for now,” Jack suggested, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Nothing more we can do for him now.”

Fatima found herself agreeing. “Jack is right. We need rest ourselves. Come, Ibrahim. Please.”

“Yes,” he said, the darkness in his tone now replaced with tiredness. “Yes, you are right.”

They slept through most of the day, with only an interruption for a meager meal of water, fruit, and bread crusts. Their tent was made only slightly more hospitable with several canvases laid out to act as bedrolls. By nightfall, the three of them all found themselves awake again during that interim between fits of sleep.

Jack lay in the dirt, absently tossing pebbles in the air. It was all he could do to keep his mind off Sanwar. Mostly, his thoughts meandered back to the question he had been asking himself for a good long while:

Who had shot him back in Jaffa?

The list was far too long, yet Jack kept running through it in his head, trying to rule out any options.

He couldn't.

So instead, he tried for a time to see if he could solve the riddle of the white eagle, to similar results. There were too many substances, too many white compounds to even narrow it down.

Eventually, he just stopped trying, and wondered if Fatima was also thinking of the answer. She lay across from him, staring at the roof, all the while fingering the cross around her neck. Her head was moving back and forth, as if searching for the answer to be written there. Maybe she was figuring it out; or maybe her mind was all a mess like his.

Ibrahim, meanwhile, did not move at all. He lay with his back towards Jack, and had not changed position since they had been brought back here. Yet somehow Jack could tell he was awake. He wondered too, what the man was thinking. He wondered when was the last time Ibrahim had prayed.

At once, Jack's thoughts were broken when the tent flap opened, and a legionnaire stepped in.

"You," he demanded, pointing to Jack. "Come with me."

The others watched as Jack stood and followed him out of the tent.

The night was chill. The desert heat had vanished with the light. Jack pulled his robes tighter about himself as the soldier led him through the camp. Only

a handful of men were about, a few sentries and some Bedouins tending to the camels by the moonlight.

The legionnaire led him past them to the edges of the camp, beneath the overhang. There, Chantal's tent awaited him, all aglow from the lamplight within.

"In," the soldier ordered, and shoved him towards the flap.

Jack obeyed.

Immediately, the scent of oysters struck him. Their salty fragrance was stronger even the dryness of the air. They were laid out on a china plate in a spiral pattern. Beside them was a sweating bottle of Sauvignon Blanc yet unopened and a pair of short green glasses. The dingy lamplight and raw wood table on which these victuals sat were poor companions for such exquisite fare.

Behind them stood Chantal in her shirtsleeves, smiling.

"*Bonsoir, monsieur...?*" she greeted him, leaving the question open for him to answer. When Jack remained silent, she continued as if he had not understood. "I am unsure what to call you. Just as I am unsure who you are."

"Sometimes I feel the same way," said Jack.

Chantal uncorked the bottle, and filled the glasses. She offered one to him.

"Drink."

"No, thank you."

"Drink," she ordered, and offered it again.

Jack accepted this time.

“The wine goes nicely with the oysters,” she went on. Her delicate fingers pulled one from the china. “I have loved them since I was a little girl. We used to dine on them every summer when we went to Nice. Father owned a cottage there, a little limewashed house by the seaside. It was so much fun, how we would live like peasants in that tiny place each year.”

Jack tried to ignore the alluring smell of them. Even though the salt would dry his tongue, the plate before him was more food than he had eaten in countless days.

“Why am I here?” Jack asked, to get his mind away from them.

Chantal feigned insult. “Is it not enough that you have been invited to dine on good food with a beautiful young lady for the evening?”

“I don’t recall receiving a *‘rezpondez s’il vous plaît’*.”

The mademoiselle slurped down the oyster, and placed the empty shell back on the dish.

“I know this Ibrahim,” she said after a good long moment. “He wants all the other Arabs want. Liberty and his own nation. That is simple enough. But who are you? What do you want? Why is it that a white man dresses like the Arab and fights alongside him?”

“Maybe I’m just fighting for the right side.”

Chantal could not keep from laughing.

“The Arabs say they want democracy, but they are not ready for it! This is their culture. I should know,

the French practically invented the republic.” She slowly sobered, and with a heavy sigh, offered him the plate. “Come. Eat oysters. Drink wine. Enjoy what the West has to offer. It is much better than camel meat, and I am sure that you are starving.”

“No, thank you.”

Again, she sighed, and rolled her eyes.

“You have nothing to prove.”

“Exactly.”

“Then, if you will not enjoy this food and wine I have offered, then at least do what the Muslim cannot, and enjoy the pleasures of a woman.”

She stepped out from around the table, at which Jack tried to back away. However, there was nowhere to flee. A single cry from her, and guards would be in the tent in seconds.

So, he froze.

“Do not deny it,” Chantal said as she advanced. “You cannot deny your race, your culture, just as you cannot deny your desires as a man. I don’t know why you are that silly Arab dress, so take it off.”

Chantal pressed herself against him, so much that her breath was hot against his cheek. She plucked the wine glass from his fingers, and placed it on the table. Then, she jammed her other hand between his legs.

“See? You cannot lie to me.”

Guards be damned, thought Jack, and shoved her hands away.

She roared with laughter at him as he went running out the tent.

“Looks like you are an Arab now, my friend!” She jeered at him. “And I am more a man than you!”

Jack did not hear the rest of what she shouted after that. He ran out into the night, stumbling in the sand to get away. He caught his breath beside a boulder, and paused there a time to let the chill air cool him down. Once his heart subsided and he saw that no one chased him, Jack straightened and looked around.

In his flight, he had run to the edges of the camp without notice. Sentries guarded either end of the ravine, but not the rocky slopes themselves. He could make a break for it, and try to climb them if he dared.

The temptation of escape seemed promising after what just transpired, but Jack dismissed the notion immediately. He could not leave the others behind, especially Sanwar. Even if he did try and escape on their behalf, there was nothing but a sea of sand awaiting him beyond these hills and miles of unfamiliar territory. He would not get far, and help would not be close at hand. No, escape was not an option.

Jack started back towards camp to find his friends again. Only, he could not remember which one their tent had been.

His mistaken wandering led him right into a midst of legionnaires sitting around a fire. Desperately, Jack tried to pass unnoticed, but that lasted all of three



steps forward when the entire circle turned their heads.

The sergeant among them stared directly at him.

“You. *Habibi*. Stop.”

Jack froze.

“More wine,” the sergeant ordered in poorly accented Arabic.

It was just as well however, as Jack understood his words more clearly than some of the Bedouins.

“At once, *effendi*,” he responded, remembering the words he had been learning along the journey. His accent too, must have convinced them, as they all turned back to fire and resumed their conversation.

Jack hurried off straight ahead, and thankfully the camels were hitched thereabouts. He found a wineskin on one of them, and retrieved, though not before taking a swig of it for himself.

He also took the chance to steal some foodstuffs from the packs. He was sure to only take a little, one item from several different animals, so it would not be noticed. These, he hid in the folds of his clothes.

A weapon was a tempting thing to take, and several were still holstered on the beasts, but only a pistol could be concealed and its absence would be noticed. Jack thought better of it, and turned back the other way.

It was then that he saw the medical tent nearby. He was tempted to go to, to see if Sanwar was improving,

when a figure crossed into the tent, dashing all chances of sneaking inside.

The irritated calls from the campfire sent him hurrying away again. He returned to the men, and handed them the wine. Still, they spat at him for the wait. Jack left them to their cups, and they paid his absence no more heed once they had their drink in hand.

Eventually, he found his way again, for thankfully the camp was not so large. Yet as he was halfway to his tent, whispered voices came from the one immediately beside him, speaking in a familiar tongue. Through the thin canvas walls, Jack could hear them.

“We tarry far too long,” said one voice. “When will we strike?”

“We must wait until the mountain,” answered another. “Then, we will not need them anymore.”

“Only when they are separated should we attack,” a third voice added. “If God wills it, the others will be there soon. Together, we will be stronger.”

“The opportunity will reveal itself,” said a final voice. “I will give the signal when it does. Until then, stay close to MacGregor.”

Jack’s heart sunk.

He wanted to run, until he heard rustling within. Four robed figures exited a moment later, and Jack had only a split second to dart behind the nearest tent and out of sight.

Only when he was certain they were gone, did he return to the others. They had been sleeping, but awoke once he re-entered.

“Where have you been?” Asked Fatima.

“Long story. Eat.”

He shared what meager rations he had stolen; some dried fruits, nuts, and flatbread. In hushed tones, Jack explained all that had happened in the past hour. Finally, he came to what most recently transpired.

“Some of the Bedouins,” he said. “They were speaking Greek.”

“Greek?” Ibrahim was in disbelief.

“Aye,” said Jack. “And they mean to kill the French.”  
He regretted not stealing a weapon after all.

## VIII

### Above the Vale Unseen

Just before dawn, the French struck camp. The three prisoners were brought to the medical tent where the captain, named LeRoux, stood waiting for them.

He looked to Jack and Ibrahim. "You will carry your companion. If you fall behind, you will be left behind. *Ça va?*"

"*Ça va,*" the men replied.

"Get inside, and fetch him then."

They obeyed, and emerged a moment later hoisting an unconscious Sanwar onto a stretcher. A wet cloth covered his face. Fatima wondered how long the moisture would hold. It was not yet warm, but once the heat set in, it was bound to vanish quickly.

"You wait here," LeRoux told her. "Your camel is being fetched."

So, she lingered as LeRoux went off to bark commands. She watched her friends fall into the column, marching double time to keep pace with the mounted men. She gave a silent prayer that they would last the day.

A shadow interrupted her.

Fatima spun about to see a man looming over her, a man without a face. Or rather, it was covered fully by

his *shemagh*, and a pair of dark glasses sat over his eyes. He held her camel's reins in his hand, but said to her not a single word.

"I see you have become acquainted with Le Moche." LeRoux grinned as he returned. He lit himself a cigarette, quite pleased at the nickname. It meant "The Ugly One" in French.

"He is not a Frenchman," the Captain explained. "We just can't say his Arab name. But they say he fights like the Devil, and that mask of his hides where the gas bombs burned his ugly face in the War. They say not even his mother could look at him. But who knows? Maybe you two were meant for one another."

Fatima coughed as LeRoux blew smoke down into her face. This amused him greatly. She recovered quickly though, and glared at him, her cloudy eye unblinking.

"I will remember that," she said.

"I hope you do," said LeRoux, and flicked the cigarette at her. "I changed my mind. Today, you can walk with your friends."

He turned away, laughing as she fumed.

Le Moche followed after him, all the while saying not word, but simply staring off into the east.

A chill ran down Fatima's spine, long after he had gone.

Sunbeams streamed into his eyes as he awoke. A hazy film engulfed his vision, and it took a moment for him to realize that a cloth was on his face.

Sanwar removed the dry scrap of fabric, and finally awoke.

A familiar face was at his side, so familiar that at first, he thought it could only be a ghost.

“Ravi?”

“I’m glad to see that you’re awake,” Ravinder said. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand. His sweat seemed real enough.

“Where am I?”

“In a stretcher.”

Once the sergeant’s sarcasm had been endearing. Right now, it was not.

Ravi seemed to sense his feelings though, and answered more seriously. “We’re about fifteen miles from the foothills where we found you, and who knows how many from this damn tower.”

Sanwar looked about. He was in the desert. Jack and Ibrahim were near, drinking water. Fatima was there too, and they were surrounded by French soldiers. The lot of them had stopped in the shadow of a day. Judging from the light, it looked about mid-afternoon, when the sun was at its zenith. What was more, his wound had been redressed, and no longer appeared to be bleeding.

“What happened? What are you doing here?”

Ravinder explained the events of the past few days, of which Sanwar only had the foggiest of memories. The last thing he seemed to recall was the encounter with Weiss upon the ruins, and even that was just a glimmer in his mind.

Finally, Ravinder came to the end of his account. “As to what I am doing here, I am protecting British interests.”

“So, you have become Saxon’s creature now, have you?”

“Easy for you to judge.”

“I judge only what I see.”

“Then maybe you should judge only what you understand instead.” Ravinder leaned in closer, his voice quieter and icier than Sanwar had ever heard it before. “I was not so lucky in my birth as you. A little orphan boy from Amritsar has few enough friends already. Fortunately for me, Lord Saxon recognizes talent.”

“He recognizes usefulness.”

“You know it was only ever about our usefulness,” Ravinder reminded him. “Unlike you, I never had the privilege of ideals.”

He stood, as if to walk away.

“So, what happened between us meant nothing to you?” Asked Sanwar.

Ravinder paused.

“What happened between us was a mistake.”

Then, he turned his back, and walked away, only stopping to tell Jack and Ibrahim that Sanwar was awake.

The two men hurried over to him at once, calling Fatima as well. They all gathered around him, and Sanwar could admit some relief in seeing them, even if they all looked haggard and disheveled.

“Glad to see you’re doing better,” said Jack, taking his hand.

“I feel godawful.”

Sanwar’s default prickliness brought a smile to Jack’s cracked lips.

The moment lasted briefly. A shout came from the sergeant. The caravan was moving out.

“Rest now,” cooed Ibrahim. “There is yet a while to go.”

Sanwar lay back onto the stretcher as they lifted it, and fell once again into a dark and troubled sleep.

That night in Gallipoli, they filled in the graves.

After the failure of the yesterday’s attack, a truce had to be called so both sides could collect their dead. The survivors then spent all day digging mass graves for them. Hundreds of men went into them and were covered over by lime to remove the stench and flies. Sanwar had overseen it. As one of the few remaining officers in the battalion, he had to see it done, and so he endured the frigid evening and the sight of men he once knew consumed by earth.



He was relieved when an order came from Command, summoning him to Colonel Windham's tent.

Windham was in his dugout, going through the lists by lamplight; killed, wounded, missing, and promoted. He shut the ledger when Sanwar appeared, and accepted the salute.

"Sit, please, Captain." Windham knew the ceiling was far too low for anyone, let alone Sanwar.

"Thank you, sir."

Sanwar took the seat in front of the desk.

His beleaguered battalion commander leaned back in his chair. While Colonels were rarely young men, Windham was older than most, and he looked it more than ever on this night. Even without the dingy lighting, there would have been dark circles beneath his eyes. When matched with his gaunt face and almost translucent skin, he looked downright skeletal at times. Yet, the shadows cast by the lamplight made him more haggard than usual tonight.

"The Army's making a retreat, Dhamija," the Colonel said plainly.

"High time, sir," Sanwar replied.

Windham raised his eyebrows in wry agreement. "The operation should have never happened from the start, if you ask me, but who does anymore?" He leaned forward again, and folded his hands. "The regiment's disbanded."

"Sir?"

“We lost half our men yesterday, and God knew we weren’t even at full strength to begin with. No, I’m afraid it’s been determined the lads are better off going elsewhere rather than seeking replacements. The order came today. I’ll inform the battalion in the morning.”

“With all due respect sir, why are you telling me before the others?”

Windham paused. “I hear you’re damn good with a rifle, Captain.”

It seemed a curious statement. “Father insisted.”

Sanwar also carried a long arm so that the enemy would not target him for being an officer.

“There’s a new unit being put together in France,” the Colonel continued. “Snipers. The ‘India Rifles’ they’re to be called. I’m recommending you for command of it. You’ll be promoted to Major, and you’re likely to get it. Few have the same level of experience in both leadership and riflery. All you have to tell me is if you want it.”

Sanwar hesitated.

“Where will the rest of the regiment be deployed, sir?”

Windham cocked his head, then shrugged.

“Sprinkled into various battalions in Egypt most likely, and sent to Palestine. Why? This is a better chance for you, Dhamija. To be honest, you’re wasted as a simple company commander. Being of a martial race, you’ve got the disposition for real strategic leadership.”

“May I think about it, sir?”

“Of course, but don’t keep me waiting, Captain. Dismissed.”

“Sir.”

Sanwar took his leave. That night, he sat wide awake in his dugout. He had never wanted any of this, but he was good at it, and it seemed that the only way out was forward. Yet again, did it have to be that way?

A light knock came on the doorframe.

Ravinder had poked his head into the flap.

“Sir?”

“Enter, Sergeant.”

He shut the flap tightly behind him. They spoke Punjabi in hushed voices together.

“Is everything alright, Sanwar?”

“You mean other than yesterday, Ravi? Pristine.”

Ravinder frowned at him.

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I am not alright. Are you?”

Ravinder shook his head, and fought back a tear like it was an Ottoman platoon.

“What did Windham want?” He asked, quickly changing the subject.

Sanwar did not answer right away. He searched for the words as Ravinder stared at him with anxious eyes.

“The regiment’s disbanding, and we are to be reassigned. You will find out more tomorrow.”

“Do...do you think we’ll be transferred together?”

“No. No, I am being reassigned to France. Windham recommended me for command of a new unit. I really must accept.”

Ravinder only nodded.

“The Army is retreating from Gallipoli,” Sanwar said to break the silence.

“So, I suppose we won’t see much of each other anymore then, will we?”

Sanwar shook his head, and began to cry. Ravinder placed a gentle hand on his cheek.

Sanwar pushed the hand away.

Then, he kissed Ravinder instead.

Ravinder kissed him back.

That had been the last night they had been together, he remembered.

The column continued on for several days. All the while, Sanwar was slowly regaining strength. His arm ached and he could not yet walk at a pace quick enough to match the camels, but he could eat solid food again and was conscious for at least some of the day.

He was certainly conscious for when they came in sight of the mountain. They passed through a rocky defile, then over a stony ridge. As they crested, the mountain suddenly appeared before them.

Jutting to the sky, the Mountain of the Crescent Moon was a stalwart pillar of crimson rock. It reigned like an island in the miles of barren sand that stretched

behind it; the sole inhabitant of a godless realm. Earthen slopes acted as a natural walkway to where the mountain itself dramatically inclined. From there, it would be a steep climb to its summit, which was only visible from this great distance.

The column halted on the ridge for a good long while.

Never had Sanwar seen anything on Earth quite like it in all the lands he had traveled.

“*Mon Dieu,*” said Chantal with a smile on her face.

“*Wallah,*” Ibrahim uttered beneath his breath.

Fatima crossed herself. Many of the Bedouins began to wail and fidget in their saddles until a bark from the sergeant silenced them. Everyone was frozen in place at the sight of it.

All except the one they called, “*Le Moche*”, who crouched in the dirt, peering down the scope of his long rifle. Sanwar knew the make, a Saxon Mark II that shot a .303 caliber. After a moment, the Bedouin withdrew the weapon and turned to face the others.

“Weiss’ men are making the ascent?” Ravinder confirmed.

Le Moche nodded.

“*Ce sale Juif!*” Chantal cursed, and shouted out some rapid commands in French. At once, the column was alive again. Jack and Ibrahim snatched the stretcher in hand, and started moving double time to keep pace as the party made its way down the hill.

It took nearly an hour to cross the open ground before the slopes. LeRoux himself traveled at the rear so that no man would flee. Still, one Bedouin could not find the fortitude to advance, and the Capitain shot him dead anyway.

That motivated the others to move faster.

As they approached the slopes, a fusillade broke out at the vanguard. At once, the men dismounted and flattened on the ground to return fire. Unfortunately, Sanwar's stretcher bearers had received the same training, and released their charge rather unceremoniously.

He hit the ground, and was rewarded with a mouthful of dirt.

"Damn it! I'm sorry!" Jack cried over the ring of gunfire.

So was Sanwar's arm.

The commotion was quickly ended though, and the column resumed march. Sanwar loaded himself back into the stretcher, ignoring the profuse apologies of his two companions.

When they all came at last into the shadow of the mountain, the source of the earlier commotion became apparent. Three of Weiss' militiamen lay dead nearby a line of camels tied to boulders. Even with the excellent cover provided by the rocky terrain, the men just did not have the sheer firepower of the French. They had been cut to pieces nonetheless, save one who had a single bullet placed just above his eyes.

The French had not won cleanly, though. One of the leading scouts was dead, and another had been wounded. The surgeon tended to him while the others dismounted, handing off their beasts to be stationed by the Bedouins in a separate area.

“Weiss will have heard the shots,” Ravinder warned as LeRoux scanned the heights above. “He’ll see us coming.”

“He already saw us long ago,” the Captain said. “We can expect *une belle surprise* up there, no?”

“Just be ready to climb,” Chantal snapped. She looked absolutely piratical in a long blue coat and with a brace of pistols holstered on her narrow hips. “We have lost enough time already.”

“Better time lost than lives,” Ravinder countered.

“You need not worry about your own life, Major. You will remain behind,” she commanded. “Along with one of my men. Together, you will guard the camels.”

“I’d be of better use accompanying you-”

Chantal ignored him. “Consider Weiss’ baggage an addition to our prize. You can pay the Bedouins with it when we return.”

Already though, the men were looting it for anything of immediate use.

Ravinder sighed, but ultimately obeyed.

It was then that Chantal turned her attention to Sanwar. She gestured at the stretcher.

“You. What is your solution for this then?”

“I can climb.”

“Prove it to me.”

Slowly, Sanwar stood. It took all his strength to keep his balance, but he could do it. Gradually, he assumed his full height once more.

Chantal was unimpressed.

“Good. Now, get in line.”

At first, the climb was manageable. There was a natural pathway in the rock at a less acute angle where four men could walk abreast. Even though the ground was broken with loose stone, a misstep would at worst result in an awkward stumble.

Sanwar was certainly stumbling his way along. Jack and Ibrahim were practically carrying him up the mountain, as every few strides, he would trip upon another awkward patch and nearly lost his balance.

All the while, Chantal berated them with a taskmaster’s brutality, shouting louder than even the sergeant for them to keep moving faster. There would be no breaks for water until the top, Jack told Sanwar, by Chantal’s orders.

For hours, the ascent went on. By midday, the sun had moved to their side of the mountain and was beating down on them like hammer strokes. Sweat drenched every pore of Sanwar’s body, the legionnaires’ uniforms had gone from khaki to mud brown, and Chantal’s once impeccable makeup was running down her face in rivulets of perspiration.



Eventually, they reached a landing where the ground leveled off somewhat. This was also where the incline stopped, and the cliff became near vertical.

The column halted, staring at the daunting task that lay ahead. Chantal herself faltered, giving no command as to how to proceed.

Sanwar scanned the escarpment. There was just another few hundred feet to go, yet it would be thrice as grueling as what came before.

Something blinded Sanwar's however, as his gaze drifted upwards. Blinking, he recovered, only to catch a shining glint of metal on a ledge some eighty feet above.

It was all the warning he had.

"Duck!" He shouted, but his cry was overwhelmed by gunfire.

Several members of the exhausted vanguard were cut down immediately. The others scrambled for the safety of nearby boulders, now that the column's screen had triggered the ambush.

Sanwar pressed himself against a rock. Fatima was beside him, huddling against his back as chips of stone were blown away.

Once the French had assumed positions, they returned fire, and added further vehemence to the cacophony. For several minutes, the air was filled with rifle cracks and ricochets, until at last, the barrage had ceased and the gunsmoke eventually settled.

Then, a booming voice called out.

“Lovely day, now isn’t it, guv!?”

“Weiss, you Jew bastard!” Chantal shouted back.

“Nice to see you again too! Now be a dear friend, and fuck right off!”

There was some muffled laughter from above, its hollow ring echoing off the walls of stone.

The French must have liked it none at all, because they resumed fire almost immediately.

Once more, the two sides exchanged rounds. This time, Le Moche appeared alongside Sanwar, staring down the scope of his rifle. With a careful shot, he brought down a militiaman, who tumbled from his position and splattered against the boulder that Sanwar was using for cover. The man then slid down to Sanwar’s feet, leaving scarlet streaks behind him. Fatima quickly grabbed him by the pistol belt, and dragged his body out of the way.

Adjusting her cloak, she darted out from cover to glance up at the ledge. A second later, she returned.

“This is folly,” she muttered, her quiet voice almost inaudible amidst the skirmish.

Eventually, the fighting died away again. Only Le Moche had scored a hit from either side, however.

“You damn fools!” Barked Weiss. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’ve got the bloody high ground!”

“And we have access to the baggage!” Chantal yelled back at him. “So how long can your thirst last!”

“This is an impasse,” Fatima whispered to Sanwar, now that they could speak more easily. Still, the gunfire

was making Sanwar's ears ring. "Weiss risks his position if he attempts to climb."

Sanwar looked at the pinnacle of the cliff face, the only section that was visible to him. Weiss would have to climb the last stretch of it in the open air, making himself a prime target for the French. It was then that Sanwar also realized Fatima's second conclusion.

"And we risk allowing him to climb if we abandon ours."

Fatima nodded gravely.

Thus, it remained an impasse for some time. Not a soul from either side moved from their positions. The cliffside stayed silent as the grave, save the sound of dust clouds blowing in the wind.

At last, Chantal grew impatient.

"Weiss! Let us negotiate!"

"Oh, so now you try and find the peaceful solution!?" Weiss jeered. "After trying to shoot my head off!? Only when you people need something do you ever want to talk to me!"

"We are getting nowhere!"

"And whose fault is that!?"

"Let us talk!"

"I won't talk to a bleeding *goy*! And don't you send a damn Muslim either!"

"And what about a Sikh!?"

Sanwar stood as he called out. Despite shouts of protest from both Chantal and his companions, he

remained standing, even as an accidental bullet from one of Weiss' men spit right past his shoulder.

"You look like a damn Muslim to me!" Weiss shouted. Sanwar could see him now, a tiny figure perched above him with a rifle trained. There were others around him, hugging the ledge for cover.

"I assure you that I am not," Sanwar called back. Slowly, he stepped forward with both hands visible. "Chantal took me prisoner! I have no friendship with her!"

The young socialite glared at him for that remark.

"Get back into cover this instant!" She ordered him, but Sanwar ignored her and instead took a few steps forward, further from her sight.

"If we remain here, everyone will lose! A solution must be reached!"

"Get back here!" Chantal demanded once again.

Weiss' laughter resounded through the cliffside. "Some prisoner you are! You're a bleeding diplomat! Alright then, Mister Sikhi! Let's parlay! What have you got to say!? You can tell me from there!"

"Have you any rope!?" Sanwar offered. "I will come to you alone if you carry me! It is awfully difficult to shout so much!"

"No!" Chantal protested.

"Are you unarmed!?" Weiss asked.

Sanwar turned about to show that he had no weapons. The French had even stripped him of his *kirpan*. Still, that had been the least of their insults.

“Alright, whoever you are!” Weiss approved. “Let’s have ourselves a little chat then!”

A few moments later, a rope tumbled down the cliff face.

Sanwar first turned to Chantal before approaching.

“I will get us all to the summit,” he promised. Then, he called to Weiss. “Will you allow a man to help me secure the rope!?”

“Very well!”

Sanwar motioned Jack forward. His friend helped fasten the line around his waist, an impossible task for Sanwar with an injured arm.

“Please come back alive,” Jack begged him, squeezing off the final knot.

“Am I ready?” Asked Sanwar.

“Aye,” said Jack, sadly. He gave the rope a tug, thus beginning the ascent.

Slowly, Sanwar was lifted off the ground. Several men had to be towing the line in order to hoist his weight, but he assisted them by placing his feet against the rock and pulling himself with his good hand. It was the very least he could do, for he could never have made the climb alone.

The rope crept higher inch by inch, with all eyes watching from both above and below. As he rose, Sanwar noticed that the cliff was not as uniform in color as it appeared to be from a distance. There were striations in the rock every several yards or so, each one a different color from the previous. They sparkled

in the sunlight as he passed, and he became lost in gazing at their beauty.

Suddenly, the rope buckled, and Sanwar slapped against the stone.

He groaned as he caught himself with both hands, and pushed off against it. His right arm shrieked in pain from the sudden effort.

There was a fusillade of cursing from above, presumably Weiss' ire, but Sanwar suspected that he had been the culprit. In his carelessness, he had loosened his grip on both the line and the cliff face, resulting in the sudden imbalance.

As Sanwar winced and attempted to regain his hold, he realized that his hand had turned completely white. It was covered in a chalky powder that had likely rubbed off from the cliff face, and did not easily go away when he blew on it. Looking up, Sanwar saw that the striations ended beyond the ledge and this white stone continued the remaining length of the journey. Inhaling, he allowed the dust to strengthen his grip, and continued to climb.

At length, he finally reached the ledge.

Several men snatched him from the precipice at once. They pinned him to the ground as they rummaged throughout his person, searching for any weapons. Sanwar was too exhausted to resist. Finally, they relinquished him, once they saw that he had indeed told the truth.

It was then that he recognized a face among. A scarred man stood over him, toting a pump action shotgun across his shoulder.

“Taggart?”

“Aye,” the man confirmed with a wretched grin. “Chuffed to see you again, love.”

“Let him be, Taggart,” said a burly man, stepping into their midst. He pulled Sanwar to his feet with remarkable ease.

“Best watch this one, Weiss,” cautioned Taggart. “He’s a tricky fellow, him and his mate.”

If Weiss valued the advice at all, he certainly did not comment on it. Instead, he examined Sanwar up and down. “So, you’re not completely a liar. You came unarmed. But you still look like an Arab to me.”

“Sikh,” Sanwar corrected once again. “I originate from India.”

“With that accent you sound like you’re from bleeding Knightsbridge.”

“You must be Weiss.”

“Charmed,” the banker said with a curtsey. “You must be that bloody mad chap from the ruins now that I’ve got a better look at you.”

“I am.”

Sanwar was getting a better look at Weiss as well. He hardly looked a man of standing, with sleeves rolled back and a rifle slung around his shoulder. His great black beard was wild and unkempt, and his fair skin sunburnt to the color of a ripe tomato. He spoke with

a smoky gruffness unbecoming of a wealthy man, but fitting to his appearance.

“You killed a lot of my lads,” he said.

“I did.”

“In a way, I’ve got to respect you.” Weiss cracked a weak smile. “You’re a real *edel mensch*, you know that? You can shoot, lad, that’s for certain. You do your own killing. Like me. But I can both respect and hate you too.”

He grabbed Sanwar by the shirt, and moved him to the end of the ledge.

“So, try anything, and I will kill you myself.”

“I know.”

Weiss pulled Sanwar back from the edge.

“Right then,” he said. “Let’s talk in private.”

While the ledge itself stuck out like a tongue, the rock indented here, almost like the mouth of a cave. Weiss led Sanwar further in, away from the rest of his men and where the air was cooler. The stone was smooth within, and comfortable enough to lounge upon, which Weiss gladly did. Sanwar, however, refrained.

“So,” Weiss said, wiping the sweat from his brow.

“Who the devil are you, and what have you got to say?”

“I am Sanwar Singh Dhamija, an Alchemist. I seek the Stone, just as you do, I imagine.”

“So, you can read all this fancy mumbo jumbo then?”

Weiss leaned in, and produced a piece of vellum from his shirt pocket. Sanwar was horrified to see as he



unfolded it, that it was indeed one of Jabir's scrolls. This one was torn along both its top and bottom edges.

"Where did you obtain that?"

Weiss grinned.

"Do you know how Jews became so good at banking?"

"No, and I fail to see the relevance—"

"In the Middle Ages, money lending was deemed a disreputable profession, unworthy of a Christian," Weiss continued, not even bothering to address Sanwar's remark. "And it's been my family trade for a long, long time. Sometimes, things can get lost for a while, sitting in the vault. But all that glitters isn't gold, now is it, mate?"

"Is that not why you are after the Stone?" Asked Sanwar. "The gold?"

"The land, you sod," groaned Weiss. "Gold, I have in plenty. Land, I don't. But even still, gold is only ever good for getting you the land. And this land right here? This is paradise."

"It would appear contrary to me," said Sanwar, looking at the bare rock about them.

Weiss sighed heavily. "It's on the other side of the mountain, stupid. It says so right here." He tapped the page where lines of arcane script were written. "At least, that's what I was told. That a promised land lay on the other side. An oasis in this wasteland. Clear water, fruit trees, milk and honey, and all the rest. A homeland."

Weiss stared out at the miles of barren desert below for a time. Finally, he stood, not really paying much attention to Sanwar anymore.

“Where else will my people go?” He asked. “Where else are they wanted?”

“And where are the Arabs wanted?”

“I don’t bloody well care!” Weiss snapped. He turned to face Sanwar once more. “They turned this country into piss. They took it from my people, just like everything’s been taken from us! Is it them you’re fighting for? I didn’t know Indians were overly fond of Muslims, were they? Yet here you are, fighting alongside that fellow Ibrahim. For what, I wonder? Why are you helping him?”

“Peace.”

“Peace!?” Weiss scoffed. “Don’t make me sick. The first thing he’ll do if he ever gets that Stone is wipe all the Jews off the face of this earth.”

“And you would do differently?”

“I’d wipe them all out as the second thing,” Weiss clarified. “First, I’d take care of my own. Then, obliteration. It’s preemptive, you understand. Got to do it before it’s done to you.”

Sanwar raised an eyebrow.

“And what of the French?” He asked.

“Catholics aren’t much better,” Weiss admitted. “But I suppose I’ve had to do business with them. Much as I hate that brat Chantal, she’s still a fellow

businessman. She won't win, but she's been a worthy adversary, I'll give her that."

Sanwar smiled.

"Do you know what lies on the other side of the mountain, Weiss? Besides the promised land, of course."

"What then?"

"Dragons," Sanwar told him. "Evil spirits guarding Jabir's tower."

Weiss could not help but laugh.

"You laugh," said Sanwar. "And yet you have come this far, following an ancient scrap of paper that tells you a magic rock will grant you salvation. Are dragons not so forgone of a conclusion?"

"You're bloody serious, aren't you?"

"Deathly."

Weiss paused a moment, weighing Sanwar's words.

"What would you have me do?" He said at last.

"Surrender my position?"

Sanwar shook his head.

"Call a truce until you reach the tower, and form a temporary alliance with the French. Anything could be waiting on the other side of the cliff. Both you and Chantal will undoubtedly need all the strength you can get if you ever want to reach the end alive."

"She'll never agree to it. My men will never agree to it—"

"It is the only way."

Weiss hesitated.

“Who are you...really?”

Sanwar did not display the same hesitation.

“A killer who is tired of his work.”

“You’re a queer one, no doubt about it,” Weiss laughed weakly. He then went back to the precipice, and shouted down to the French. “Oy! Chantal! Still alive down there!?”

“WHAT DO YOU WANT NOW!?”

“How’s about we have that chat!?”

## IX

### Before the Tall Tower

It took an hour to ferry the French onto the ledge. A few men would climb the ropes laid down by the militia while men on both sides trained rifles at one another. The agreement had been for a ceasefire, and each party would be certain that the other should uphold it.

Weiss and Chantal had bickered a long time over the terms, until Sanwar had settled them; a ceasefire would remain until everyone had reached the tower. It was the longest he could delay the inevitable conflict, provided the Bedouins did not make a move like Jack had warned.

The first step would be reaching the top, however, and after the ledge, came another daunting two hundred feet to climb.

Chantal and LeRoux came about halfway through the process, and the former was none too happy about it. Weiss offered her a hand as she pulled herself over the precipice, but she willfully ignored it, and crested without his help. A cloud of dust formed around her as she beat the debris from her expensive clothing.

“I wish we had just taken my father’s aeroplane from Palmyra,” she complained.

Weiss sneered. “Yeah? And where exactly would you land it?”

By the final trip, there were forty people crowding the ledge all the way back to the cave where Weiss and Sanwar had spoken. Tempers were already running high. Not long before, these men had been shooting at each other. Both sides had been responsible for killing somebody’s friend on the other’s, and now they were sitting mere inches apart.

The Bedouins were wise to keep themselves out of it, huddling together and speaking only faintly. Sanwar was more concerned about them however, than any of the soldiers.

Yet, Chantal forced his attention elsewhere.

“Now what?” She demanded from him. “Have you got us a plan to get us to the top, clever man?”

Sanwar glanced at the remaining stretch of cliff above them.

“A few men will have to climb unassisted to the summit,” he determined. “Then, establish a series of lines, thus allowing the rest of us to follow.”

“How convenient for you,” she said. “That your injury prevents you from being one of these men.”

“Just as I told Weiss about our current arrangement, it is the only way.”

“Then a man from each party should go,” Chantal suggested. “It is only fair that as allies we should share the risk, no?”

“Very well,” Weiss begrudgingly agreed. He turned to his men. “Anyone want to volunteer?”

Every one of them stepped forward.

Weiss scanned each man over, then selected a hardy, dark-haired man from their ranks.

“Elijah will be my man,” he said. “And he gets a double in his pay for the risk. Everyone else gets a bonus, because I know they’d do it too.”

The militiamen cheered at that.

Chantal only frowned.

“Allow me to be the one to climb, my lady,” LeRoux pleaded with her. “To show my loyalty and an example to my men.”

“Fine.” She looked at the Bedouins. “One of them will go too. And you.”

She aimed a finger at Ibrahim, who instantly recoiled.

“I?”

“Do I point at someone else? Yes, you!” She gave Sanwar a sly grin. “After all, we are all allies, and must share the risk.”

“Right,” Weiss agreed, much more amicably this time.

Anger flashed in Sanwar’s heart, but he was quick to suppress it. His enemies had the guns. There was

nothing he could do about it. He should have expected such pettiness, if anything.

“Let me go instead,” Jack offered.

Chantal grinned. “No.”

“I will go,” said Ibrahim. He accepted the rope without another word.

Sanwar walked with him to the edge.

“Godspeed,” he said, but Ibrahim seemed not to acknowledge the remark.

Instead, he stood there smiling.

“Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

Ibrahim shut his eyes, and inhaled deeply. “Birds.”

Sanwar paused. Indeed, there was a faint chirping on the air of many tiny musical voices. Other than the cries of vultures, there had been no bird songs in the desert. He had almost forgotten what they sounded like. They must have been nesting at the summit.

“I am ready,” Ibrahim declared at last. He turned to face Sanwar with sympathetic eyes. “I will be waiting for you at the top, my friend.”

“Go with God.”

The four “volunteers” found their handholds in the rocks, and stepped off the ledge one at a time. The company watched as each man, a length of rope looped around his shoulder, carefully made their ascent.

It was slow going. Every step had to be calculated. One hand grabbed a hold, then a foot helped balance



it, before the next hand came over and the other foot with after.

LeRoux was the tallest, and made the best time because of his reach, but Ibrahim was not far behind. Speed was hardly the game, however.

Fatima held her cross in one hand, and Jack's in the other. Sanwar found himself praying too, and it occurred to him that he had not done so in quite a long while. This was good a time as any, though. Ibrahim needed all the divinity he could get.

Eventually, the climbers became little more than specks above them. The top was just a few dozen yards away.

Just as they were about to reach the height, a scream rang out.

The Bedouin "volunteer" had suddenly lost his balance. When he had grabbed the nearest hold, the stone beneath his hand came loose, and the man went plunging towards the rocks below. The company watched as he went shrieking past the ledge.

His cries were cut off by the impact.

Ibrahim lingered for a moment after, staring at the bloody ruin below, then sighed and continued on.

LeRoux was at the top a few minutes later. Elijah was behind him, and then finally, Ibrahim.

With the climb complete, the three remaining men drove iron spikes into the rocks above, then dropped the lines.

"Who is next?" Chantal asked.

Three more men followed after in a similar arrangement. Again, each one of them carried a rope to set, as did the six after them. With a dozen lines soon in place, the group's ascent became much faster. Sanwar was among the last few to make the climb, and had to be hoisted from the waist again.

He kept his eyes forward the entire journey. Climbing to Weiss had been one thing, but this height was another altogether. It was more than thrice the distance, not to mention all the mountain they had climbed below the ledge as well. Of course, there was always the thought of the fallen man in the back of Sanwar's mind, and an awareness of how helpless he truly was in this moment. If Weiss or Chantal changed their mind and chose to undo the rope, that would be the end of it.

Yet, no such thing occurred. Jack and Ibrahim were there to help him over the top once he had reached it, and Fatima offered him a drink from her canteen. Gratefully, he accepted and rested there a moment.

"I pray to never traverse in such a manner again," he panted, wiping the moisture from his beard.

Jack grinned. "Don't forget, we still have to climb back down again."

"That is optimistic of you," said Sanwar.

"Come and look at where we are though."

They helped him to his feet, then had to help him keep them when he saw exactly what they meant.

The words escaped him.

The Mountain of the Crescent Moon was no true mountain at all, but a great wide basin high above the earth. There was no peak nor even a plateau. Instead, the land scooped downwards, wherein lay a dark primeval forest that stretched all the way to the other side. A haze of mist lay just beneath their canopy. Strange noises echoed throughout the valley, and Sanwar was unsure if they were the calls of beasts or the very trees themselves speaking to one another.

And in the very center of it, rose the tower, an ivory spike jutting taller even than the forest. In the waning light, it shimmered like a beacon against the sea of trees. The company stood on the narrow shoulder that ringed this entire valley, and stared at their destination for a good long while.

“Only one way to go,” said Jack.

“Forward,” Sanwar finished for him.

“Then let us get a move on before dark,” Chantal snapped, and the lot of them were marching again.

The climb down was far more gentle than their previous travel. Though ragged, these slopes were at a kinder incline, and eventually gave way into the wood. At such closeness, Sanwar finally gained a true appreciation for their true size.

They must have measured eighty feet, and their bases were at least ten feet in diameter. They were red-barked conifers of some sort, though he had never seen their like, and unlike the tangle of any forest Sanwar

had seen either, there was a dozen yards of ample space to walk between each one. Though some of the men had brought machetes, there was no need to use them for clearing foliage.

As they traversed beneath the shadows of the trees, the flora became stranger still. Stocky cycads and spiny ferns sprouted in the lower reaches. The forest floor was grassless, covered instead by sheets of moss growing on brick red earth. Yet there were no palms, nor oaks, nor cedars to speak of.

“Have you ever seen any of these plants before?” Sanwar asked Ibrahim.

“Never.”

He too, was in awe of this place, and it became more apparent when the fauna finally revealed themselves.

There was a melodic whirring sound above them. Scores of tiny shapes drifted down from the conifers to land upon the trunks. At first, Sanwar thought them to be birds, until they latched ahold of the bark with their little foreclaws.

Although they were feathered like birds in a motley raiment of fantastic colors, there were finger-like appendages securing these creatures to the wood. Their eyes too, were not quite avian, but more reptilian, with scaly lids and yellow corneas. When a six-inch dragonfly zoomed by, one of these animals snapped at it, not with a beak, but rows of razored teeth. Another caught the insect midair though, not so much by flying, but gliding down from one tree to the

next. The others satisfied themselves by picking the bark clean of any bugs available. They were quite a sociable lot, whirring and chirping happily to each other in an almost musical fashion.

However, silence suddenly befell the flock.

A shadow then passed over the column.

Sanwar's eyes widened as he looked to the sky.

Soaring over them came a draconian form. Enormous dart-shaped wings carried it so lithely on the air that it seemed weightless, despite a thoroughly perplexing body plan. It must have been about the size of a giraffe, yet two-thirds of its body length were head and neck alone. Its wingspan was roughly equivalent, leaving all its weight to be supported by a pair of short and slender legs that trailed behind. When it opened its needle point beak, it omitted not a warble nor a cry, but a long and solemn drawl, resonant and hollow.

At the sound of it, the strange "birds" chattered and took wing, gliding off to the safety of lower branches elsewhere.

The column hurried on themselves.

With their advance, the jungle continued to surprise them. There was an oppressive heat about the place despite the shade, but unlike the desert, it was seeping with humidity. Steam rose off the plant life. The air was somehow thicker here as well, as if every breath weighed heavy in the lungs. Yet, it was also invigorating in a way. Every inhale revitalized Sanwar.

His mind thought clearer, and his heartbeat, once past the initial excitation, slowed to a ponderous speed.

The whole company seemed to be experiencing the same sensation. Many of the soldiers and militiamen were taking experimental breathes and huffing them out again, laughing as it expelled a hearty sound.

“Keep it quiet lads,” Weiss chided them. He was studying the trees and keeping his rifle close at hand.

A moment later, somebody cried out.

Everyone was quick to sober, and had their rifles trained in seconds. There was only mild relief when they saw that the legionnaire on point had merely stumbled. However, anxieties resumed upon seeing what he had stumbled *into*.

The man had lost his footing in a shallow hole indented in their path. Though only inches deep, its width and length were several feet respectively.

And there were more of them running perpendicular to the path, each spaced many yards apart.

Ibrahim helped the man to his feet, then bent down to inspect the marks. Sanwar then saw what he was seeing; that these holes had three pronged toes.

“Footprints,” Ibrahim confirmed.

“Bloody hell,” Weiss muttered. “What the fuck could make something like that?”

Sanwar only raised an eyebrow at him.

There came then the sound of thunder. The ground shook and everyone sought cover behind a tree or hidden in the brush. Sanwar found himself flattened

beside Ibrahim underneath a squat fern plant. From here, he had the closest vantage on a clearing to the column's left.

Then, he saw them.

Their heads appeared above the treetops long before their bodies were ever seen in full. At first, Sanwar thought they were the tops of trees swaying in the breeze, for their color matched the leaves. Yet, when a herd of these enormous creatures finally emerged from between the trees, there was no more doubt.

Those lofty heads sat crowned upon an impossibly long neck. Great barrel-chested bodies carried the immensity of their weight as they strode into the clearing. With legs as thick as tree trunks, each step they took left an impact upon the earth. A whip-like trailed forty feet behind each one, roughly half the creatures' length.

A long and mournful cry went on from the leading animal, a towering behemoth even amongst their number. The herd moved in tandem to some nearby trees and then, the mighty beasts halted there before their mere mortal observers, to feast upon the canopy.

"God be praised," said Ibrahim.

"Dinosaurs," Sanwar gasped.

He had only ever seen their bones at the Museum of Natural History in London, and the paleontologists could never have been more wrong in their reconstructions. They were always shown to be such fearsome, lumbering, and clumsy beasts with their tails

dragging slovenly upon the ground. Those images captured not an ounce of the majesty before him.

Sanwar dared to look away for just a second to see how Jack was taking it. Tears were running down his best friend's face. Sanwar smiled.

"Jesus Christ," came a nearby mutter. Taggart was just to the right of him, crouched behind a cycad with his shotgun trained. He gave the gun a reassuring pump.

"Lot of good that'll do you, Taggart," Jack jeered, never looking away for even a second. "Even if the range was any good, you'd never break that hide."

"I'll break you, MacGregor" sneered Taggart.

Sanwar emerged from hiding and intervened.

"They are herbivorous," he confirmed. "If we remain quiet and exit here without a fuss, we should have no trouble."

"Do we have to go...?" Asked Jack, wide-eyed.

Sanwar nodded sadly, and walked casually over to where Weiss and Chantal were cowering. He reckoned that such gargantuan organisms could barely even see him from their extreme height, but still, he wanted to avoid any unnecessary attention with quick movements.

"Might I suggest that we proceed?" He asked them both. Then, he asked the question again, for they had not acknowledged him the first time.

"What...? Oh...should we?" Weiss hiccupped.

"I want to leave," said Chantal hurriedly.



“Are those the things that made the footprints?” Weiss asked.

“Not even remotely,” Sanwar assured him. “Those tracks were much too small.”

“Small...?”

“Let us be organized in our departure now,” Sanwar advised. “Nobody fires a shot. Nobody makes a sound. Am I understood?”

The column made slow and somewhat orderly retreat. Not a single man turned his back until the creatures were fully out of sight, though Jack had to be practically dragged away. Silently, the march continued.

Yet as they navigated through the dark and steaming woods for some time more, Fatima could hardly keep her quietude.

“This place, these things,” she mused to Sanwar. “By natural law they should not exist. Dinosaurs have never coincided with mankind!”

“Apparently, that assertion is now disproven.”

“I don’t even care,” chirped Jack. He said it as though he had almost forgotten that he was still a prisoner.

“But where is this water coming from?” Fatima gesticulated wildly at the steam and the colossal trees all about them. “How can such things grow in the desert?!”

Sanwar of course, had no answer beyond that Jabir had written it in his scroll. So, perhaps Weiss was right; this *was* paradise.

However, all Weiss could mutter about it now though, was, “Fucking dragons...”

Eventually, the column came to a halt. Ahead of them apparently was a ravine, which prompted Weiss and Chantal to start bickering again, this time over how they should proceed. She wanted to go over it. He wanted to go around.

Sanwar took the momentary interruption to deposit himself on a nearby stone. He groaned from the strain. Though livelier than he had been in days, they had been marching a considerable time, longer than should have been demanded of a recently bedridden man.

Meanwhile, Ibrahim sniffed the air. He scanned the area, evidently searching for the source of whatever it was.

“What do you smell?” Asked Sanwar.

Ibrahim pulled back some brush, and then the scent took hold. Behind the ferns were steaming lengths of scat, each probably the size of a man’s forearm. They were lumpy in consistency, and matched the color of the earth. Ibrahim prodded one link with a twig, breaking it apart and releasing more of the stench. Sanwar had to swat the rush of flies away.

“Bones,” said Ibrahim, pointing with the stick to chunks of skeleton.

“Let us be on guard,” said Sanwar, pushing the ferns back into place.

Ibrahim gave him a cheeky smile. “It would be of little good to us, my friend. Four unarmed prisoners in a haunted wood, surrounded by our enemies.”

“I simply fear for us,” Sanwar explained. “For you.”

“Do not fear for me,” Ibrahim assured him, placing a soft warm hand on his shoulder. “I fear for you. After all, you are injured.”

“I am touched by your concern.”

“You are welcome, my friend. Take heart. Weiss and Chantal dare not kill us until the tower. Although, we have more than them to consider...”

It was then that Sanwar got a keen sense that Le Moche was watching. He pretended to turn idly, and confirmed that the faceless man stood right behind them, rifle shouldered and gaze unbroken.

They smiled at him.

Le Moche said nothing.

“I do not like that man,” said Ibrahim between his teeth.

“Everyone come forward,” ordered LeRoux, suddenly appearing. He waved his pistol lazily for the prisoners to follow.

They were brought to the edge of the ravine where all the others had gathered. The gap was not exceptionally wide nor deep, perhaps thirty feet in both dimensions, but it was a steep, rocky drop and would have been difficult to climb in either direction.

“So, it is decided,” Chantal declared. “Going around will take too much time, and we are losing light.”

“Fine,” Weiss submitted.

Almost all of the ropes had been left behind either at the summit or at the ledge before it, but Weiss had saved one for himself. With a grapple tied to one end, he gave the line a spin, then dexterously launched it across the space, where it snagged securely on a boulder. The rest of the rope was fastened around the nearest tree trunk, thus completing the line.

At once, LeRoux took the rope in hand. Weiss gave him a puzzled look.

“A good leader shows example to his men and to his lady,” the Captain said airily. He gave Chantal a wink for good measure.

“Be my damn guest then,” said Weiss.

LeRoux obliged himself by shimmying across the gap, his long legs dangling beneath him as he went.

Weiss followed in a different fashion. He grabbed the rope with both arms and legs, and monkeyed his way to the other side completely upside down, though quicker than his predecessor.

Few after were brave enough to try his method, yet they all made their way across one by one. Chantal did manage Weiss’ style however, much to her own amusement and his chagrin. Their men then followed after in an alternating pattern, with one of the Bedouins occasionally interjected, and somewhere in

the middle of the order, the French sergeant commanded the prisoners across.

Sanwar went first.

He had no choice, but to use Weiss' method to cross, as shimmying would have been too much strain on his arms alone. At least this way, his legs could foster some of his weight. Even still, every inch of progress was utter agony. Every grip shot pain down his arms and into his back. Halfway through, both sides started jeering at him for going too slowly. Sanwar suppressed the urge to hasten, though. Any misstep, and he might lose his grip.

Yet, their taunting coerced something inside him. A sudden desire to prove them wrong swelled within his heart. He wanted nothing more than to rush stolid forward, showing that he was as strong as any of them, if not more so; that he would not be underestimated. With vigor, he gripped the rope again, ready to propel himself to the other side in seconds flat. He grinned, and looked back to see if Ibrahim and the others were watching.

Then, he stopped and continued on at his self-same pace.

Despite the jeers, Sanwar reached the other side slowly, but safely.

“Took you long enough,” Weiss blustered.

“Would you like my help at the tower or not?” Asked Sanwar. “I fear that I am of scant assistance in a non-living state.”

“Enough of that,” Weiss scowled. “I’m a banker, and I don’t even use a five guinea word as much as you.”

Ibrahim and Fatima were quick to follow. Fatima moved faster than any of them, given that she had much less to carry. She reached the other side, and carefully readjusted her sleeves. Both the French and the militia called her a monkey for her quickness and other reasons, yet she ignored them as always.

Jack was the last of them to cross.

As he placed his hands onto the line, one of the Bedouins suddenly rushed forward, and wrenched him to the ground.

A swift kick to his guts disabled all resistance.

Jack lay stunned, flat on his back in the dirt when the others aimed their weapons.

Before anyone else could react, the Bedouins opened fire.

Half a dozen men went down in the initial volley, several of them dying outright. Most of the Bedouins had remained on the near side of the gap, which left their targets neatly lined across from them like a shooting gallery. Yet even the Bedouins who had crossed were not spared from the carnage. Several dropped in front of Sanwar as their own comrades cut them down, firing indiscriminately into the mass.

LeRoux leapt behind a tree, shouting out for his men to return fire. Weiss tried to do the same, but his men lacked the discipline of professional soldiers, and

broke. Some of them were hit in the back as they tried to flee.

A Bedouin bullet missed Sanwar narrowly, but he was not spared from injury. It struck a nearby boulder to his left ricocheted a chunk of rock into his upper arm. Sanwar growled, and clutched the limb.

“Down!”

Ibrahim suddenly yanked Sanwar by the wrist, bringing him to the ground. Seconds later, several other rounds went screaming overhead. Together, they crawled to the refuge of behind the boulder.

Fatima was already there waiting for them. She handed Ibrahim a captured rifle, and immediately he returned fire at the other side. It was that Sanwar noticed blood stains on the edges of his *thawb*.

“You’re hit!”

Ibrahim only smiled. “I fear for you. Do not fear for me.”

Immediately, Fatima had a piece of her cloak ripped off and fastened to Sanwar’s arm. She finished the tourniquet by using a fallen twig to tightened it. Sanwar winced, but it hurt infinitely less than the last wound that he had sustained.

Bullets continued to rain. The Jews and French were trying desperately to mount a defense, but it was clear that the Bedouins still had the initiative. Their attack was far more coordinated, targeting specific spots of cover, and overwhelming them with fire.

“We must flee!” Ibrahim cried, squeezing off another round. “If we stay here, we shall die!”

“But what about Jack!?” Asked Sanwar and Fatima in unison.

Jack lay groaning in the dirt.

All around him, the roar of battle waged. Strangely, nobody was shooting at him, however. Dazed, he raised his head, only for a bullet to slap the tree trunk right beside it. Sheepishly, he lay back down again.

He tried to crawl away, but saw that his hands and feet had both been hastily bound with strips of fabric. He could certainly reach forward to undo them, but if he did, a Bedouin was right there beside him with a rifle.

What was more, the man was deadly with it. Crouched behind a cycad, he ducked out quickly and landed a careful shot, felling one of the legionnaires with a round to the chest.

There were only nine or ten of them, less than half of Chantal and Weiss’ combined force, but each one man fought like three, and had their enemies pinned in place.

Le Moche fought the hardest of any of them. Armed with an automatic Mauser pistol, he churned out streams of lead twice as fast as the opposing side. Every burst was lethally efficient.

Jack rolled onto his stomach, and glanced about the scene. He caught a glimpse of Ibrahim shooting out



from behind a boulder. Somehow, Jack needed to get across the gap to him and the others. The only trouble was the rope was in the middle of the crossfire...

It looked like he would just have to improvise.

Jack waited until the man nearest him was forced to reload before springing his attack.

He rocked himself from side to side, then suddenly released all of his momentum and rolled like barrel at the Bedouin.

As the man was jamming in another ammunition clip, Jack collided with him. The two crashed into the cypripedium, and spilled out on top of each other in a tangle of gunslings and fabric strips.

They grappled. The man abandoned his cumbersome rifle to reach for the pistol in his belt, but Jack bit down on his fingers, drawing blood. The man withdrew the hand, then smacked Jack across the face with his other.

He went for the gun again, only Jack was quicker to recover than he probably expected, and had the pistol out and clutched in both his hands.

With the barrel practically pressed against his enemy's midriff, Jack fired.

The man shuddered, then went limp.

Ears ringing, Jack pawed around the body for any sort of blade. There was a sheathed *saif* upon his hip, which Jack withdrew several inches in order to cut his hands free. He nicked a finger in the process, but had

the ropes cut in seconds. Instantly, he drew the sword in hand, and hacked through the bonds around his legs.

An instant later, he was on his feet, and staring Taggart right in the face.

Jack cocked his head. "What are you doing here...?"

Taggart smiled, and swung the barrel of his shotgun at Jack's head.

Jack barely parried the oncoming blow with his sword, but it had only been a feint. Taggart checked the blow, then brought his gun around to jam the wooden butt into Jack's stomach.

The impact knocked him on his arse once more. The *saif* went clattering away, and Taggart stood over him, grinning his ugly Glasgow grin.

"You're lucky he wants you alive," the other Scotsman derided. "Elsewise, you'd be eating six long feet of cold hard earth."

"Eat shite yourself!" Said Jack, finding a scrap of bone-filled dung in hand and chucking it at Taggart's face.

Taggart turned his back in time, and managed to take the load of scat on the back instead of the face.

The distraction had served its purpose, though.

Jack snapped back into a seated position, and launched a straightarm jab at Taggart's groin. The blow connected, rendering the man knock-kneed, and therefore vulnerable to Jack's second attack.

Planting a foot straight into Taggart's chest, Jack booted him several feet away. The man went flying back, and vanished into the underbrush.

Jack was already searching for a gun to finish the job, when the roar of battle turned into a roar of a different kind.

The sound ceased all fighting.

For once, the French, the Jews, and the Bedouins lowered their weapons at each other, and all turned towards the same direction.

Jack followed their gaze.

“Aw fuck.”

It appeared on the far side of the ravine, emerging from the trees on Jack's right. If it had not made a challenge, they would not have heard it, for it ambled noiselessly on two long springy legs. They would not have seen it either, for its scaly gray-green hide was streaked with lines of brown and black, making it a part of the very trees themselves. Yet, now that it had made its presence known, the immensity of its size was obvious.

It towered more than twice the height of the tallest man among them. Though large, its design was also sleek, with its sinewy tail held parallel to the ground. Its weight seemed balanced above the hips, as if it was always poised to strike. Jack knew its clade, but not the species; one of the giant three-toed carnivores called “theropods”.

Whatever it was, it peered down at them with a pair of small, intelligent eyes, framed menacingly beneath the heavy bony ridges of its brow. It shook its head and flared its nostrils, then let forth another challenge, revealing a set of six-inch knife-like teeth inside its jaws.

Everybody froze.

It seemed antithetical to survival not to run, and yet any motion seemed just as likely to set the creature after them. They did keep their guns on it, although even a .30 rifle looked like a popgun next to this thing.

Only when the creature advanced, did anybody move. They matched its step, trying desperately to maintain the distance.

At first, it came a few steps forward, issuing a rasping growl. Emboldened when the company gave way however, it continued its advance, gradually shortening the time between each step.

Jack's gaze found Sanwar and the others in the crowd. They were among the closest to the creature, just behind the French sergeant a few others. He wanted nothing more than to run to them, but should he cross the gap in time, he feared that any motion would upset the beast.

A movement in his periphery demanded him to look away. Reluctantly, Jack submitted to the urge.

Jack turned to see that the Bedouins were reloading.

His heart sank when he realized what they were about to do.

“Run!” He screamed, right as the men brought their weapons to bear.

With the safety of the gap between them, the Bedouins resumed fire.

His warning was inaudible amidst the volley. A cacophony of lead ensued, ripping into the far side ranks once more.

Men began to die again. The creature absorbed most of the gunfire due to its size, although the bullets did little more than break its skin.

However, the Bedouin’s desired effect was still achieved. The sudden rush of noise and motion sent the beast into a frenzy. Infuriated, it rushed forward, and attacked.

The French sergeant instinctively aimed his rifle as it charged, but before he could even get a round off, the creature’s jaws came down on him and snatched him from the earth. Bisected at the waist, his halves were flung aside and went crashing through the branches.

Chaos followed.

The company scattered, and Jack lost sight of Sanwar. The creature charged the fleeing ranks, crushing any obstacle underfoot or hewing through it with razor teeth.

Jack snatched the *saif* in hand, and ran for the ravine.

The fight was moving into the trees, and out of view. If he lost his friends now, Jack knew he would lose them forever.

So, he ran.

Jack heard Taggart shout his name. The Bedouins suddenly realized what was happening and dropped their weapons to pursue him.

Le Moche was the closest.

He lunged to try and grab him, but Jack was too quick, and slipped from his grasp.

As soon he had a hold of the rope, Jack cut the end and went swinging across to the side; towards his friends and towards the danger.

## X

### Baleful Blades Ring Clear

Blood and viscera fell from the sky.

The standoff had become a slaughter. Each side abandoned their quarrels, for sheer survival had taken over. This reptilian beast was their reckoning, killing anything before it without judgement or mercy. It was like a prize dog in a rat pit, grabbing at the nearest man, shaking him about, then flinging his lifeless corpse aside before moving to the next. Anyone foolish enough to shoot the creature found his bullets useless, and his body torn pieces.

The columns had broken, the firefight forgotten. Now, every man was fighting for his life and not his cause. They made a mad dash for the trees in the hopes that they would give some cover.

Fatima and Ibrahim were urging Sanwar to follow them, but he resisted.

“Jack!” He cried. “Where is Jack!?”

“He’s right here! Run!” Screamed Jack.

His friend had pulled himself up the broken rope like a monkey, and was already running towards them, flailing his arms like the madman he was.

The theropod was right behind him.

They ran.

It was a frantic flight downhill. Within the trees, the ground gave way to a sharp slope. No one ran down it so much as did their best not to fall, for the acuteness of the angle was so steep. It was sheer gravity that gave them speed and not their legs.

Rocks and fallen logs blocked every measure of the way, forcing Sanwar and the others to duck, jump, and dodge whatever crossed their path. Men stumbled, but their momentum never stopped, and so they kept on tumbling down the hill.

A man beside him tripped over an exposed root on the way down. Sanwar kept running, but glanced back, and watched Jack leap over him then the giant creature crush him underfoot.

It was remarkably agile in this terrain. Around the sharp turns of trees, its legs banked to one side, then recentered immediately as it came around them, all the while holding every ton of body weight in balance. With the steepness of the slope, its great long strides carried it farther, and so it quickly gained.

The goal was not to outrun the beast, however. No, that would be impossible. Instead, Sanwar only needed to outrun the men behind him. Their screams echoed through the forest as the theropod killed another.

Sanwar prayed that the others would make it. Jack was quick, but still far behind, and he had lost sight of Fatima already.

Only Ibrahim was still beside him, yet it was clear the man was faltering. Sweat poured down his brow as



he struggled to keep pace. So, Sanwar grabbed his arm, and pulled him along.

The hill began to flatten just ahead. Weiss' and some of his men were there in front of them. They had been the first to flee the pandemonium, and had the greatest lead.

Yet, Chantal was not far behind.

Even as she ran, she had her pistol in one hand. As Weiss passed below her, she aimed the gun and fired.

Jostled by her erratic motion, the shot went wide and slapped a tree beside him. Hearing the crack, Weiss spun around to face whomever had taken aim at him. Another shot went whizzing past his head as he noticed his attacker, and did not flinch when it struck a branch behind him.

He simply held steady for just a moment, and fired his pistol back.

Chantal screamed. Blood spurted in the air as her body was knocked aside, and vanished in the undergrowth.

Weiss continued running.

Sanwar and Ibrahim were close behind him. Eventually, the hill leveled onto even ground once more, and the dirt gave way to sand as they broke the tree line.

They were standing on the edges of a riverbank now. A mighty stream barred their path. It spanned perhaps a hundred feet across, and dropped off at a waterfall to

the right of them. Neither man was feeling bold enough to swim it, but there was no need.

A giant uprooted conifer lay near the edges of the falls, acting as a makeshift bridge to the other side. Weiss' men were already scrambling across it, using its knobby branches for handholds.

Sanwar at first made to go after them, but paused to glance behind.

There was still no sign of Jack or Fatima anywhere. He snorted, knowing that he could not go back for them. Besides, Weiss was beating them.

“Come on,” urged Sanwar, and turned back towards the fallen tree.

Ibrahim groaned, however, and Sanwar barely caught him as he swayed for balance. A bloody stain in his side was spreading, turning his white clothes crimson.

It instantly reminded Sanwar of his own injuries; how his arm was still wrapped in a tourniquet and his shoulder was throbbing from exertion. Yet, for the sake of Ibrahim, he ignored the sudden awareness of pain to help him lean against the tree trunk. From the placement of the wound, Sanwar could glean that it was not a shallow enough wound on its own, but left untreated, Ibrahim would bleed out.

“We must get you across,” he asserted.

There was no way he could assess the wound here, only the safety of the other side would allow that. He would have to come back for Jack and Fatima then, but sadly there was no other choice. Ibrahim was dying.

A roar from the hills re-instilled their sense of urgency.

“Leave me,” Ibrahim commanded.

“Outrageous poppycock,” said Sanwar, and slung his friend over his arm.

He boosted Ibrahim over tangled roots onto the trunk, then together they hurried their way across, maneuvering their way through a mix of knobs and branches. Sanwar’s arm was screaming now, but he ignored the pain and continued shouldering the weight of the other man.

Pain was temporary. Death was not. Silently, he vowed that he would get them across.

They had not made it far before they heard the screams again.

Fatima burst through the trees, and stumbled out onto the beach. As soon as she hit the sand, all of her momentum ceased. Each step was like pounding into granite. She tumbled and fell, then kept running on all fours towards the salvation of the nearby tree-bridge.

The others were just behind her. She was nimbler than many of them, and so had maneuvered through the forest much more easily. Yet all of that lightness vanished on the sand. It was a matter of strength now, and that was where everyone else had the advantage.

They came flying out onto the strand, jerking from the sudden shift in ground, then started charging down the bank to where the tree bridge waited.

They were much fewer in number now. Most of them were what was left of the legionnaires, but a few stragglers from Weiss' band were there as well. LeRoux was in the lead, his long legs carrying him farther than anyone else. Jack was there behind him, naked sword tucked into his sash.

Moments later, the beast appeared.

It broke the tree line with a body in its mouth, which it let fall to give another awesome roar. Then, it rushed forward, unimpeded by the sand at all. At once, it snatched a militiaman from the bank, and launched his body into the stream.

Fatima was at the bridge.

She climbed with a lightness that the others did not have, and made it to the top. LeRoux grabbed the roots after her, but Jack threw him to the ground, and took his place.

He joined her on the bridge, and they took off running before the men behind could reach them. Sanwar and Ibrahim were just ahead, as were some of Weiss' men. Jack had the *saif* out, for it was faster to hack away the branches than to try and get around them.

The Frenchmen did the same with their machetes. The short stout blades were better for this work however, and they quickly gained. LeRoux was in the front, his otherwise handsome face twisted into the hideousness of rage.

*“Putain!”* The Capitain swore as he slashed aside a bough. He was only a few feet behind them.

Fatima froze.

“Run!” Jack urged, but she would not.

He turned and saw why.

Rising from the stream was an eight-foot sail. A long and narrow snout soon followed, notched at the end like a crocodile’s and lined with dozens of needlepoint teeth. Gouts of steaming breath emitted from the nostrils between its eyes. As it swam into the shallows, the true size of the creature became apparent.

Fifty of feet of black and scaly hide lumbered out of the depths on four stout, hook-clawed feet. Half its length was dedicated to its tail, which was flanged with ridges like a newt. When the creature whipped it back and forth, it sent a spray of mist raining down on Jack and Fatima.

The theropod halted on the bank as this new challenger emerged. The two squared off against each other, pacing back and forth as they exchanged their threat displays; a rumbling growl and a low, rasping hiss. For such enormous beings, they moved about with an eerie sense of grace.

The whole bridge had paused to stare at them until the fight began.

Seeing an opportunity, the sail-backed creature lunged forward to snap at its opponent’s tail. The theropod pulled back, then closed in with its own attack. Its bite connected with the sail. The other

creature cried and shook, but the theropod held itself in place with its short, powerful arms. The beasts fell back into the water, locked in a titanic struggle; Leviathan and Behemoth battling each other for supremacy.

Everyone resumed running again.

There was a renewed freneticism to them all. Now they were not just outrunning one great beast but two, and each other. If Jack and Fatima lost their lead, then LeRoux would overtake and kill them.

She knew that running was her only salvation, that she should not look back, but still, she dared to glance behind.

It was a good thing she had.

LeRoux had gained.

He raised his blade to strike.

“Jack!”

The Scotsman only put his guard up just in time.

LeRoux’s machete swung in, and met Jack’s hasty parry. LeRoux pressed the attack, swinging again, though Jack riposted him this time and assumed the offensive himself.

Steel struck steel. Each man countered the other’s blows, and threw in fists and elbows with them for good measure. It could hardly be called fencing though, just a dirty, brutal brawl.

A second legionnaire came forward while the two men dueled. He made his way around the fighting, by

clinging to the branches where the trunk curved, and advancing nearly parallel to the water.

Fatima found a nearby limb that Jack had cut away, and grabbed it with both hands. Lifting it overhead in a hammer grip, she lobbed at her foe. The shaft spun forward, and slammed into his chest, sending him plunging into the stream below. The man sputtered as the current dragged him along, then screamed when it sent him over the edge of the falls.

There was no time to triumph though, as another legionnaire was coming round the other side. Jack must have seen him, for when LeRoux attacked him next, he simply dodged the blow and shoved the captain aside.

It was all he could do before his next opponent leapt forth, bringing his machete down in a vicious swing.

Jack narrowly danced aside, and the blade bit into the bark next to where he had just been standing.

Perhaps it bit too deeply in fact, for when the legionnaire tried to retrieve it, the weapon would not dislodge.

The soldier abandoned it, but Jack was there already.

The range between them was too close to swing a sword, so Jack gripped the spine to shorten its reach, and sliced the blade against his enemy's neck in a grizzly pushing motion.

He shoved the corpse away as LeRoux regained his footing. The two men resumed their guards, and began the fight once more.

Sanwar heard the clatter of their blades behind him, though it was quickly consumed by the clash of mighty beasts. The theropod let out a bellow of pain as the sail-backed creature dragged it by the tail into deeper waters. Those needle teeth held a vice grip on their prey, and the theropod had come crashing down just trying to escape them. The impact shook the earth, and sent waves into the air like geysers.

The log shuddered. Mist showered Sanwar as he tried to keep his feet, but the force of the shockwave cost him his balance for a moment, and he slipped on the slick wood beneath them. He dropped Ibrahim hard on the bark, and was thrown into a gnarled branch. Pain stabbed throughout his arm as he landed squarely on his injured shoulder.

Fighting against every fiber of his being, Sanwar pulled himself upright again. All sensation vanished from his arm a few seconds later, but he continued stolidly onwards.

Ibrahim groaned as Sanwar lifted him back to his feet, and started half-dragging him across the bridge. Though he knew Jack and Fatima had troubles behind him, he could not go back for them. Doing so would only put all four of them at risk instead of only two. Besides, Weiss' men were already scrambling for the safety of the opposite bank once more. He could not let them reach the Stone before him.



Sanwar shoved his way through branches and bristles after them. Somehow in spite of his wounds and the weight of another man, he gained.

From an off-glance over his shoulder, Weiss saw them. At first, he seemed taken by surprise. Then fear and anger won him over.

He shouted orders at the rearmost man.

Dutifully, that man nodded, and turned to face Sanwar. It was the one they called Elijah, the stout fellow with the black beard. The tangle of branches was too thick for a rifle and the footing too unstable for a pistol, so the man drew a blade instead. It was not a knife he wielded, but an eighteen-inch-long bayonet. Brandishing the weapon, Elijah advanced.

Sanwar halted, placed Ibrahim against a nearby branch, and squared off to meet his new threat. Instinctively, he reached for *Cadarama* then his *kirpan*, but remembered that both had been taken from him by the French. Instead, he snapped off a sturdy limb with his “good” hand, and instantly armed himself with a cudgel.

Elijah paused, realizing that his enemy had suddenly gained the reach advantage, then backed away.

Sanwar rushed at him, and swung.

Elijah fell back onto a branch, and dodged the blow, which struck against a separate limb and splintered the end of Sanwar’s makeshift weapon.

Then, Elijah rushed forward with his bayonet to seize the gap, but Sanwar brought the cudgel back

around with surprising quickness, and caught him with the backswing.

It knocked Elijah to one side, and he barely caught himself from falling off the log. He still held onto his blade however, and recovered fast enough to come after Sanwar again.

The heaviness of the weapon had left Sanwar's shoulder weak, and he could not bring the club to bear in time. He could only toss it lazily to slow his enemy's advance.

The awkward limb bounced uselessly against Elijah's chest. The man shrugged off the pathetic hit, and continued forward unimpeded.

However, it was enough of a distraction for Ibrahim to find a makeshift weapon of his own, and rush at Elijah's flank. Even in his wounded state, he summoned forth surprising speed, and there was no time for Elijah to react.

With a sturdy bough in hand, Ibrahim cracked him in the ribs. The snap of bones sounded beneath the blow.

Elijah cried out more in anger than in pain, and swung wildly at him with the bayonet.

He drew a flesh wound from Ibrahim's forearm, but in the process had exposed his left to Sanwar, who closed the gap immediately.

He grabbed Elijah's wrist to secure the weapon, then Ibrahim jumped in to help him. They might have both been badly injured, but the strength of God was in

them now, and not even a man as stout as Elijah could overcome them.

Sanwar grabbed the bayonet by the blade, and turned it upside down over the back of Elijah's hand, thus disarming him. Ibrahim then held him back as Sanwar slid the weapon six inches into Elijah's guts. His body shuddered, then went limp. Ibrahim released his hold, and let him flop onto the bark.

It was a short-lived victory.

Sanwar was about to urge them forward when right then, the dueling giants slammed against the log.

The colossal reptiles had collided with the bridge in the middle of their grisly combat, the force of which sent the tree along several dozen yards and spinning on its axis.

Elijah's body was thrown from the trunk, and swept away by the draught.

Ibrahim fell into a knot of branches.

Sanwar found no handhold however, and fell back onto the bark and started sliding towards the edge as the tree rolled over.

He only managed to dig the bayonet into the wood before he hit the stream. With two hands locked around the hilt, he held on for dear life, and took one last desperate breath as the whole bridge went upside down and underwater.

Jack had only just caught himself in time. A shout from Fatima had saved him. Her warning gave him

only just a second to cling to the nearest branch before the creatures hit them.

Now, his world was topsy-turvy.

Cold and clouded water flushed his eyes and nostrils as he spun, and bubbles billowed from his mouth. For a long time, all he could see was the white rush of the stream.

Seconds later, he was yanked out into the sun again, gasping for air.

The log was still in spin, and he had only precious moments to take a breath.

Then, he was plunged underwater all over again.

Only after another full rotation, did the conifer finally jerk to a halt. The wood groaned, and Jack almost lost his grip as the whole thing rocked back into place.

Catching himself, he made the mistake of looking down.

The tree was now careening over the edge of the falls. It was impossible to know far the drop was, as the bottom was invisible, lost in a great white mist of crashing waters.

What was worse, the bridge no longer lay flat atop the stream, but was leaning slightly towards the falls...

“Jack...” A small voice called out.

He glanced to his left.

Fatima dangled over the edge by the skinniest of branches. If she were even one pound heavier, the stick would have snapped.

Jack clambered over to her at once, and extended his hand.

His arm was barely long enough to reach her, but when he tried, his hands were too wet and slippery to grab a hold.

Fatima's grip came loose from his, and now she was holding on with a single hand.

Her own slick palms were struggling to keep a hold themselves.

"Hold on!" He cried, and shoved his hand out again.

He caught her wrist right as her grip on the branch came loose.

Jack cried out as he held her there, suspended above the falls. Grunting from the strain, he curled his arm with all his might to lift her back to the branches. The fingers on his other hand went bloody as they dug into the bark to keep them anchored.

Suddenly, Fatima's eyes went wide.

She pointed to something over his shoulder.

"Jack! Look out!"

Jack turned his head in jerky motions.

Crawling on all fours, LeRoux was coming towards them. He had lost his white kepi, and there was a wild, unhinged look on his face as he inched closer. In one hand, he still gripped his machete, its steel scraping against the bark with an awful, cringy sound.

"Aw...fuck."

LeRoux stopped, and crouched on his knees, right above Jack's fingers.

*“Au revoir, putain,”* the Captain said with a deadly smile, and raised the blade above his head.

“Jack! Look out!” Fatima yelled again.

Jack realized now that she was warning him about herself, and not LeRoux.

A pistol had suddenly appeared from her sleeves and into her hand. Jack knew to hold his breath, and lean his head aside as he held her steady.

For a moment, all motion stopped.

Fatima fired.

LeRoux was taken underneath the jaw, and lost all function at once. The machete fell from his hands, and his flaccid corpse slumped forward. Jack swung them both aside as his body plummeted off the falls and into the mists below.

He vanished beneath the stream.

“Now lift me, damn it!” Fatima shouted once he was gone.

Jack pulled.

Sanwar spat out a lungful of dirty water.

The bayonet blade was bent almost perpendicular, and the rivets were busting out of the handle, but Sanwar had held on. He found nearby bough strong enough to support him, and used it pull himself back to the top.

The tree had been knocked aside a considerable distance from its original position. Some fifty yards in distance, the two colossi were still thrashing about in

the stream, staining the waters red with their gaping wounds. Their movements became more labored with every attack and counter made.

At the far end of the bridge, a few of Weiss' men were pulling themselves to safety; fewer than there had been before.

At the other end, Jack and Fatima were doing the same, and Sanwar wished he could feel any ounce of joy for them above the numbness. His body ached so much that it felt not its own, as if he floated above the ground rather than stood firm upon it.

Then, he remembered Ibrahim.

Where was he?

Had he fallen?

Relief swept over him, when Sanwar saw that he was indeed alive, but that did not last. His dear friend was near, though trapped in a tangle of twigs and needles, with his legs pinned underneath a twisted branch. He lay still where he was pinned, making neither sound nor movement.

Sanwar started for him, until a tirade of cursing drew his attention away for just a moment.

Just a few yards away, Weiss was hanging off the side of the bridge by several branches. Somehow, they had drifted closer together during the confusion, and now the banker was finding himself in very precarious spot. Every attempt he made to find another foothold and lift himself higher, brought forth a slew of expletives.

It would be an easy thing to walk over to him, and crush his fingers with a boot until he fell. Yes, his men might get away, but those few survivors lacked his leadership and more importantly, his ambition. Besides, Sanwar had always been taught to target the commanders.

He had taken one step in Weiss' direction, when he heard a voice call out his name.

“Sanwar...”

Ibrahim was alive.

Sanwar paused.

He gave one last look to Weiss, who was fumbling about, unaware that Sanwar was so near to him; then turned back and went to Ibrahim instead.

He brushed aside the foliage, until he found purchase on the limbs that trapped the noble *sheikh* in place.

“I thought you might not see me here,” rasped Ibrahim. He coughed out water when he spoke.

“I have and do see you,” Sanwar replied. “Hush now. I will free you.”

Sanwar grabbed the branches, and pulled.

Though both of his arms were injured, though his entire body ached, he heaved with every ounce of strength within him. He could hear the tendons in his right shoulder snapping again from all the strain. He felt the wound reopen yet again, and the red-hot blood coming streaming down his chest.

And yet, the branch was lifted.



Ibrahim wriggled himself free at once, allowing Sanwar to release his grip. With the weight of it gone, he sank to his knees.

Ibrahim embraced him.

They held each other for as long as urgency would allow.

“Come, my friend,” whispered Ibrahim. “To the shore.”

Together, they carried each other across.

Weiss was long gone by the time they made it to the beach, with half a dozen sets of footprints in the sand leading off into the jungle.

Sanwar found a nearby rock for Ibrahim lean on, before turning back towards the stream.

The battle there was at its end. The titans’ war had brought them all the way to the far side of the stream, and now the sail-backed creature lay in a surf of gore with the theropod’s three-toed foot upon its ribs. It gave a last few roils beneath the victor’s heel, and let out one final rasp of defeat from its narrow, bloodied snout.

Then, the theropod bit down on its neck. The sail-backed creature’s newt-like tail flapped tensed and flapped in the water from the force, but when its large head hung loosely on its neck and its small eyes rolled back white, the tail lay still.

The theropod then turned its attention to Sanwar, who did not flee as it approached him.

Long, deep streaks were gashed into its side and face. Blood coated its claws and mouth. It walked forward in a stilted, jerky manner, and it could not summon a roar like it had before, and let out a labored growl instead. Those small eyes peered down at Sanwar, at the ready to slay yet another who challenged its crown and kingdom.

Sanwar just wanted this to be over.

If he died here after all of this ordeal, so be it. It would be a much-welcomed relief.

“Sanwar!”

Jack and Fatima were there on the bridge.

From the trunk, Fatima tossed him a pistol.

He caught it midair with his left hand, and in a single fluid motion, spun it around, and cocked the hammer.

There was only one weak spot that had a chance of killing this beast, and that was exactly where he aimed the sights.

The theropod advanced, opening its jaws and flashing its rows of six-inch serrated teeth.

Sanwar held his ground however, and fired.

Its left eye exploded in a gout of blood. It took a moment for the rest of its body to register, and the beast came forward several steps before it all went slack, and crashed onto the turf with thunderous impact.

Sanwar lowered the smoking pistol, as the others breathed a sigh of deep relief.

This fight was over.

The tower waited.

## XI

### And Through Seal Unbroken

They stopped for rest in a clearing some distance away from the river, as fresh carrion was likely to attract more unwanted attention. Here, they sat Ibrahim against a tree trunk, and collected water from low hanging cycad fronds. The condensation on them was far cleaner than the river, so they filled their canteens with it readily before addressing the wounded.

Ibrahim was in a bad way, so Fatima tended to him first.

“A graze,” she determined after looking under his *tawb*. “The bullet cut the flesh and passed through. Not deep, but he has lost much blood.”

Sanwar admitted that Ibrahim’s clothing made the wound look worse than it was. Blood showed more easily on white.

Fatima cleaned the wound with squirts from her canteen, and improvised a bandage from her torn clothes to bind it.

“Will he survive beyond the tower?” Sanwar asked frankly.

“No,” answered Fatima, just as frank. “Not without proper medical attention.”

“I need only to survive until the tower,” Ibrahim laughed weakly. “Just to give Weiss back the bullet that he gifted me.”

Sanwar checked the revolver that Fatima had tossed to him. The cylinder only had four rounds left. He would try and save one for Weiss, if he could.

Fatima turned to him next.

“Your wound is a disaster,” she told him, fashioning another tourniquet for his right shoulder.

The limb was now unusable, and Sanwar had lost all sensation in it. The wound had reopened, allowing pus and blood to ooze from it if he moved too much. If Ibrahim had little time, Sanwar assumed that he had even less. Fatima did her best to tend the wound however, and wrapped it in her makeshift bandages.

“I stole some morphine from the surgeon a long time back,” she said, and produced some tablets from those mysterious sleeves of hers. “I did not think that he would give you proper doses, so I did myself secretly. This is all that I have left.”

Sanwar accepted the tablets, and downed them dry.

“Thank you,” he said, and cocked the revolver’s hammer with his good hand. Though injured, his left arm still worked. Besides, he had learned early in sniper’s school how to shoot from both sides.

“Jack, are you hurt?” Asked Fatima.

“Fuck no,” he said. The mad gleam was in his eye again. “Not let’s end this bollocks once and for all.”

Sanwar smiled grimly.

So this would be the end, would it?

A part of him had died away a long, long time ago. Today, the rest of him would join it.

He hoped at least that he might see the Stone before his time was done.

Another ten minutes through the jungle brought them within the shadow of the tower. Its walls were shiny and smooth, as if freshly polished. Even in the twilight, the white stone gleamed.

A balcony lined with golden railings presided high above them, with an archway to a darkened chamber behind it, but curiously, there was no front entrance. Instead, a staircase spiraled around the outside. There was no sign of Weiss either, so it stood to reason that the man must have found some way inside, and the stairs appeared to be the only option.

Sanwar led with the pistol, followed by Jack who shouldered Ibrahim against the wall and Fatima in the rear. Several times they passed fully around the tower's circumference, which only added to its dizzying height. More than once, somebody slipped on the narrow steps, and was reminded how much farther there was to fall with every passing moment.

It was a mercy when they finally reached a landing after some immeasurable distance. The steps ended at a simple horseshoe arch doorway. Sanwar entered the portal and into darkness.

Light shined through a second doorway at the end of what might have been a long corridor. Voices echoed down it as well. One was gruffer and louder than the rest.

The group crept along, using the meager light to guide them as best it could. The day's heat had dissipated here in the dark, and the air was quite crisp and cool. Still, Sanwar found his palms to be slick with sweat as he rounded the corner.

The second door led to another corridor, perhaps longer than the first, which eventually opened into a much larger room. The light emanated from this chamber, illuminating ornate stonework on the floor, walls, and ceiling. Flowing Arabic script had been worked into the masonry as if it had been part of the natural rock itself. Thankfully, the stone floor concealed their footfalls as well, and soon enough, they were peering into the large chamber at the end.

What lay within was an extensive alchemical laboratory. To the lefthand side were rows of stone worktables lined with all manner of instruments, and behind them, shelves of what looked to be every ingredient imaginable. Each was carefully labeled in neatly ordered vials. The only thing disorderly about this section was a loose collection of limestone bricks, tossed carelessly in a pile where another table was presumably to be constructed.

To the right-hand side of the room stood the most massive kiln that Sanwar had ever seen. Its cylindrical

frame went almost floor to ceiling, and was made of a strange, dark metal. The sheer size of it occupied almost the entirety of its section of the chamber.

Finally, at the far end of this room, overleaved between a set of enormous double doors, was the insignia of the white eagle devouring flames.

Weiss' men stood before it, arguing amongst themselves in Yiddish, presumably about how to get through this puzzle. Weiss himself was blustering at his five surviving companions, which motivated none of them to solve the answer any faster.

Now that he thought of it, Sanwar had not even solved the riddle himself. In all of the chaos since as far back as the ruins, the riddle had all been forgotten to him. The answer was some sort of compound, that much was likely true, but such information hardly narrowed it down.

He turned to his companions, who were transfixed on Weiss' group, as if they too were trying to puzzle out the answer. He then surveyed the room.

Jabir al-Hayyan had been among the greatest masters. His answer had to be something clever, but played by fair rules. Alchemists, after all, followed a code. Otherwise, there was no Art.

Yet, hundreds of chemicals lined those shelves, if not thousands.

What was the solution?



He scanned the room in desperation, searching for a sign, anything. There was nothing save for the kiln and a pile of stones...

Then, Sanwar had his answer.

Elated, he nearly laughed out loud and shouted it out right then, but was reminded of the second riddle when Weiss shouted out instead; how to reach the door in the first place?

Sanwar scanned Weiss' men. Each man had guns still, and he had just four bullets for the six of them. Two men were occupied with lanterns. He could certainly kill the other four right now, Weiss among them, but the others would live long enough to draw their guns, chase him and the others down, and slay each one of them. Besides, there was the risk of them hitting some dangerous substance on the wall and killing everyone in the tower.

No, there seemed to only be one solution.

Sanwar safetied the pistol in his belt, then stepped right into the corridor. The others looked at him in horror, but it was too late to stop him.

“Encountering some complications with the door?” Sanwar called out.

Weiss and the other men wheeled about at once, all their weapons aimed at him.

Sanwar did not flinch.

“I ought to shoot you for killing Elijah,” Weiss growled.

“You sent him to kill me before you even had a solution,” Sanwar pointed out. “Shoot me and you will never solve the riddle.”

“It was either you killed me or I killed you back on the bridge! You would have taken that chance. I know it. Like I said, you’re a killer.”

“That would make two of us, then. However, I am willing to reach an agreement.”

Weiss laughed. “Alright, here’s the terms; tell me the answer to this riddle, and I swear I won’t shoot you or your friends back there.”

He nodded to the others, who stepped forward now that they had been discovered.

“Well, even if you did, it would help you none.”

Weiss lowered his weapon. “And why’s that?”

“Because the answer is compound that must be synthesized,” Sanwar replied. “The white eagle represents its coloration. The flames indicate it to be an endothermic reaction. I intuit the operation to be a calcination-”

“Speak bloody English!”

“Do you know how to make quicklime, Mister Weiss?”

Mister Weiss said nothing.

“The answer is quicklime,” Sanwar reiterated. “Now if you will excuse me and my friends, we would like to make some without the fear of being shot.”

Weiss turned sheepishly to his men, who merely shrugged. With a nod from their commander, they

collectively lowered their weapons as well. He then turned back to Sanwar.

“Tell me how you’ll do it, so I know there’s no funny business.”

“Fair enough,” Sanwar agreed. “First, we will grind limestone, which is over-abundant here, into a coarse powder. We will next heat it to the proper temperature in that kiln yonder. Finally,” he hesitated. “We will add water to the solution, so that it can be slaked and applied there.”

He gestured to a font on the door beneath the eagle’s talons. As he did, he glimpsed Fatima’s body tense in his periphery.

“Very well,” Weiss declared. “Hop to it. The lads and I will be watching.”

“I trust you will have a splendid view of the show,” Sanwar returned.

And so, they began.

Jack was the only one strong enough to lift a heavy block of limestone, and carry into onto the table. He then broke it apart with a hammer and chisel he found, before giving everyone a section to mash with mortars and pestles. Even Ibrahim contributed his best to work the stone. Thankfully it was soft, and crumbled easily, yet all the while Fatima had a white knuckled grip on her instruments. They were careful not to grind the powder too finely, leaving small chunks of it in the mix. When finished the entire block had been pulverized by the four of them.

Next, Jack collected their samples in one bowl, and carefully climbed a series of handholds on the kiln to load them into the top. Fatima waited at the bottom to ignite the fire through a large round slot, where she would also stoke the lime with a long wooden pole.

Yet there was no need for ignition. Almost as soon as Jack had clambered back down, a burst of heat erupted in the kiln. Scarlet flames flew up from nowhere to kiss the charge inside. Before anyone had time to recover, the fire vanished in a whiff of smoke.

Everyone exchanged looks of astonishment. Gingerly, Fatima removed the lime.

It emerged as a pure white ashy powder with the perfect consistency. The small woman held her hand above the pile. Puzzled, she looked back to the others.

“Completely cool.”

Sanwar raised an eyebrow, and ventured forth.

Sure enough, no heat emanated from the quicklime.

“Shouldn’t it be hot?” Asked Weiss.

Sanwar ignored the question, and began loading the powder into a mixing flask. Ibrahim provided him with water from his own canteen, though not before giving him a quizzical look. Jack and Fatima crossed around to behind the worktables as Sanwar emptied the canteen into the large glass vial. Last of all, he stoppered it, and was about to shake the contents.

“Wait!” Demanded Weiss. The burly man stepped forward, and snatched the vial from Sanwar’s hand. “I’ll do the final touches myself. Shake this then...?”

“Shake *vigorously*,” Sanwar corrected.

“Right then.”

Weiss sidled over to the font, and with a firm grip around its neck, shook the mixing flask as hard as he could.

In seconds, the glass began to whine.

The vial’s shape began to warp and crack as the gas inside expanded.

“You bloody *messhugenah*...” cursed Weiss.

He wheeled furiously around, but Sanwar and the others had already ducked behind the tables.

Then, the flask exploded in his hand.

In an instant, the entire room filled with ash white smoke. The four companions stayed low to the ground, and covered their noses and mouths to avoid inhaling it, as meanwhile Weiss’ men hacked and wheezed above them. Lanterns fell and smashed upon the floor, though their fires still burned weakly.

Wildly, the men fired off their weapons, in one final attempt to take their foes down with them. Glass shattered on the shelves, and unknown substances came crashing to the floor. Sanwar pulled his legs aside as steaming liquid splashed upon the stone where they had been. Bullets ricocheted off stone. Screams and thuds rang out as men fell writhing to the floor.

Through the chaos, the heavy scrape of stone could be heard.

“The door!” Rapped Sanwar, loud as he could.

One of the militiamen stood in the way, so Sanwar ducked out of cover, and fired off a shot while the others crawled along the floor behind him, careful to avoid spills and bodies.

Sanwar's round took the man directly in the chest, and put him down. However, another stepped out from the smoke, coughing out of blood, and waving a pistol wildly about. Half-blind, he fired back.

The shots went wide of Sanwar, who killed the man with a second shot.

Fatima was not so lucky.

She gasped as a stray bullet struck her ribs. Her face dropped into the stone, and she lay motionless. Blood leaked out onto the floor.

Sanwar moved for her, but Ibrahim, last in line, held up a hand to stop him. With sorrow in his eyes, he shook his head, and Sanwar understood.

The *sheikh* then turned away, grabbed the nearest pistol and fired at wherever he saw muzzles flaring through the smoke.

Sanwar grabbed Jack, yanked him to his feet, and sprinted for the door.

The two limped their way down a long dark corridor as the gunshots grew fainter and fainter behind them. They could breathe freely again, though they were out of breath, and perhaps nearly out of time as well.

Their panting was audible in the darkness, the only proof that they were still together. In the darkness, it was nigh impossible to see how far they had run or

even know how long. The only indication they were advancing was a speck of light in the distance. As they drew nearer and nearer, it slowly began to grow, until eventually it was a brilliant scarlet radiance flickering through a doorway.

The two men entered the portal, and stepped into a second chamber. This one of was circular in shape, filled with stone chairs arranged around a table of the same shape. In the table's center sat what looked to be an enormous silver chalice, and the source of the glowing light.

Jack and Sanwar approached the cup. It stood above waist height, forcing them to lean forward in order to see its contents. Their eyes widened when they witnessed what lay within the basin.

A throbbing crimson orb rested at the bottom. Its pulsations deformed its shape every so often, so much so that it sometimes burst and liquified. Yet sure enough, the orb reformed just moments later and began the cycle again.

“Is it...?” Murmured. Jack.

“It cannot be,” uttered Sanwar.

The map and diary had not lied to them.

Jabir had done the impossible. He had made the Philosopher's Stone.

The two men were not alone, however.

Out from the shadows stepped forth a knight dressed in black with a white cross emblazoned on his surcoat. He wore a sword upon his belt and a hauberk

that bore not a single ring of rust. Tall and strong, his presence seemed to fill the entire room.

Sanwar could not believe his eyes.

“Godfrey?”

The knight smiled at him sadly.

“Parzival,” he answered, then said something else in a language that Sanwar could not understand.

“He says that he is Godfrey’s twin brother,” said Jack after a moment.

“You know what he is saying?”

“Vaguely. It’s Old French. The words don’t all sound the same, but aye, there’s a wee bit of similarity.”

Sanwar nodded, and was sure not interrupt any further.

Parzival spoke slowly and softly. There was a weightiness about him, which was remarkably odd, for he appeared no older than Jack or Sanwar. Each word seemed spoken with such carefulness, even if Sanwar could not understand.

“He says that he and Godfrey came this way so long ago he does not remember when it was,” Jack interpreted. “A dream guided them here, through the desert. He says that it was their quest...from God. He has been waiting in this tower and keeping vigil ever since.”

“Waiting?” Asked Sanwar. “For what?”

Parzival looked at him, and answered.

“For us,” said Jack.

The knight gestured to the chalice behind him.



*“Le Graal.”*

That word, Sanwar certainly understood.

Parzival beckoned him forward, and guided his hand into the massive cup. The Stone had liquified again, but when Sanwar’s fingers touched it, it solidified immediately and shaped itself to fit his grip. At once it went from a gelatinous feeling in his hand to a hard crystalline texture.

Sanwar recoiled, but could not will himself to let the object go. The Stone seemed sealed to his palm. He cradled it with both hands, for at once it felt heavy as a block of lead, yet also weightless as a feather in the breeze. An eerie power surged through his arms. An electricity crackled in the air.

In all these years, Sanwar would never have believed that he would hold it in his hand.

Parzival smiled, and said something to him directly.

“J-Jack what did he say?”

In the heat of the moment, Jack’s translation had almost escaped him.

“He says that only a worthy man may wield it,” Jack repeated. “That we must take it with us from this tower...to use it in our quest.”

Sanwar looked back at the knight.

“No. No. I cannot be worthy. Not a man like me.”

The old knight only nodded.

Gently, he placed a mailed glove on Sanwar’s hands, and closed his fingers around the Stone.

“Bastards!”

A gunshot ricocheted about the room.

Abner Weiss, despite their efforts, was not yet dead.

Somehow, the surly banker had survived, and followed them here. He staggered through the door, pistol waving wildly about, and fired off one erratic shot after another into their midst. He cursed at them in English or Yiddish with each successive burst.

Instinctively, Sanwar shoved Parzival to the ground, and ducked behind the cover of the Grail. He then reached for his gun, but found that his hand was slick with blood. He looked back at Parzival.

The white cross on the knight's surcoat had turned to red. Parzival lay peacefully, a sad smile on his lips.

Sanwar cocked back the hammer of his pistol, and swiveled out of cover.

He expected return fire as he stood, but curiously, Weiss had ceased all hostilities. Instead, the banker simply stood there, ignorant of Sanwar's presence, staring at the ground. Entranced, he reached down and retrieved what Sanwar had let fall in his haste.

Slowly, Weiss lifted the Stone to the level of his gaze. Its light pulsed against his face, revealing what remained of it. The skin had been charred to a shiny pinkish hue, and half the hair on his face was burnt away. Shards of glass jutted from his cheeks and left eye, but Weiss seemed not to notice them. His world had shrunk to the glowing crystal in his hand. He let out a rasp of laughter.

“At last, it’s mine,” He uttered, and held the Stone aloft. “*Der Judenstaat...*”

Sanwar pulled the trigger.

The bullet struck the Stone, shattering it instantly.

A burst of light erupted in Weiss’ hand. Scarlet fluid sprayed forth from the crystal and splattered on his face. A second later, he began to scream as his body turned to ash.

It was a high-pitched, awful scream, rasping and unending. Weiss tore at his steaming skin. Each time he did, he clawed chunks of dust away. His clothes dissolved right off his back. Bones stuck out from his fingertips. His face seared, and smoke billowed from his hollow eye sockets. He sank to his knees in a steaming ruin.

Sanwar used the final bullet to end his suffering, for he could not bear the screams. When it struck him, Weiss disintegrated, and the ashes blew away.

Then, the walls of the chamber shook.

Stones crumbled, and fell from the ceiling.

The whole tower began to sway.

“Come on!” Shouted Jack, who appeared out from cover behind one of the stone chairs. He urged Sanwar towards the door. “Come on!”

Yet, Sanwar did not listen.

Something red and gleaming lay discarded on the floor. He walked towards it despite Jack’s pleading. Daintily, he plucked a tiny crystal sliver off the ground.

“Come on!” Jack yelled again, and ran back for his companion.

He had just grabbed Sanwar by the arm when suddenly a thunderous crack rang out above them.

Jack had only enough time to shove Sanwar out of the way.

A gigantic section of the roof came down a moment later, bisecting the room.

Sanwar turned round to see a wall of rubble had now barred everything behind him.

What was more, Jack was gone.

Sanwar paused in confusion.

He started back towards the stones to tear them down piece by piece, until another slab of falling rock nearly crushed him to death. He dodged it by inches, and when he looked back, the barrier was now immovable.

Heartbroken, Sanwar turned away, and raced back down the corridor.

Jack was gone.

With every step, the tower rumbled. Pieces of the wall rent open, letting bursts of evening sunlight through. It was all that allowed Sanwar to see his footing, as each stride demanded that he leap a gaping crack in the floor or dodge a falling stone. Dust rained from the ceiling. The whole structure wavered, and knocked him to one side. His shoulder slammed against the wall, but despite the pain, the sudden jolt had inadvertently saved him. Seconds later, a section of

the floor ahead of him gave way. Sanwar recovered, leapt the gap, and continued on, not lingering to think what might have happened.

Eventually, he made it back to the laboratory. Fatima and Ibrahim lay amidst the bodies of Weiss' men, unconscious and barely breathing in mixing pools of blood.

The tower walls shook, knocking vials off the shelves, and shattering them. The double doors gave way, and the once resplendent eagle came crashing down in cascades of dust. The world was crumbling around him, but Sanwar's eyes were darting around the room, vying for some way out.

There was only one solution to this riddle.

With no other option, he slung his two friends' bodies over his shoulders. He had lost Jack already. He would not lose them.

Jack screamed, and pounded at the stone.

"Sanwar!"

It was useless.

An immovable barrier of rock had ripped the two men apart, and Jack had found himself on the wrong side of it. There were no stairs leading down from here, only the ones behind him leading up. The tower was caving in around him, so with nowhere else to run, Jack rushed out into the twilight, and thundered up the steps.

As he ran, the spire swayed, and Jack was nearly thrown over the side with no rail to catch him. He only saved himself by dropping flat on his arse, and digging his bootheels into the alabaster steps. Moments later, the tower swayed again, knocking him back into the wall. Jack scrambled to his feet, and continued on, climbing the stairs on all fours like some wild beast.

The spiral staircase ended at a balcony. From this vantage, Jack witnessed the entire basin collapsing beneath him. Avalanches of rock crashed down as the earth yawned open, and the ring of cliffs around the valley began to fold in on themselves. The great beasts and the giant conifers that dwelled in this oasis were swept asunder by the tide of sinking ground. Hard stone turned soft as clay in the churning morass below, taking all life with it. The river was no exception either. Its stream became a spray, as it too, was sucked into the gaping pit that the basin had become.

Only the creatures of the air were spared. Jack saw them, the great winged beasts, soaring above the ruin, desperately searching for a place to land. The smaller birds could not fly so high for so long, and so had been crushed like all the others. Yet, a few of these huge, drake-like creatures had managed to survive.

As one of them circled nearer to the tower, Jack vowed that he would do the same.

Unfortunately, there was only one way to do so. He stepped onto the ledge of the balcony.

“Aw fuck,” he said to himself, looking down.

He would have to time it right. He waited for the perfect moment.

Jack did not so much leap, as he was thrown forward.

The balcony simply gave out under him, and suddenly he was falling.

Ten,

Twenty,

Thirty,

Forty feet, and collided with the massive flying beast.

It buckled another twenty from the impact of his weight. Jack's hands clawed desperately for a hold, but the damned beast was seizing in the air to try and shake him. He found a hold between its shoulder blades before it nearly tossed him overboard, yet it kept on flapping wildly.

"Fly straight, damn you!" Jack scorned through gritted teeth.

The beast did not oblige.

Still, it squawked and gaggled while trying to stay airborne. Jack knew that his added weight was costing them precious altitude, but he was surprised the damn thing could even fly in the first place. The pterosaur was nearly twenty feet long, but almost half that length was devoted to a pencil neck and pin-shaped head. A pair of short, skinny arms were all that held its thirty-foot wingspan aloft. It shook and wobbled as it tried to flap to safety.

Dangerously close beneath them, trees bent and splintered. Debris was tossed into the air, buffeting

Jack's face and the underside of his steed. Boulders rained down from the cliffsides, and struck some of the other pterosaurs midflight.

Then, there was a mighty crack, followed by a clap of thunder. Jack threw his gaze back over his shoulder.

Behind them, the Tower of Idris came tumbling down. Its spire broke apart into several pieces in midair, each one sending forth an earthquake as it hit the ground. Yet soon, the tide of rock washed over them as well.

Jack's heart sank.

There was no way anyone could have survived that.

The wreckage of the tower vanished, as they flew into a cloud of dust.

Jack shut his eyes, and pressed his face into the creature's feathers. Tiny stones abraded his skin, and whiffs of sand stuffed into his ears and mouth. Soon, the whirlwind passed, but when Jack opened his eyes again, they were fast approaching a falling wall of solid rock.

"Shite!"

The pterosaur bleated out in shock as well.

Instinctively, he dug his heels into its flanks as if it were a camel.

The creature banked, and narrowly dodged the collapsing mass.

Jack almost breathed a sigh of relief, until a loose boulder dashed against the pterosaur's big, awkward



head. The whole neck went limp, and suddenly, the two of them were plunging towards the earth.

Jack screamed, and roped his arms around the creature's neck.

For a moment, his world went black.

The impact of the fall jolted him back to his senses, though. The creature hit the ground beak-first, sending forth a spray of sand. Then suddenly, Jack was flying himself.

He was soaring through the air, arms flailing for a handhold that wasn't there. He could not even hear himself screaming as he was catapulted.

He landed on his back in a heaping bank of sand, and slid down the dune, only to land with a hard smack on the bum from a pile of rubble.

Jack groaned, and fell back flat, alive, unscathed (somewhat), and totally defeated.

He lay alone in silence with his eyes shut for a good long while.

It was the sound of footsteps and the click of a pistol's hammer that awoke him.

Jack's eyes lazed open to see a womanly figure stepping out of the dust. He eased onto his knees to see more clearly, but the motion was met with challenge.

"Stay where you are!" Chantal commanded.

She stepped forward, the cloud of dust and a blood red sunset at her back. All of the young *mademoiselle's* former sophistication had vanished. Her shiny copper

hair had been dulled by dirt and twigs. Her makeup was running down her cheeks in rivulets of sweat. One hand clutched her bloody shoulder while the other was white knuckled around her pistol's grip. A wild look was in her eyes, as all her breeding fled from her, and feral instinct took over.

"It would seem...that we...are the only ones who lived," she panted.

Jack said nothing. His voice was shot. Besides, his gaze was fixed upon that pistol in her hand.

"I was wounded..." she went on, almost unaware that she was speaking to anyone. "When I came to...there was no way across...the river. So, I came back...to the ropes. And just in time...I climbed down before..."

She looked at the wreckage all about them. Black stained tears rolled down her cheeks, and mixed with sweat.

A stronger man might have lunged at her just then while she was turned away and wrestled for the gun, but Jack had no strength left. So, he sat there paralyzed while Chantal wept.

"*Mon royaume,*" she whined. She snapped her head back at Jack. "You...you ruined everything, Jack! You have spoiled everything!"

She advanced on him, gun brandished and ready.

"Just tell me one last thing..." She said. "Tell me if the Grail was real..."

Jack gave the weakest smile.

"It wasn't."

Her face twisted into a mask of rage.

“WHAT!?”

Her fingers tightened around her weapon.

Blood splashed against Jack’s face as the shot rang out.

Chantal’s body dropped face down in the dirt a moment later, dead.

From out of the dust, emerged Le Moche, a smoking Mauser pistol in his hand.

Several shapes appeared behind him, the remainder of the Bedouins. Ravinder was with them too, and Taggart, a cigarette between his teeth. All three were gathered around Jack like a horde of ghouls about the carcass.

Oddly, it was Le Moche who spoke.

“I am gladdened to see that you are alive, Mister MacGregor.”

His voice was somehow familiar.

The mystery was short lived, however, as Le Moche lowered his *shemagh* to reveal his face.

Nero the Knight Hospitaller smiled down at Jack.

“How...?” Was all Jack could say.

“*Deus Veult*,” said Nero.

And with that, a pair of men then rushed forward, knocked Jack to the ground, and tied a chord of rope around his hands. Taggart came forth just to give him a kick in the guts while they restrained him.

“That’s to return the favor,” he grinned, and flicked the cigarette against Jack’s face.

Jack growled and tried to get at him, but already the Knights were dragging him away.  
He was now their prisoner.

## XII

### A Cold Gale Blows

A moonless night hung heavily over the desert. The Hospitallers had struck a fire to keep out the chill. Little of its warmth reached Jack over by the camels. They had tied his hands behind his back and around the same post where the beasts were hitched, so that he could not even attempt to run. It also meant that Jack spent his nights smelling all manner of camel effusions and occasionally being spit on. Jack had to call out his guard anytime he had to take a piss.

The trouble was, he had only pissed once a day since they had begun the journey back. The Hospitallers only gave him enough food and water to keep him alive. Jack was given their scraps after meals. While they laughed and ate around the fire, he hunted scorpions for food. Whenever any crawled onto his body, Jack would crush them with his chin, head, or between his thighs, then work them towards his mouth. The Knights never put a stop to this. Instead, they laughed, and sometimes fed them to him. Jack was just grateful for any ounce of food.

Tonight, the Hospitallers were enjoying their same comforts while Jack was shivering and starving within their sight. Most of them had survived the ordeal on

the Mountain, as did a fair number of Saxon's Bedouins. Jack saw the distinction between the two groups, though the Hospitallers had stayed in Bedouin dress out of pure practicality in the desert climate.

Each group sat on opposite sides of the fire, and interacted only when required. From Jack's rudimentary Arabic, he determined that the Bedouins were infuriated with the Knights for firing into their brethren back at the chasm, including their *sheikh*. Many of their tribesmen had perished on this endeavor, and the tension was palpable on the air.

Taggart did his best to assuage them, while several of the Hospitallers who spoke the local dialect acted as interpreters. He assured them that Lord Saxon would triple their reward when they returned to Jerusalem.

This did not make the Arabs any happier, nor Jack. Saxon.

It seemed the two men would meet again.

His stomach churned at the mere notion of their reunion.

The Bedouins looked equally uneasy. Whatever their feelings about the situation however, they were fewer in strength now than the others. Between Taggart, Ravinder, and the Knights, they were outnumbered almost two to one, and the Hospitallers always kept a close eye on them.

Nero was especially attentive. There was nothing that those dark glasses missed whenever he was watching, and he was always watching. Even with his

back to him, Jack felt like the man was spying on him, and would know if he ever tried to get away.

The Bedouins were sure never to direct a complaint in his direction, although Nero rarely said anything himself. The others always deferred to him however, whenever the conversation shifted to more serious matter. In those cases, his answers were minimal, and no additional questions were ever needed.

The only one who spoke less than Nero was Ravinder. He said next to nothing a majority of the time. Every night, he sat slightly away from the others, and did not participate in their conversation.

It seemed almost unbelievable to Jack that this was the man Sanwar had spoken so highly of once; how they had rushed the trenches of Gallipoli together; how Ravinder had fought with him side by side, their swords and daggers slashing against Turkish bayonets; how next to Jack, Ravinder was one of the bravest men he had ever known.

All Jack saw was a man wallowing in his own self-pity, who looked away whenever Jack made eye contact with him.

A coward.

The thought of Sanwar though, made him realize how little he had thought of his friend since capture. He knew that exhaustion had prevented him, but he felt guilty all the same. If he could trade places with Sanwar now, so that he could live, he would have done it instantly. Yet, it could not be. His friend was

dead...or so he kept telling himself. Part of him thought otherwise, but Jack knew that it was folly to believe such things. He just could not seem to convince himself, though.

“Rest.”

If Jack had energy to be startled, he would have been, but instead he turned slowly to address the speaker.

Nero loomed over him, peering down at him through his dark glasses. Jack suddenly noticed that the others had gone to bed. Only embers burned in the firepit. How long had his mind been wandering? Now, he and Nero were alone.

“It will be another long day of traveling tomorrow,” the Knight said. “You need your strength, and I need you to reach Jerusalem alive.”

“Why are you taking me to Saxon?”

A cool wind blew. Nero lowered himself to Jack’s level. Genuflect in the sand, he peered at his prisoner with a strange curiosity, and cocked his head. Light from the fire gleamed against his lenses, but Jack could see no eyes underneath.

“I knew that we would meet again,” said Nero, after an uncomfortable length. “When God had spared me from the sea, I knew that it was because my business with you was yet unfinished. Therefore, we were destined to be reunited.”

Jack was incredulous. “How did you survive? The damned ship exploded.”



After all, it was Jack who had thrown the makeshift bomb that exploded it. He had lobbed it straight into the ranks of Turks and Hospitallers when the former had boarded them on the passage to Smyrna. Nero had been in those ranks fighting, the last time Jack had seen him. The whole thing felt like a lifetime ago at this point, even though only a few months had passed.

Nero gave a thin smile. "Your explosion threw me into the sea. I really should thank you for that, as I was the only one to be spared from Captain Bakir's wrath."

"You aren't welcome."

"I swam all through the night, praying I would be spared from the sea as well," Nero continued, inattentive of Jack's remark. "I lost my glasses to the waves, and was blinded for a time. And my prayers were answered. God washed me ashore near some small fishing village. The fisherfolk saw my crucifix, and knew I was a godly man, so they nursed me back to health and sailed me to Smyrna when I was strong enough and could see again. But you and Sanwar were long gone by then, and four of my brothers were dead. I saw then that my new quest was to stop you from getting the Stone myself. That was why God had saved me from the sea."

Jack smirked.

"And here I was thinking you'd been swallowed by a whale."

"You mock God, because you have no god," said Nero, again without reaction to Jack's sarcasm. "You

are worse than the Muslim that way. He may be a vicious dog, but he is at least a believer in the Almighty.”

“Then what am I?”

“A bargaining piece.”

Jack blanched.

“What deal did you make with Saxon...?”

Nero shrugged. “A similar deal that we made with you. One that will grant us the Stone and further our plans.”

“And what are your plans?”

“With the Stone, the Holy City will finally belong to Christ again,” Nero replied. “But more importantly, it will stay that way. It was taken by violent conquerors once. It will be taken back.”

Jack gave a weak and rueful laugh.

Nero frowned.

“What is funny?”

“For such a Godly man,” he said. “You were awfully quick to shake hands with the Devil.”

The Hospitaller was not amused, but neither was he insulted. Instead, he stared at Jack uncomfortably long, considering him with a blank expression until finally, he stopped laughing. Only then, did he speak.

“Better to partner with the Devil than be his plaything.”

And then, he said no more.

Nero rose and walked away, leaving Jack all alone beneath the stars.

He shivered. The bitter chill of the desert night had fully set in. Again, its cold winds blew, and with them the last few embers of the fire blew out.

At first, Sanwar thought that it was night.

Then, he thought that he was dead.

The darkness was so deep and so black that he could still see nothing even after several minutes of waiting for his eyes to adjust. This had to be what came after, he concluded, for the profundity of the void he found himself in now was fathomless.

Was this rebirth?

Was this the sensation of being made anew? Did it begin in darkness or had it always been this way?

Or perhaps, the Gurus had all been wrong, and the Christians had been right. There was no rebirth, only Hell awaiting you, and he knew that Hell was no inferno but a deep, dark pit.

Yet, he felt bodies breathing against his chest. Every detail of their rasping breaths was salient in the gloom where their sounds echoed without end. Slowly, the stiffness in his muscles returned to him, and in recognition of the pain, he knew that he was still alive.

Then, he remembered.

Sanwar reached inside the breast of his shirt, carefully not to disturb his resting friends, and removed the shard. At once, its radiance assumed the kiln, filling its walls with a soothing scarlet light.

Those adamantine walls had saved all three of them from certain death. Sanwar had used his final moments to throw them all inside and seal it shut, before it went tumbling down in the darkness. He remembered being tossed about in the descent, but not much else after that. All that mattered was that the walls of the lime kiln had held firm, and that they were alive.

Ibrahim and Fatima were sleeping with their heads laid upon his chest. The three of them were ashen white from limestone residue. The kiln itself was slanted at about twenty degrees, and they were resting at the bottom of its incline. All of Sanwar's limbs were tingling with paresthesia, presumably from the awkward slightly upside-down position he had ended in. Despite the strange sensation, Sanwar chuckled softly, gladdened by the simple fact that he could feel anything at all.

Gently, he removed himself from his companions, and laid their bodies back down. The kiln was not nearly wide enough for him to stand to his full height, but the tilt of the vessel meant he had to climb more so than walk in order to reach its vent anyway. There was a natural ramp of rubble, sand, soda, and ash that led there. However, more debris clogged the vent when Sanwar finally got to it, blocking off the only possible exit. Strangely though, the air was not stuffy in this giant metal tube, and at a pleasant temperature. Still, there was food and water to consider, as well as the fact that Sanwar wanted to be free of this place as soon

as possible, if not for his sake, then for his companions’.

He sat down at the top of the slant, and considered his options. Absently, he twirled the shard between his fingers as thought. There seemed to be no alternative after some deliberation, and so Sanwar had resigned himself to death once more, until he realized what he was literally playing with in his very hands. Access to unlimited power certainly did not occur to most people, and it had certainly not occurred to him at first.

Only, how was he supposed to use it?

Did he simply, aim it at the ceiling, and imagine a tunnel leading straight to the surface-

Sanwar was thrown back, and nearly blinded by a flash of light.

When he opened his eyes, the light of the moon shined down on him, and the cool night air blew against his cheeks.

He stared through the long cylindrical shaft in disbelief. A perfect spiral staircase was right above him, leading out into the night.

He went to wake the others.

The night was calm and cold when at last they stumble out from the tunnel. Chill winds blew, the only sound for miles, as they stood atop the broken ground.

The Mountain of the Crescent Moon had been reduced to foothills. A pile of rock and stone stretched for miles around them. Jabir's tower was no more. Buried somewhere beneath the rubble, it had disintegrated back into the landscape as if it had never been. Somewhere beneath that, the corpses of friends, foes, flora, and fauna alike were buried too.

They were the only ones to have survive, and Sanwar wondered why. He wished that Jack had lived instead of him.

His eyes had no water left for tears, but still, he tried to weep. His tired, aching body writhed, and he could no longer keep his feet. He fell forward onto his knees.

Ibrahim was there to catch his fall, and eased him down.

“Rest now,” he said, his voice as gentle as a breeze.

Sanwar only had strength left to nod.

Ibrahim laid his body back, resting it against the stone.

“Rest.”

Sanwar shut his eyes. The pain slowly faded away as sleep overtook him.

Morning broke with a cold bright dawn.

November rains drizzled down hard and bleak from skies of gray. Hidden in those low, dense clouds, biplanes fluttered, humming as they passed invisibly overhead. Effortlessly, they glided above the trenches,

bypassing the fields of mud and grime for which so many men had extinguished their meager lives.

It was a dawn like any other Sanwar had experienced that autumn and the autumns twice before; rain pittering down his canopy as he lay there on a tarp in the mud. He too was hidden, watching the war from far away.

To the enemy, he was just a bush, a mound, another body among the rotting corpses. The barrel of his rifle was wrapped in cloth to disguise its sheen. His uniform was covered over in a cloak of camouflage with bits of branch and brambles sewn into the fabric.

He sat alone in the middle of No Man's Land, far from either side of the trenches. It was not war he played, but a little waiting game. Every once in a while, something would pop out of the German trenches, and he would pop it back. Sometimes it was a head, a helmet, or a mirror. He learned quickly when to spot a dummy held up on a stick, and not to fire, so as to build a false sense of security among their ranks. No one ever shot at him, not even the German snipers, because no one ever found him.

Sometimes, an enemy would raise his hand above the trench deliberately. A bullet through the palm would guarantee a man would be sent home for good. The wound was but a small price to pay for life. Sanwar obliged them by shooting every time.

He did not blame them for wanting to leave this place.

He knew the ones he had killed, but the ones he had wounded sometimes survived. Still, it was a fact that he had killed more men than he even knew, not less. It was only a matter of how many.

The Germans probably had a name for him, not necessarily because he was a boogeyman, but because he was an abstraction. He was a fact of their condition, a force of nature almost. Leave the safety of the trench, and they would die. It was an inevitability.

He did his best to aim between the eyes. That way, the man would not feel anything as he went down. Sanwar likened it to a captive bolt pistol placed against the heads of cattle. A single pinch would spare them from the pain of slaughter. He wondered if someone would extend him the same kindness one day.

He laughed to himself.

Was the slaughterman evil or just an employee?

When the planes passed too far away, the only sounds left were wind and rain. At least, for a time, they were.

Shouts sounded out from down the line. Sanwar could not turn without compromising his position, so instead checked his rear-view mirror planted in the mud in front of him.

A lone figure had just gone over the top.

He was sprinting like a madman, charging the enemy ranks all by himself, as if he were fighting this war against them personally. He screamed out challenges to them, almost begging them to shoot. At first, the



bullets slapped the ground ahead of him in an attempt to drive him back, but the man was not dissuaded whatsoever.

He kept on coming, and Sanwar realized just how large he was growing in the mirror suddenly. Then, he heard the screams and the squelching of his strides as the man ran past him, just inches from the canopy. Clad in the kilt and bonnet of a Highland soldier, this man seemed a figure out of Celtic myth and not of human sanity. Yet for all his spirit, he was still bound to the realm of mortality, and when he reached that trench, he would surely be cut down.

But something overtook Sanwar right then.

Without thinking, he threw back his canopy, tossed aside his cloak, and sprinted after this man.

Another shout went down the line, but he ignored it. German bullets whizzed about his face, and he ignored them too.

His focus was singular.

As the Highlander neared a giant bombed crater, Sanwar collided with him. His amber eyes went wide right before the impact.

Together, the two went tumbling down into the crater, rolling in a swathe of blood and mud and rain.

They hit the bottom.

Sanwar picked himself off the man, who looked absolutely infuriated by this sacrificial gesture.

“Why the hell did you save me!?”

That was when the dream ended.

Sanwar awoke to the familiar heat once more.

Dawn was breaking. The red sun was cresting over the eastern horizon to herald in the coming day.

Slowly, Sanwar rose to his feet. Fatima was laying by his side, so he did his best not to disturb her. He looked about for Ibrahim, whom he discovered seated on a ledge nearby, watching the sunrise.

Upon seeing Sanwar, he stood as well, and approached. His white cloak and *tawb* had lost their illustrious white to the stain of blood and grit, and were torn beyond repair, but somehow the man never looked more a *sheikh* in Sanwar's eyes. A breeze fluttered in his long, dark hair, and a smile spread across his lips.

He took Sanwar's hand in his own.

"I owe you my life," he said weakly, but proud.

"You cannot owe what is freely given," Sanwar returned.

"Then let this gift suffice."

Ibrahim leaned inwards, and Sanwar mirrored the motion to receive the kiss. Their mouths found one another, as Sanwar met Ibrahim's embrace. His lips were cracked, and there was dirt littered in his beard, but Ibrahim cared not at all. His passion forgave such things easily.

This was the first man Sanwar had touched since Ravinder. He almost had forgotten what it had felt like to be held, and so, he did not let go. The two of them

stood there for quite a while, intertwined in each other's arms.

When they pulled away, the sun had at last risen. With its brightness glaring down at them, Sanwar pulled away to shield his eyes. Reality broke him from this dream, and he remembered where he was again...and their circumstances.

"We will not survive the desert," he said, looking out at the vastness of the sand around them.

Yet, Ibrahim dismissed such notions. "Perhaps we shall not, but let us begin by waking Fatima, and getting down this hill. Can you do that?"

"Yes," said Sanwar gladly. "That I can do."

They trekked across the broken ground due west for several hours before they reached what Ibrahim presumed was where the caravan had tied their camels. He reckoned that the beasts had only fled a short distance away, short enough to track them, but this was not the case. Instead, he found a series of prints leading away from the destruction in an orderly fashion.

"Headed back the same path as before," he remarked, crouching beside the evidence.

"Which means back to Jerusalem in all likelihood," Sanwar concluded. "And that enough men survived to drive them."

"Exactly," said Ibrahim. "Enough men of one accord. Not one of our enemies would have left the other alive

after this catastrophe. I doubt that any of the French survived.”

“I doubt so either!” Fatima called out.

She had been traipsing about the rubble herself, and apparently had found something. They joined her where she stood, some distance away.

A woman’s body lay in the dust, though it was hard to tell her sex at first. Dried blood had caked around the copper hair on the back of her skull.

“Chantal for certain,” Sanwar concurred after a moment’s examination.

Fatima crossed herself.

“She was shot from behind, as well.”

“How do you know?” Asked Ibrahim.

Sanwar knew the reason without thinking, but let Fatima answer.

“That is too small for an exit wound,” she said, pointing to the hole. “It has to be the entry. Given the diameter, a pistol is responsible.” After some additional searching, Fatima crouched beside the corpse, and retrieved the spent casing. “A thirty caliber Mauser cartridge.”

“So, she survived, only for someone to shoot her from behind.” Ibrahim almost seemed amused by the fact.

“There is another legionnaire’s body over there.” She pointed to a spot several dozen yards away.

“The man who was guarding Ravinder,” said Sanwar.

“Then we know that he survived at least,” Ibrahim declared. “He was left behind after all.”

“Taggart also survived,” Sanwar noticed.

He had found something on the ground nearby the body. Gingerly, he plucked it from the dirt, and placed it beneath his nose. He offered the cigarette to Ibrahim next.

“Turkish tobacco?”

“The kind that Taggart likes to smoke,” Sanwar elaborated. “Arabs prefer to smoke their own leaves.”

Ibrahim smiled. “A fine hunter you make, Sanwar. But still, two men could not drive so many camels on their own, nor would they know the way back to Jerusalem.”

“Then some of Saxon’s Bedouins are with them,” said Fatima. “Or else they would be lost.”

“The Bedouins, led by Le Moche,” Sanwar added, gesturing to the casing in Fatima’s hand. “I noticed that he carried a Mauser. Ravinder and Taggart have Saxon pistols.”

Fatima put her hands on her hips, and growled in frustration. The others knew her anger was directed not at them, but at their circumstances.

“Fine conclusions all of these, but they do not help our own predicament! Here we are still, left behind without food or drink. We have survived the tower only to die in the desert! Saxon’s creatures may have fled, but at least I find solace that they did so empty-handed.”

“Perhaps not empty-handed,” Ibrahim concluded.

He peered down at something in the sand near Chantal’s body. Fatima and Sanwar gathered around to see for themselves, but he stopped them with a hand when they had gotten close enough.

“Another print in the sand,” he said, hovering his finger above an outline impressed into the earth. Sanwar suddenly realized its shape. It was the tracing of a human body laid onto the ground. The silhouette was faint, as some debris had already been blown over it, but the shape was there.

“Quite a large fellow,” Fatima said, almost absent mindedly.

Sanwar immediately brightened.

“Jack!”

“That is right!” Fatima cried. “Le Moche was trying to capture him back at the ravine! But why...?”

The light in Sanwar’s eyes faded just as quickly as it had come.

“Saxon.”

The others darkened as well.

“No doubt that the man has some devilry awaiting Jack,” said Ibrahim. “But what can we do? We cannot outpace a herd of camels. They will reach Jerusalem long before us!”

Fatima scoffed. “How can you think of three weeks’ travel when we will die of thirst today!”

“Wait.”

Sanwar paused, and the others did likewise.

Slowly, he looked down at his arms. He flexed his fingers. He stretched his wingspan, and moved his shoulders in a circular fashion.

“What are you doing?” Asked Ibrahim, confused by this spontaneous performance.

Sanwar turned around. “Lift your shirt.”

“What?”

“Please do me the favor.”

Ibrahim obliged. His fair skin was bare beneath the *tawb*. Only a faint scar remained where he had been...

“You were bleeding to death twenty-four hours ago,” said Sanwar. “As were you, Fatima.”

She rang a finger along her ribs. Her eyes went wide in disbelief.

“How?”

Sanwar stretched his shoulders again. If anything, they felt better than they had ever been.

“Are we thirsty? Hungry? I may have a solution.”

He removed the shard from his pocket.

A faint red glow glimmered from within its crystalline form. Fatima and Ibrahim stared on in amazement as the sand rose from the earth. It piled into an eight-inch pillar, which then molded itself into a chalice. In a flash of light, the sand smoothed over into a shining, shimmering glass. Several other mounds appeared as well. They began as simple lumps of sand, but quickly turned to white, loaf-like shapes.

When the process was complete, Sanwar lifted the chalice, and offered it to Fatima. Crisp, clear water filled it to the brim.

She drank.

“Jesus Christ...”

Ibrahim tore off some of the bread-like substance, and tasted it. His face twisted with confusion.

“Sweet as honey-loaf,” he said, swallowing the piece. “Is this manna?”

“It is food and water,” Sanwar told him. “Whenever we need it.”

The others sank to their knees.

“So, this is how you saved us from the tower?” They asked.

“Yes.”

Sanwar looked to the Stone. He held a miracle inside his hand. It never stopped feeling strange to him.

“We will live,” he said at last. “And we will free Jack from Saxon too.”

“But how will we reach Jerusalem in time?” Asked Ibrahim.

Sanwar suddenly had another idea.

“We don’t need to reach Jerusalem,” he said. “Just tell me...how far is it to Palmyra?”



## XIII

### Whence Angels Fall Down

*Friday, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1922*  
*Palmyra, French Mandatory Syria*

The *Tapis Volant* hummed as its nose pulled up and out of the gliding attitude, and drifted down towards the runway. It slowed midair so that it could ease its landing when the wheels made contact with the earth.

The aeroplane slid across the track, gradually coming to a halt just one hundred meters from the bungalow. Gustave Tournai-Blanc, pleased at the nearness of his landing, switched off the propellor, and exited the plane with a hearty thud onto the ground. A man was waiting to take his goggles, gloves, and jacket. Another came forward urgently telling him that the High Commissioner in Damascus had called during his absence. Gustave thanked the man, and crossed the airfield to his bungalow, waving at the patrolling soldiers as he passed them.

The building was located by a small oasis, which acted as a reserve water supply for the camp, while a multitude of wells provided the main supply. *Monsieur* T.B. mostly used the oasis for his personal stash of

dates, which were brought to the bungalow every morning.

They were waiting for him in a silver bowl when he came in, on a table right beside the desk set telephone. Gustave, quite peckish after his daily round in the aeroplane, scooped a few into his hand for a quick snack. He chewed one as he crossed the curtained door of his bed chamber, past his work desk with next year's plans laid out in folders on top of it, and over to the window overlooking the oilfields.

To the north, just beyond the oasis, the new drills had finally been erected. They stood as tall as minarets, but instead of calling men to prayer, they would call them to riches beyond belief. Gustave smiled at the sight of his creations. The Greeks, the Romans, and his Frankish forefathers had all left their marks upon this land. This would be his.

Ah yes! The governor was waiting, he suddenly remembered.

He spat the date stone out the window, then dabbed the sweat from his forehead with his scarf. There was a glass of ice water by the phone to quench his thirst, and he took a long swallow before dialing the High Commissioner. After some minutes, the call finally reached him in Damascus.

"Gustave! Mon gars!" Came a joyous voice over the other line.

"Henri, you impatient bastard," Gustave laughed, leaning back in his chair and stroking his long

mustache. “You caught me while I was up in the air! How rude of you!”

The Commissioner chuckled over the other line. “How are the new models flying? I thought instead I called while they were having your funeral!”

“We’d have your funeral first, you old fox,” Gustave returned. At fifty-two, he always made fun of Henri for being almost three years his senior. “But seriously, these new models are an improvement over the ones we had developed during the War. Better mileage, and slight improvement in airspeed.”

“You just let me know when I can fly back to Nice, and get out of this damn heat.”

“At this rate, hopefully before you keel over and die on us, you old bastard.”

Again, the Commissioner laughed, but after a moment, he sobered a little.

“And the drilling is on task?”

“We are right on schedule, Henri. Output should surpass the Brits within six months’ time. The engineers from Paris will be arriving very soon to discuss another drill.”

“Good. And no trouble with the Arabs?”

“There’s always trouble with them,” Gustave chuckled, but quickly changed his tone to reassure the Governor. “But my boys here are keeping them in check.”

Every so often, rebel Bedouins would harass the camp with gunfire, but the French garrison always

repulsed them. Occasionally, the *Legion du Syrie* would ride out and catch a few in the desert to make examples of them, but this proved more for their own amusement than as a deterrent. Still, the drills were progressing nicely in spite of minor, albeit frequent setbacks.

“What about your daughter?” Asked the Governor. “We sent Chantal all the way to Jerusalem, and then out into the desert. Have you got any word, yet? It was a mistake to let such a pretty thing go out there, even with our best men.”

“No word yet,” Gustave replied. “And you couldn’t have stopped her, even if you tried.”

Chantal was very much of her father’s heart. She was his only child, and had always been a rambunctious one at that. She had taken an interest in Papa’s business almost immediately, and was often telling him ways that he should be improving it. Rather than hoping that she would marry someone respectable enough to assume the family business, it was his wish that she would inherit it herself. After all, *Monsieur T.B.* was a man of the times! He was all in favor of equal opportunities for women.

He was beginning to worry a little, however. Even with the men that he had attached to her, Weiss was still a dangerous man to cross that far from civilization.

“No, I have not heard anything,” Gustave said again. “But I have heard nothing of Weiss either. Not to

worry, though. Chantal is a tenacious girl. Just like her Papa, no?”

The Commissioner’s laugh seemed unconvinced. “Quite right, Gustave. Let’s just hope that Weiss did not find that drilling spot before her.”

“Ah, yes. I pray not.”

“Anyway,” Henri’s voice resumed its casual timber. “When are you going to fly back out here and join me for a glass of *cognac*?”

Gustave assumed a smile once again. “Soon enough, you whoreson. The *Tapis* is refueling now, and when she’s done, I’ll be over there in time to punch your teeth in so you can eat your supper through a straw!”

“Just what I like to hear, Gustave! *A bientôt.*”

“*Adieu, mon gars.*”

Gustave laughed to himself, and seated the telephone. He stretched and yawned. It had been a busy morning, and the heat was getting to him. Now, it was time for a nap...

...except when he stepped through the curtain, he walked straight into the barrel of a gun.

He gasped at the mere sight of the intruder, a hard-eyed, swarthy Arab in an indigo turban. Gustave was a tall man himself, but this fellow looked him in the eye. His hand was steady on the pistol, and there was no hesitation whatsoever in his deep, resonant voice.

“Lower your hands, you dotard,” the man commanded. “And make no attempt to cry for help.”

Gustave was startled at the perfection of his English that the order did not even register.

“Do you mistake me, sir?” The Arab asked. “Lower your hands.”

Only then did Gustave realize that he raised them unconsciously. He dropped them awkwardly to his sides.

“Thank you,” the man said, conspicuously polite.

He stepped forward, and Gustave stepped back to match the distance. Two others then appeared out of the curtains behind him. The first was a white man curiously dressed in Arab garb. The other was a hideous little woman with a half-burnt face who stared him with a listless gaze in her pale, dead eye.

“Who are you? What do you want? How did you get in here?” Gustave sputtered all at once.

“The answer is to the first two is that we are individuals who require your aircraft,” the man replied calmly. “As to the final inquiry, we waited for the guards to change at dawn, whilst you were indisposed.”

Gustave’s periphery caught sight of the small, ugly woman cutting the telephone cord with a letter opener from his desk. She and the white man then shared a sip from his glass and a few of his dates.

“T-the aeroplane only seats t-two!” Gustave stammered. “Y-you’ll never get it off the ground.”

“I do not recall asking for your input,” said the gunman, with an eyebrow raised. “Now then, it seems like an ideal time for a tour of the airfield. After all, it

would be the polite thing to show your three friends about, especially since they have just arrived, would it not?”

Suddenly, the second man grabbed Gustave from behind, and spun him around. Before he knew it, the gunman had the pistol pressed against his lumbar, thus hiding the weapon's profile.

“*Après vous,*” ordered the white man, and gestured to the door.

These characters spoke French as well as English!? There went Gustave's hopes of signaling for help.

He swallowed again, and led them all outside.

They walked together in a tight cluster across the sandy landing strip. The mechanics who were pulling out the fuel pump, regarded the group strangely, as did the patrolling guardsmen.

One of the latter approached them, a steady Lieutenant named Jourdain, with a puzzled look upon his face.

“*Bonjour Monsieur Tournai-Blanc,*” the soldier greeted him. “Is everything alright?”

Gustave forced a smile, and kept moving hurriedly along. “Quite well! These are three friends of mine who I am showing about, especially since they have just arrived, Lieutenant!”

He tried his best to sound natural, but even Gustave was not convinced of his own performance. Jourdain furrowed his brow, and took another step forward.

“Bonjour, friends of *monsieur*,” the Lieutenant said. “Perhaps I could see your authorizations signed by the colonel?”

“That’s quite alright!” Gustave answered loudly. “They have their papers, I assure you. Everything is fine!”

They were fifty meters from the aeroplane now, and not slowing down one bit.

Yet, Jourdain kept pace.

Some of the other guards were closing in too.

The pistol nudged Gustave in the spine, urging him along.

“And what will I be telling the colonel?” Jourdain asked. The man was practically jogging now. “You have the engineers arriving in an hour, as I understand.”

Gustave realized that he did not have an immediate answer.

He improvised.

“Tell him, we’ll just be taking another ride in the aeroplane, seeing the sights.”

Jourdain stopped in his tracks.

“All four of you?”

Gustave realized his mistake.

The soldiers went for their weapons.

The gunman was faster though, and had his pistol pressed against Gustave’s head in a flash.

“Any closer and he dies,” he said, in English.

“They only speak French!” Gustave pleaded.



“Then tell it to them! Another step and you will be exsanguinated most severely!”

Gustave relayed the orders, but Jourdain and the other men stood their ground.

“Fear not, *monsieur!*” Jourdain assured him. “We will not let this man escape.”

That was not Gustave’s concern! Damn the loyalty of Frenchmen...

“Please,” he begged them. “Lower your weapons-”

The soldiers advanced.

“That does it,” the gunman said.

“No!” he cried.

BANG!

Gustave’s world went black.

“BANG!”

Sanwar had simply yelled the word, because the pistol he was carrying had run out of bullets back at the Tower.

Either way, the effect had been the same as a real gunshot.

The soldiers jumped back in surprise, and *Monsieur* Tournai-Blanc fainted in his arms.

Sanwar took the split second of hesitation to hurl his unconscious body at Jourdain and his men.

They tried to catch him, but ultimately were knocked asunder by his awkward mass like they were a line of ninepins.

Only Jourdain managed to avoid the collision. He quickly tried to re-aim his pistol, but Sanwar threw his own in Jourdain's face. The Lieutenant yelped, and staggered back with a bloody nose.

It was all the opportunity that Sanwar had to run for it.

The others were already at the biplane, having fled right when Sanwar had his gun against Tournai-Blanc's head.

Ibrahim had leapt into the pilot's seat, strapped on goggles and was starting the engine. Fatima was hopping in front of the plane, desperately trying to reach the propellers in order to spin them before takeoff.

Bullets cracked somewhere behind Sanwar, but he did not bother to see where they coming from. Running would be his only escape.

He reached the plane, spun the propellor for Fatima, then jumped into the backseat. Fatima climbed in after him, and leapt onto his lap.

A bullet sparked against the spinning propellor, as Ibrahim turned the plane down the runway. Jourdain had rallied his men, and now they were firing at will.

The plane was slow and awkward in its turning, exposing its broadside to the soldiers as it did. Several rounds punched into the side of its wood and canvas frame. Several others hit the rudder.

Sanwar ducked his head, and found a pair of goggles between his feet. He snapped them around his face

while Fatima practically blindfolded herself with her shawl.

The plane was facing the proper direction now, and trundling down the strip. More soldiers were gathering though, appearing from over dunes and out of tents. Jourdain screamed at them to fire, and they obliged him with added bullets to the frenzy.

The plane was gaining speed, but still, it did not seem to be fast enough. A bullet struck near Sanwar, and the splinters cut his face. The plane zoomed down the runway, yet the men were running after it, firing as they went. Many of their bullets missed, but hit anyway by virtue of sheer volume.

Suddenly, the plane had liftoff.

It rattled as it left the ground, and wobbled as it took to the air. A rush of cold wind buffeted Sanwar's face, blowing back his beard. His heart sunk into his testicles with the sudden lurch of the aeroplane's climb in altitude.

Below them, the soldiers continued to fire. They were nothing more than specks shooting off dots of smoke, yet the bullets still cracked and whizzed about the air around them. Even at the height of a hundred yards, a careful shot still had a chance of hitting, and aeroplane could not shoot back, so why not take the chance?

Ibrahim took the plane straight up, gaining altitude as fast as he could. The aeroplane wailed. Its hole-

punched wings swaggered like flimsy card as the whole thing went near vertical.

Sanwar's stomach tightened.

The soldiers would not be their end. It would be crashing.

Yet, in seconds, they were leveled off, out of the range of gunfire and flying low among the clouds.

Sanwar gasped, and dry-heaved, but eventually felt better.

Ibrahim was laughing and whooping above the clangor of the engine.

"You see father!" He cried. "All that education was not a wasted time! I can still do it! I can still fly!"

It had been a huge risk, relying on Ibrahim's admittedly tenuous skills, but the man had been confident in his ability during the planning, and to his credit, had delivered.

A curious smell undercut the triumphant moment.

Sanwar looked around Fatima, and then down at his feet. The poor girl had regurgitated all of over his trouser legs. Undigested dates squelched beneath his shoes.

"Sorry," Fatima panted, then vomited again as the aeroplane sputtered.

"Not good!" Ibrahim shouted.

Sanwar took stock of the aircraft. The rudder was torn to shreds, the hull was scarred and splintered, and both its double wings were slashed with bullet holes.

To worsen matters, another smell had filled the air; burning petrol. Black smoke was gurgling from out the front of the machine.

It was a miracle that they were airborne at all.

“We will not make it far!” Ibrahim shouted above the whirr of the failing aeroplane.

“Hold on!” Sanwar shouted back.

He reached into his shirt, and withdrew the shard. Holding it out in front of him, Sanwar shut his eyes, and concentrated.

When he opened them, the burning scent had dissipated, as had the foul smoke. Red light was glazing over all the holes and splinters in the wood and canvas, and when it vanished, so too did the damage. It was as if the wood itself had just regrown, and the torn canvas had been sewn shut. The aeroplane steadied, and flew straight and smoothly from then on.

“*In’Sha’allah!*” Ibrahim cried. “It is a miracle!”

Sanwar looked down at the tiny shard between his fingers. The glowing light inside of it had darkened, with only the faintest crimson shimmer waning deep within. He pocketed it immediately.

“We must conserve the Stone forthwith!” Sanwar warned.

“Do not worry!” Ibrahim assured them. “Five hours, and we shall reach the city!”

Five hours?

It seemed almost humorous to think about. Three weeks they had journeyed through heat and sandstorm,

leaving a wake of blood and bodies in the sand, and now all of that struggle would be circumvented in a fraction of the time.

It was almost dizzying to think about, and he laid his head back, suddenly recounting all that he had been through in the past few months; no past few years, going back as far as Alexandria, and then even long before that.

He felt so utterly exhausted, but it was not over yet.

Then, he also realized something; a question that had gone neglected.

It was Fatima who asked it first, however.

“Ibrahim? Where are we landing...?”

In all their misadventures, trekking miles to Palmyra, planning how to steal the aeroplane, studying the guards for two full nights to learn their shift schedules, and thinking about how they would rescue Jack in time, the three companions had forgotten one key detail:

Where to land the plane.

The only sound for a good long while was the raucous humming of the engine.

Ibrahim had no response.

“Oh shit,” said Sanwar.

The next few hours were spent debating the next course of action. No time was wasted on accusations of neglect, for they had all collectively overlooked an exit strategy in their exhaustion. However, the question of

landing remained regardless, so Sanwar and Fatima went back and forth weighing every option while Ibrahim kept them moving towards their goal.

Most options were nixed immediately.

Landing on authorized airstrip was right out. As soon as they grounded, British soldiers would question their presence immediately and arrest them. An improvised landing was also nullified. Due to Palestine's rocky, chaparral terrain, a natural uninterrupted stretch of earth was hard to come by, and Ibrahim reminded them that they did not have enough fuel to spend all day searching for one.

It was only when they had gotten near enough to the city that the opportunity presented itself. Even through her blindfold, Fatima could see the shimmer of it below them.

"There!" Fatima pointed.

"There!?" Sanwar was horrified.

"Where!?" Ibrahim called back to them.

They showed him.

"THERE!?"

"Ditch it on the water!" Fatima shouted above the wind.

"This is suicide!"

"This is the only way!" She shouted. "The water has a saline content of almost thirty-five percent! The buoyancy will ease our landing!"

"*Wallah*," Ibrahim groaned. "Fine!"

He banked the plane downwards, and changed their course.

Sanwar secured his arms tight around Fatima.

“Just in case,” he assured her.

The plane descended towards the water.

Mohammed had lived all his life as a goatherd near the banks of the Dead Sea. His father, Mohammed, had lived under the rule of the Turks, as had his father, also Mohammed, before him. Yet, even as the British ruled their land, and new settlers threatened to remove him from his little village, Mohammed held onto the family business. He was a simple man, who held onto old ways, and cared little of the new trains and this strange and changing modern world.

Every day, he went down to the shore, and collected salt crystals growing on the rocks. He would add them to his goat cheese or sell it raw at market for a little extra money.

This day, like every other, he carried his wicker basket down the hill to the rocky shore, and scraped away the crystals with a hand scoop. Yet, as he filled his basket, something happened that was not like every other day.

There was a great humming from above. Mohammed cupped his hands over his eyes, and looked to the sky. A dark shape was hurtling through the clouds. It was far too loud for any bird that he ever heard, and far too big.



It was not until the shape began rapidly descending that Mohammed realized just how big it was. This was no bird, but a strange contraption with two sets of wings stacked on top of one another and tailfins like a fish.

The hum began a shriek as it plunged lower and lower to the sea. The poor goatherd dropped his scoop and basket, so that he could cover his ears. The strange contraption dove at an angle like a hunting falcon, but at the last second, eased back so that it flew parallel to the water. It zoomed past him, the tiny wheels on its legs skimming against the surface, sending waves into the air. Gradually, it slowed, and finally made full contact with the water.

The whole thing fell apart on impact, but stopped.

The wheels snapped off first, followed by the wings. It hit the sea with a tremendous splash, then sort of floated there, spinning around in a circle like a very odd canoe about a hundred yards from shore.

Three figures leapt out of the craft, and into the Dead Sea. Because its waters were so buoyant, they did not sink or even swim, but simply fell into the sea and bobbed about. Mohammed walked over to the shore as they slowly backstroked over to him. It took nearly ten minutes for them to reach the rocky banks. When they did, he helped each one back onto dry land, and was utterly amazed by their appearance.

They had to be the most unexpected group of people imaginable, though truth be told, Mohammed had no

idea what to expect of people who inexplicably fell out of the sky.

There were two men and a woman, all soaking wet and smeared with the muddy sediment that rested at the bottom of the Dead Sea. The woman was small and fearsome looking, especially with her scarred face and fierce, pale eye. The first man was quite imposing despite his sordid outfit, as was his exceptionally tall companion.

Mohammed did not know if these were angels or *jinn*.

“Is there a railway station nearby?” Asked the first man perfectly in the local dialect.

Mohammed only nodded absently, and pointed in its direction.

“Thank you, brother.”

Without a further word, the man urged his two companions on, and went bounding up and over the hill.

Mohammed watched them go. When they were gone, he turned his eyes to the heavens, and wondered why God had sent these messengers today, and how they knew what a railway station was. The strangers' craft sunk minutes later, vanishing beneath the salt waves.

In the end, he simply shook his head, denied what he had seen, and went right back to scraping salt.

## XIV

### Judgement Takes Wing Swiftly

*Ten Miles North of Jerusalem, British Mandate for Palestine*

*Friday, November 10th, 1922*

Doctor Theodoros Albrecht Rothstein made his incision carefully.

He had been laughed at all his life for having such small hands, but the last laugh was on all his tormentors now. His fingers were deft and supple, even in his advanced age. He knew the scalpel like it was an extension of his own arm, and wielded it with finesse of any fencing master.

Yet, it was his mind that gave him the most satisfaction. Without the neurons firing within him, without the electric signals from his brain, his hand would be a useless instrument; little more than a limp mass of fleshy carbonic compounds.

The mind was everything, and chemistry was its instruction manual. If the ancient Alchemists understood but one thing, it was “Omnia Unus Est”- “All is One”.

Even they, with their crude drawings and minute comprehension could discern such a paramount

fundamental. Rothstein possessed admiration for them, yes, for their discoveries were directly responsible for the creation of chemistry, all of which were achieved without modern method. Still, for as much as he had studied the texts, he could find little more than disdain for the vulgarity of Alchemy. They held such vast secrets, but described them in such mystical terms, and frankly with such religiosity, that Rothstein could sympathize with why the Art had long been dismissed as quackery. It was the same quackery that he had been accused of, but he cared nothing for it. In the end, both he and the Alchemists would be vindicated.

The Emerald Tablet would be the key to his success.

He noticed within an instant of decoding it that there was mathematical precision to its language. At first, he thought that it might denote the recipe of a chemical formula, but after his initial tests, he remained unconvinced that this was its sole purpose. There was something more hidden in the text, and he was hellbent to decipher what it was. Time, he had decided, would be his only obstacle.

Rothstein slid the scalpel from the trachea down to the groin. The body opened its secrets to him. All the structures were intact, which was a promising sign. With the outbreak of Tuberculosis in the city, finding uncontaminated cadavers was a constant frustration. The doctor would not squander this one. He set about

removing all the organs, and placing them in their respectively labeled cases of formaldehyde.

The subject had previously been exsanguinated, and vials of her blood were lined on a rack beside the jars. The organs he could lose, but those- those samples were of the utmost importance. He lifted one to the light with gloved fingers.

In biology, Syrians were not terribly far removed from Caucasians in the racial hierarchy. This sample would prove a useful analog for the purposes of experimentation, much like how, his first medical surgeries had been performed on swine.

He looked down at the flaccid corpse, flayed out before him. This was a female of approximate age to his previous male subject. She had been young and otherwise healthy, save for the bullet in her brain. That was no hinderance, however. The male's was wholly undamaged, and was preferable anyway, due to its larger size and complexity. Saxon's men had delivered the woman cleanly enough however, and that was best that Rothstein could ask of them.

The last thing he took from her was a skin sample, which he placed inside a living culture. The container was then stored inside of an icebox.

“And how is the good doctor faring?”

The smoky baritone of Saxon's voice brought a smile to the Rothstein's lips. His benefactor descended the staircase into the Doctor's domain. Saxon had dedicated the entire lower level of his warehouse to

Rothstein's work, and gave him full access to company resources under the label of his "Developmental Branch".

Every once in a while, such as now, the high lord would grace the doctor with his presence.

What a presence it was. The man was a perfectly mesomorphic specimen; the epitome of Caucasoid features as expressed in the male image. His eyes were the rarest blue, and his hair was golden blond. What was more, he overtopped Rothstein by head and shoulders. At his physical zenith, Saxon was the purest phenotype of his extraordinary Nordic bloodline.

"Progress advances steadily, my lord," Rothstein replied. "I will commence another round of tests upon the morrow."

"More tests?" Saxon pouted. He glanced about the Doctor's crowded but orderly work station. His eyes were clearly unaccustomed to a laboratory setting, but settled focus on one of the jars across the room. "Why more tests? What are we fooling about with this charade anyway? Why aren't we developing the Stone, damn it!?"

"This is developing the Stone," Rothstein chided him, but none too harshly. He did not wish to spoil Saxon's disposition for both personal and monetary motivations. "The Tablet is a labyrinthian text. Had I not studied the Language of Birds for decades prior, its scripture would be completely alien to me."

"As you've made clear..."

“So,” Rothstein continued, ignoring the remark. “Something this complex requires suitable comprehension before it is attempted. What I am synthesizing now are the products; the capabilities of the Stone. An object of its magnitude... We would need to fully know its powers before we begin to harness the immense quantities energy it could produce. I fear that an object of this intensity has the capacity for an extraordinary phenomenon I would describe as ‘nuclear fission’.”

“So?”

“So, accidentally incurring nuclear fission could prove...detrimental to our efforts.”

Saxon sighed. “Alright, Rothstein. I trust you...but what the bloody hell are concocting down here, anyway?”

Saxon lowered his head to the level of the jar. It was sitting right at Rothstein’s eyeline, but well below the high lord’s.

The Doctor smiled at how Saxon’s expression morphed from confusion to contempt to at last, curiosity, as he gazed upon the experiment within.

“See,” said Rothstein, joining his side. “This is proving well worthwhile. Soon, you will bear witness to the fruits of our collective labor.”

Saxon’s words were frozen in his mouth.

The eyes in the jar were staring back at him, blinking.

“I require a live fetus,” said Rothstein.

This was Saxon's chance to look away without admitting that he had been unmanned. "Good heavens, why!?"

"Fetal cells will catalyze tissue growth."

Saxon paused a moment, considering.

"I'll see what I can do about it."

"Excellent. Many thanks, my lord."

Saxon turned his back on the jar, even as Rothstein's first success stared after him. He found the Tablet where it usually was, alone on a separate workbench.

"Anyway," he said. "I remembered my original intention for visiting." Saxon put his massive, ringed hand atop its glossy surface. "Cassar will be here soon, and I'll need to borrow this for a while. Hope that won't trouble you, at all?"

Rothstein grinned. "Not at all, my lord."

"Right then."

Saxon carried the heavy slab away, hefting it back up the stairs with him underneath his massive arm.

"My lord!" Rothstein called after him. "Be so kind as to bring it back!"

His benefactor did not respond, but he knew the message had been received. Saxon had not failed him yet. Besides, until it was returned to him, Rothstein had plenty to busy himself with.

He grinned, crossing back to his seat.

The good doctor took up his knife again, and resumed his bloody work.



*Jerusalem, British Mandate for Palestine*  
*Friday, November 10th, 1922*

The three companions stumbled into the *kasbah* sometime in the late afternoon. Ibrahim had known the guards posted on the Lion's Gate, who looked the other way after he promised them a charitable bribe, which he would pay at later date of course. Fatima knew all of the back alleys of the city, and was able to sneak them back to the complex with minimal trouble. Starving and exhausted, they piled in through the front gate, much to the astonishment of a wide-eyed Hokmah.

All of three of them fell into the old woman's arms with a firm embrace.

"You have returned!?" She asked in disbelief. "But I thought surely you had all been killed."

"Why would you think that...?" Asked Ibrahim.

Hokmah swallowed hard, and urged them to come out of the courtyard and the heat. At once, they were brought into the tea room, where she sat them down on the cushioned floor and gave them drinks of water.

"A caravan was sighted just a few hours ago, heading north," she said, once they were all in a comfortable position. "They had Jack prisoner, but not the rest of you. I feared the worst."

"We barely escaped with our own lives," said Ibrahim. "We are all that is left of our party."

Hokmah nodded sadly.

“But I what do not understand,” said Sanwar. “Is where these men are taking him.”

“The only logical place,” Fatima answered. “Saxon’s warehouse.”

“It is not far north of the city,” Ibrahim confirmed. “It is very well-guarded.”

Sanwar raised an eyebrow. “I expected nothing less.”

“There is something else,” said Hokmah. “My sources told me that the Knights Hospitaller were also seen driving in that direction not long ago. The Grandmaster was among them.”

“Cassar...” Sanwar felt renewed anger growing in his veins. “So, he has a hand in this as well?”

“He is not a man to be crossed,” Hokmah explained. “And it appears that you and Jack have crossed him too many times already.”

Sanwar seethed.

At first, he had wondered what Cassar would gain from this, but then he realized that he did not care. All that mattered was that Cassar was stopped and that Jack was saved.

Ibrahim took a deep breath, and stood.

“Hokmah,” he said. “Would you please ready the truck?”

“You cannot mean to-”

“I do. We must assault Saxon’s warehouse.”

“Only the three of you?” She asked. “Three exhausted, weary souls against an army?”

“There is no time to get more men,” Ibrahim told her plainly. “We must go now.”

Fatima stood as well.

“Either we die for Jack or forsake him to death alone,” she said. “And I choose death.”

They all looked to Sanwar.

He stood and smiled wanly.

“Death chose me a long ago,” he said. “Let us risk it. For Jack.”

“For Jack,” they agreed.

“Very well,” Hokmah resigned, and departed from the room.

As she did, Ibrahim crossed over to the far wall, where a piano stood beside a shelf of jarred teas leaves. Playing a combination of notes on the black and white keys swung caused the wall behind the shelf to swing open, revealing a secret cupboard behind it. Instead of tea, the shelves inside were lined with weapons and ammunition.

“Stolen corpses, British armories, and battlefields,” said Ibrahim almost with a hint of pride. “And a few I bought myself. Take whatever you need, but remember to travel light. Speed will be our one advantage.”

Sanwar stepped inside.

All he needed was a rifle and a scope.

They carried out their hardware to the waiting truck, and loaded it into the bed. They could only bring as

much ammunition as they could carry, so every round would need to count.

Ibrahim was strapped with several bandoliers of thirty caliber cartridges, and around his neck was slung a most unusual weapon.

It was a long and huge metallic beast with a kickstand attached to the end of its barrel. A blocky magazine was jammed inside of it, carrying who knew how many rounds.

“A traveling American soldier traded this to me,” he said. “A Browning Automatic Rifle. High velocity. The next best thing to a machine gun.”

“And what did you give him in exchange?” Sanwar asked.

Ibrahim only winked. “The best week of his life.”

Fatima came out into the courtyard a moment later, laden with her own arsenal. The weapon she carried was quite fitting for her physique; short, squat, and vicious. It was a stocky grenade launcher, single-shot, break-action, and fitted with a four-inch-wide cylindrical barrel.

“I know that I am not a fighter nor a marksman,” she said, loading it into the truck. “But you don’t have to be the most accurate with grenades.”

She pulled her cloak to show him that she was festooned with all sorts of the hand-sized bombs underneath; British Mill’s Bombs, German stick grenades, and even smoke rounds. The tiny woman was braced from head to toe for Armageddon. She carried

plenty of extra ammunition as well, acting as a mobile magazine for both him and Ibrahim. Sanwar was glad to have her on his side.

And Ibrahim.

Before they departed though, Sanwar found a moment alone with him, standing beside the driver's seat. The *sheikh* was busy with his weaponry, and did not notice him approach.

"Ibrahim."

His friend turned, and smiled when he saw Sanwar, but then frowned at the grimness on his face.

"What troubles you, Sanwar?"

Sanwar paused at first. When at last he spoke however, his voice was haggard, hollow.

"So many times, I have raised my weapons in anger. I wonder, should we live, if this will be the last time I ever do. If this is the last time the world will ever allow me."

"That is if we live, *In Sha'allah*," Ibrahim laughed ruefully.

"You know of what I speak. For I know that you have felt that self-same anger."

"But this is not anger," Ibrahim corrected. "This is fury. Do you know what separates them?"

"Tell me."

"Fury cannot be quelled without action," he said. "And that is how it should be, for fury is outrage justified."

Sanwar understood, yet he still sighed deeply.

“I only wish that it were not so. That peace will come. That tomorrow I can at last stop fighting.”

“They will not allow us peace without,” said Ibrahim. “So let us find it for ourselves within. That is one choice we can claim in this world.”

Then, he kissed Sanwar’s hand, and touched his cheek.

Sanwar did the same.

“Whether life or death awaits us, I am ready.”

No other word was needed to be said. Weapons loaded, the companions hopped inside the truck, and started north.

And Hell followed with them.

Through the dust and haze, Jack saw the compound.

It was more of a fortress than a factory. The warehouse, attached directly to the factory itself, was like the barbican. Four steel towers lined with riflemen stood at each corner of its thick square frame like bastions, and a giant metal service gate acted as the portcullis. To the left of the warehouse was the factory proper, a long rectangular keep with a green glass m-shaped roof. The compound’s walls were twenty feet in height and built with three-foot bricks of concrete all the way around.

Saxon had chosen the location of the compound strategically as well. The factory stood in the center of a little valley, surrounded on three sides by rocky foothills. Only a small group of men could traverse

those hills. Any other sort of attack would have to come from the south side.

Which is exactly where the Hospitaller caravan was coming from. As they approached the complex, the massive service gated creaked open to allow their passage. The great mass of men camels entered, and immediately Jack was forced to shield his eyes from the sunlight flaring down into the warehouse's open-air interior.

The inside was built more like a castle ward than a warehouse, he noted. A grated metal parapet wrapped around the atrium to form a second floor. The walkway was supported by steel beams every fifteen feet or so, lined with railings, and had doors to the four towers at each corner.

The left side of the parapet had a small balcony and spiral staircase to the ground floor. The balcony hung over another set of huge steel service doors, which undoubtedly led to the factory floor. A smaller, but still sturdy, set of hardwood doors were located just beyond the balcony, and led to...God only knew where. Curiously though, Jack did not hear any sounds coming from the factory floor. Where normally, the factory would be alive with sounds of machinery and screaming foreman, the building was oddly silent. What was more, Jack noticed loudspeakers flaring from the top of all the towers. Normally, they would sound the shift bells or announcements, but again, no sound was coming from them.

It was also impossible not to notice the line of tanks on the right side of the warehouse floor. Three of them were stationed there, and only three, because even this large chamber could barely fit their enormous rhomboid frames. Jack had seen the monstrous war machines a few times in France. These looked to be a newer model. They were bigger, but also simpler in their design, and of course, had even more guns. Jack wondered how many more men they would be capable of killing, and how easily.

Yet all of these details were secondary compared to who was waiting for the caravan as they arrived.

In the center of the space, stood Filippo Cassar.

The Grandmaster was accompanied by four other black-robed knights, who had presumably arrived in the shiny black Rolls Royce Phantom parked behind them. Each man carried a sword and pistol on his hip.

Cassar greeted his brothers warmly as they dismounted, and Jack coldly when he was thrown down before them.

“God remembers treachery, Mister MacGregor.”

Cassar wiped away the dust from his sleeves that Jack had inadvertently flecked on him. He then dabbed his bald forehead free of sweat with a handkerchief. The black wool of his robes hid the stains, but it stood to reason that the Grandmaster and all his knights were perspiring heavily underneath their dark clothing.



“Aye,” said Jack. “And I seem to remember your men trying to kill me back in Smyrna. Does it stop counting as treachery when you do it?”

That earned him a hard slap across the mouth.

The blow knocked Jack to the floor, and since his wrists were bound behind him, he was unable to catch himself and landed hard.

“Right then,” Taggart said, grinning. “Let’s get this lot out of here before the camels start shitting all over the floor, and get down to real business.”

He jerked a thumb at the remaining Bedouins. A pair of guardsmen swiftly appeared carrying several briefcases. The de facto leader of the Arabs opened each of them to check that the amount was indeed correct, then lashed them to his camels and departed with his men, although none of them were all too happy about the transaction. As they rode out of the warehouse, the service gate was shut behind them.

“Now, we have upheld our end of the bargain, Mister Taggart,” said Cassar. “It is time for you to uphold yours.”

“What bargain?” Asked Jack, though he was totally ignored.

“Where is Saxon?” Cassar demanded, ignoring Jack.

“He’s right here, ready and waiting for you,” came a deep, smoky voice from above.

Everyone turned to the left.

Saxon was there, leaning on the rails of the balcony, wearing a pearly grin upon his face like this month’s

fashion. He grinned even wider at the sight of Jack beneath him.

“Hello, Jack old boy,” he said.

“Aw fuck...”

Cassar stepped forward.

“Let us conclude our business, my Lord Saxon.”

“Of course,” Saxon allowed. “I called you as soon as Mister Taggart rang me from Jerusalem, and I aim not to keep you a minute longer than is necessary. Taggart, why don’t you and Major Singh bring the Grandmaster and his men up here?”

Taggart loosened his necktie, and gestured towards the stairs, but Cassar made no motion to follow just yet.

“You are allowing us our weapons inside?” He asked.

Saxon merely shrugged. “Of course. I trust you, Cassar. And if it makes you feel any better, Taggart and Singh will leave their own weapons behind.”

Cassar hesitated. Jack knew that he was assessing the scenario, searching for the trick in Saxon’s words. There had to be one. This was Saxon after all. Only, Jack could not discern what it was himself.

Unable to puzzle out any reasonable objection, the Grandmaster finally acquiesced, much to Saxon’s approval.

“Very good! You and two men may accompany me to my office.”

“Three,” Cassar corrected. “Nero and two others will wait outside the door. The rest will wait by the car.”

Saxon considered the words a moment.

“Done.”

With that Ravinder escorted the Hospitallers up the stairs, while Taggart shoved Jack along behind.

“Wait,” Jack protested. “What have I got to do with this?”

“Shut it,” Taggart told him, and shoved Jack harder.

Saxon unlocked the heavy wooden doors, and they all filed in after him, save for Nero and his two fellows. Those men stood dutifully outside; their Mauser machine-pistols close at hand. As Jack passed them, he saw that it was Nero who carried *Lann Dhearg* and *Cadarama* on either hip. He wanted nothing more than to tear free from his bonds right then and there, and wrench away both blades. Only then, he could properly avenge Sanwar. However, those dreams were quickly dashed as Jack was shoved right past the guards and through the doors.

Inside was Saxon’s office. To say that it was lavish would be too much of an understatement. The doors to Saxon’s milieu had been African Teak, but the interior was even richer still. A mahogany desk sat to the left side, and on it, casually perched, was a crystal carafe of whiskey and some glasses. Beside the drinks was the flared brass mouthpiece of a record player, along with a few sleeves of vinyl. The device was connected by a long wire off the desk and down the floor.

Scores of leatherbound books were housed in floor-to-ceiling shelves just opposite of the desk, with the pelt of a white tiger carpeting the ground between them. Over the desk hung a long-barreled elephant gun, possibly the very weapon Saxon had used to slay the beast. Of course, its cherry stock was filigreed with gold.

On the far side of the room was a marble plinth, covered with a velvet cloth. Behind this pedestal was a glass door set into a window as wide as the entire room. Jack reckoned this was so that Saxon could observe the factory floor below from his lofty height.

Once they all had entered the room, the heavy teak doors were shut behind them. Taggart forced Jack to his knees, so that he could adjust his tie again. Ravinder did the same. Jack thought it strange choice that they should be wearing such articles on a day like this, but perhaps it was for the sake of this “formal” occasion.

“Damned heat,” Taggart muttered, voicing the same opinion. He and Ravinder opted to just remove the piece of clothing in the end.

“Can I offer anyone a drink?” Asked Saxon, gesturing to the whiskey.

“No,” said Cassar shortly. “We have brought you MacGregor, just as we promised. Now, you must fulfill your promise.”

Jack’s breath caught in his throat.

He was the thing being exchanged...but for what?

Saxon crossed over to him.

“Just a moment. Let’s inspect the merchandise first.”

With a huge hand, Saxon suddenly grabbed Jack’s face and squeezed. His grip forced upon Jack’s mouth, despite Jack’s vigorous thrashing. This close, he could see the lord’s every hair and pore, and every inch of the engraving on his rubied silver ring. He wanted to scream, but all that escaped his lips was an atonal cry of pain.

“Well, he’s got all his teeth,” Saxon laughed, and tossed Jack’s head aside.

Panting, Jack straightened himself.

“What...do you want with me, Saxon? I thought...you wanted me dead.”

Saxon clicked his tongue.

“Jack old boy, how you wound me! I don’t want to kill you. Not anymore at least. You see, you’re too much fun. Things are so much more...amusing while you’re around. The game is just begging to be played. Just like our school days, isn’t it?”

Jack spat at him, but Saxon deftly stepped aside.

“Enough of this!” Snapped Cassar.

“Yes, Jack, really. Enough of this.” Saxon smiled at his own wit. Jack did not. The lord turned away from him, and crossed over to his desk. “Right then. Down to business.”

Only, Saxon removed a record from his collection instead.

“You like music, Cassar?” Saxon asked. “I’ve just got this new one from an American fellow named Jolson. I think you’ll like it.”

“We did not come for music,” Cassar growled.

“Contributes to the atmosphere though, doesn’t it?” Saxon slid the black disc onto the player, and laid down the stylus. Immediately, the music began blaring from the loudspeakers all around the factory.

*I’m sitting on top of the world.*

*I’m rolling along...*

“Right then,” said Saxon, waltzing over to the plinth. With one swift motion, he plucked off the velvet cover and spun around like a ballerina.

The Hospitallers had been watching him in utter confoundment until that moment. Then, it immediately turned to awe.

Jack had the same reaction.

Glowing on the marble, was the Emerald Tablet.

*"Glory Hallelujah," I just told the Parson.*

*"Hey, Par get ready to call."*

Cassar nodded to one of his men. “Gregori, retrieve it, please.”

The knight stepped forward slowly. Eyes wide and hand outstretched, he was spellbound as he approached.

Until he heard the gunshots from outside.

A moment’s hesitation cost him.

Suddenly, Saxon gripped the Tablet in both hands, and slammed it square across the Hospitaller’s face.

*Just like Humpty Dumpty, I'm going to fall...*

Gregori dropped to the ground harder than a slab of stone with a bloody, dented skull.

Before any of Cassar's fellows could even react, Taggart and Ravinder were already behind, throttling the life from them with their neckties. The Hospitallers kicked as they dropped to the floor. Jack had wits enough to roll away from the killing, and took cover behind Saxon's desk.

Cassar however, was paralyzed.

Whether he had expected a trap or not did nothing to assuage the sudden brutality Saxon had pulled. The Grandmaster fumbled to draw his rapier, yet Saxon made no move stop him.

Instead, Saxon put down the bloody Tablet, and cracked his knuckles.

Cassar at last whipped free the weapon, and brandished it at Saxon. Yet even with the point threatening his face, Saxon only grinned.

With the simple snap of his fingers, Cassar's rapier liquified.

The old man released the blade just in time as molten metal hit the wooden floor and burned right through.

Jack fell back, astonished.

Cassar simply ran.

The Grandmaster raced past Saxon for the glass doors to the factory, leaving his dying brothers behind.

Saxon, however, was in no hurry.

Waltzing and singing along to the music, he followed after.

*I'm sitting, sitting on top, top of the world.*

*I'm rolling along...*



## XV

### War Bells Peal Thunderous

Music.

The notes erupted from the loudspeakers, filling the warehouse with its eerie song. Instinctually, Nero and his companions aimed their weapons at the towers.

It was just in time.

The tune had only played for a few bars before the guards opened fire on the Hospitallers.

Bullets hailed down from all four corners of the warehouse.

Nero had been watching the towers the whole time. He had known this was a trap. Yet, nothing could have prevented it.

Saxon's men had numbers and the high ground.

But Nero would fight them anyway.

The two nearest towers fired down at him and his two brothers on the parapet. They had a perfect line of sight, and their targets had no cover.

Nero did have speed, however.

As bullets ripped around him, sparking off the metal rails and walkway, he pressed his cheek into the Mauser folding stock and fired back in short professional bursts. He took out one man from the right tower, then another. One body fell the twenty

feet out of the nest, and splattered on the parapet below.

A bullet struck Nero in the shoulder from behind. He shuddered, then wheeled about to give fire to the left side as well. Another burst downed another man.

Nero reloaded.

Around him was Armageddon. Rifle rounds tore from every corner with no breaks between the shots.

Saxon's men were firing at will.

Nero's nearest brother took several bullets to the chest, and fell back in a spray of blood.

In the courtyard, another knight lay dead, but the other four had fared much better. They had escaped into the car only just in time. That was their contingency plan. Cassar had the cars specially designed with lead lined interiors and laminated glass windows.

Bullets dinged and dented the exterior and left ripples in the windshield, but nothing got through.

The Hospitallers inside cracked the windows like loopholes, and fired back at the towers in blasts of heavy automatic fire.

Nero grinned.

Cassar had hidden submachines inside too.

Saxon would not be given such an easy victory.

Gunfire.

Sanwar saw flashes from the towers before heard the sounds. They crescendoed in staccato notes over the

easy melody of the blaring music. Gunsmoke was rising from the warehouse. Men were shouting.

He could see it all through his left eye.

His right eye however, was peering through his rifle scope, searching for another way inside.

They had seen Jack go through the service entrance, but that was too large and needed to be opened from the inside. They would easily be cut down attempting to breach it.

Then, his sight picture settled on something.

“There.”

Ibrahim and Fatima turned their binoculars in the same direction.

From the eastern heights above the valley, they could see just beyond the northern wall. There, a machine gun team had positioned themselves; three men flat at the ground, aimed at the warehouse itself.

“What are they doing there?” Asked Ibrahim.

“Insurance,” said Sanwar. “In case any man is fortunate enough to escape the death trap within, they will run head long into that machine gun crew at point blank range.”

“So, there must be another entrance,” Fatima concluded.

“Precisely. I will kill those three men, then we will rush the two hundred yards or so to the entrance they were formerly protecting, and make our assault.”

“What is our exit strategy?”

Sanwar laughed.

“Optimistic of you...Ready?”

Ibrahim prayed. Fatima crossed herself.

Sanwar took his aim.

He killed the gunner first, then the two assistants.

Three shots in three seconds.

“Go.”

The three of them scrambled down from the rocky heights. Though Sanwar hoped that no man in the towers had heard the echoing shots over the cacophony of battle, haste was still key to their initiative. Every second wasted another risk on Jack's life, a risk he would not afford. It was two hundred yards of dead ground to that other entrance, and when they reached the bottom of the hill, they ran.

Into the fire, into the fray.

The bodies writhed and kicked as Taggart and Ravinder squeezed the life out of them. It was surprising how long it took someone to choke to death.

It did give Jack more time to improvise, however.

From behind Saxon's desk, he looked about, searching for anything that could help him. His eyes darted around the room...

The dead man!

Jack rolled over to the corpse of the middle of the room, through blood and brains all over the floor. He wriggled to the Hospitaller's side, and stretched his arms behind his back to pull the man's sword free. He

was doing the task essentially blindfolded and literally with his hands tied around his back.

Meanwhile, the other Hospitallers had stopped moving.

Ravinder was sliding the body off himself, and getting to his feet.

Jack's fingers groped faster for the sword. He found the pommel, then the hilt, and finally loosed the blade about six inches. He did his best to put his bonds against it. He nicked in his wrist and fingers in the process, but eventually hemp found steel, and Jack sawed himself free.

He leapt to his feet in triumph, his bonds now shorn away...

...only to see Taggart standing right in front of him.

“Aw fuck.”

Taggart's fist sent him reeling back.

Jack had only seconds to recover as Taggart swung again, this time with his off hand.

Jack did an inside block, but the attack was only just a feint, and a right hook took him in the cheek instead.

It was bad form to punch the face bare-knuckled, as you could easily break your hand, but Taggart seemed not to care. He just kept coming forward, swinging.

Jack staggered back, and only barely managed to dodge another blow. He threw a quick jab in response, but missed. Taggart danced away, and the punch never made any purchase. Still, it put some distance between them, giving Jack enough time to assume his guard.

Taggart came back soon enough, giving one hook, then another. Jack blocked each one in succession, but as he tried to throw his own attack, Taggart's heavy boot smashed him in the midriff and sent him flying.

He slammed back into Saxon's desk, knocking over the carafe of whiskey and its glasses perched on top. The glasses shattered on the floor, though the carafe's impact was softened by Jack's head and then his genitals. As he sank to the floor, it dinged off his pate, and then fell squarely in his lap.

Jack cursed the size of his endowments, and prayed that nothing had been permanently damaged.

As if to curse his penance, Taggart stepped in front of him, and hauled Jack to his feet by the collar.

This close, every scar and wound that adorned the Glasgow man's face filled Jack's vision with frightening detail. His eyes were wide in joyous anger. His fetid breath wreaked rancor in Jack's nose. His yellowed teeth were twisted in a horrid grin.

"Saxon might want to keep you as a plaything," he whispered in Jack's face. "But you're going to be my little bitch first."

In his blind rage, Taggart had missed that Jack still held the carafe in his hands.

Jack's first blow was not enough to shatter the vessel, even though it caught Taggart firmly in the chin.

His second blow did, however.

As Taggart recoiled, clutching his jaw, Jack brought the bottle down onto his head. The crystal shattered,

and the other Scotsman crumpled on the floor beside the bookshelves in a pool of blood and whiskey.

“Second time’s the charm,” said Jack.

He spat bloody spittle on Taggart’s body, then turned his gaze towards the Emerald Tablet.

The shining green slab was there on the plinth, just within grasp. He only needed to step forward and take it. With it, he could at least salvage something out of this ordeal. With it, Sanwar’s death would not have been in vain.

Except, he heard a hammer click behind him.

Major Singh had retrieved a pistol from his victim, and now had it aimed at Jack. They were only six feet apart, and there was no way that he could miss at such short range.

Jack put his arms in the air, and slowly backed away. The Major advanced onto the tiger carpet, maintaining the distance between them.

“A valiant effort, Mister MacGregor,” said Singh.

“But it will cost you. If Saxon does not punish you for your insolence, then I certainly will.”

“You know Sanwar loved you, don’t you?” Said Jack.

Ravinder shook his head.

“There is no love for men like me.” The Major’s voice was thick and heavy. He motioned for Jack to lay down. “Now. On the ground, hands on your head. Nice and slowly.”

Jack lowered himself onto the floor. There were drops of blood on it, but he had no choice but to ignore them, and put his chin down anyway.

Ravinder stepped forward, so that he was standing over Jack. From Jack's low angle, it looked like the man had the tiger's head between his legs. In any other circumstances, he would have laughed.

The Major had no idea how he appeared to Jack, however, and kept a stern countenance and a steady finger on the trigger.

"Now, we're just going to wait until Lord Saxon returns," he said.

Jack muttered something.

"I'm sorry. What was that?"

"I said, 'eenie meenie'."

"What...?"

"Eenie meenie. Miney mo."

Ravinder looked at him in utter confusion.

That confusion turned to shock, when Jack suddenly grabbed the tiger pelt, and yanked.

The gun went flying into the air.

And so did Ravinder.

Two hundred yards was a long way to sprint, even without the weight of weaponry, but the adrenaline was surging through all their veins thicker than blood. They cleared most of the distance without being noticed, until those final fifty yards.



At that range, a confused challenge came from one of the guards in the northeast tower.

Fatima responded by firing a grenade at him.

Her aim was off, but the same effect was achieved. The projectile arced, and hit the tower's crenels and not the battlements. The grenade exploded in a flash of smoke and fire against the concrete, sending the guards ducking for cover.

The diversion was long enough for the three companions to sprint and reach the walls. The smoke also afforded them concealment, as wild shots flew out of the tower in every direction. Sanwar and the others hugged the wall for added safety, and strafed along its northern side.

Some other guards on the northwest tower spotted them there, and did not give verbal challenge. Instead, they opened instantly with riflery. Their bullets clipped sand and concrete, as the awkward angle and the wall provided the companions' some protection.

However, they could not lose their momentum, and sooner or later a bullet would land. Ibrahim was on point, and stepped out into fire. He gave the tower a good peppering of automatic bursts to keep their heads down. When one of the guards dared to pop back out again, Sanwar sniped him in the throat.

There was a personnel door on the northwest corner of the wall, just beside the tower. They ran to it, bullets cracking from the front and back of them. When they reached the door, Sanwar spun around to exchange a

few rounds with the northeast tower, while Fatima unpinned a grenade and lobbed it at the other.

However, it bounced off the ramparts, and exploded harmlessly in midair.

Well, harmlessly for the guards.

“Down!”

Ibrahim threw both Fatima and Sanwar into the dirt to avoid the falling shrapnel.

At once, Sanwar tore another grenade from Fatima’s belt, and tossed it at the tower.

This time, it did the trick.

Fatima nodded in thanks, then the three of them hastily reloaded, and assumed positions at the door. Fatima and Sanwar stacked against the flanks while Ibrahim blasted off the lock, and kicked the door in.

Immediately Fatima tried to fill the breach, but was repulsed by a sudden spray of submachine gun fire. She fell back against the wall, clutching her bloody right arm.

“Car!” She shouted over the fusillade.

Ibrahim was almost hit himself, but from their side of the wall, as bullets snapped into the sand beside his feet. He leapt to the wall for cover.

The northeast tower was still giving them trouble.

Again, Sanwar wheeled round, and gave them some fire. His shots were ragged though, and he knew none of them hit home. It was just enough to keep some fire off their back.

“We have to breach!” He shouted. “Can you lift that?”

He nodded to the grenade launcher dangling from her grip.

Fatima grimaced, but hefted the weapon once more. There was a fresh round inside.

“Give them a blast,” he told her. “Then we rush them.”

Ibrahim slapped in another magazine.

“I’ll cover you, my brother.”

Sanwar nodded.

“Ready...”

They resumed positions.

“...Now!”

The music had been replaced by the clangor of an alarm.

The explosions had changed the pitch of the battle. Now the northern towers seemed to more concerned with something coming from the outside than within, which allowed Nero to fight back against the southern ones with greater vigor.

He was the only one left alive on the parapet, but now his enemies were more manageable. He had nearly eliminated all the guards in the nearest tower on his right, and the other’s attack was wavering.

His brothers in the vehicle had grown bolder too. Seeing that their foes had become distracted, they opened the doors, and stepped out to give themselves a

better line of sight. One of them, Theodoros, pulled back the sunroof, and fired out of it like a turret.

It was all to deadly effect. Saxon's ambush was failing. Soon, the Knights would prise themselves free of the jaws of death, and reclaim the Tablet.

Nero almost blessed these mystery attackers for diverting the towers, until he saw just who was coming through a small door in the lower left corner.

Then, he cursed them.

A figure leapt through the portal, but was immediately repulsed by his brethren.

However, seconds later, the attackers tried again.

This time, there was a gout of smoke and flame, as some small missile struck the car and dented it with a blast. His brothers took shelter behind the doors and Theodoros in the car itself, using its metal shell to absorb the shrapnel.

The failed attack had succeeded in allowing two men to pass through, firing in tandem.

Nero recognized them instantly.

Dhamija and the *sheikh*? How were they still alive?

Whatever, Nero would kill them again.

He turned his fire on the newcomers. He would deal with the towers later. His fellows did the same, blasting at their meager cover behind the girders. The two men were pinned down, unable to return fire.

Then suddenly, a tiny woman ran forward.

No one had noticed her at first, but now she burst through the doorway, and juked right to flank the car.

Theodoros saw her, and turned his fire, but was empty.

As he fumbled to reload, the woman hurled a stick grenade.

It fell right into the seats.

Theodoros dropped his weapon to throw it back. He made it halfway down when the bomb went off.

Normally, grenades did not make much of an explosion, but normally, they did not explode right beside a fuel tank. The car's full load of petrol only added to the fireball.

Nero was almost thrown off his feet by the explosion. The brightness would have completely blinded him, save for his glasses.

However, he was not completely spared.

Several chunks of hot metal car parts dug themselves into his side and shoulders. He was wearing padded mail beneath his robes, but still, some of the shards went through, and were buried about an inch deep inside of him.

Nero suppressed the pain, and used the railing to pull himself to his feet. He tossed aside his tattered robe, baring the bandoliers of ammunition strapped to his chest beneath, and loaded in another clip.

There had been many times before when Nero had thought that he would die, but today it was a certainty.

And he did not care.

He did not care if he lived or even how many men he killed, just so long as Sanwar Singh Dhamija was one of them.

Cassar had run himself into a corner.

When he had fled from Saxon's office out onto the parapet that overlooked the factory floor, he had run right instead of left, and by doing so had inadvertently run away from the stairs.

Saxon would not have chased him either way. No man made John Henry Saxon run either to or from him, and someone like Cassar would never be the exception. So, Saxon strode slowly towards the end of the parapet, his heavy steps echoing on the metal grating.

He passed over the two dozen or so men he had had waiting in reserve. They stood waiting and watching on the factory floor below him, just behind the steel doors to the warehouse. Saxon always liked to have a fall-back plan.

"Do you need assistance, my lord?" Called the commanding officer.

Saxon waved the help away.

"Shall we help our fellows in the warehouse, my lord?"

This time Saxon sighed.

The sound of gunfire and explosions was getting awfully loud in there.

"If you must."

The officer barked an order, and the steel doors were wrenched wide open. The men went running through, adding their own gunfire to the cacophony.

Saxon meanwhile, had Cassar trapped with his back to the wall.

The old knight in panic suddenly remembered that he had a pistol on his belt, which he drew and aimed at Saxon.

Saxon only clicked his tongue.

“We know that won’t do you any good.”

Cassar’s hand shook, but he did not release the weapon.

“I knew you would double-cross us in the end, Saxon.”

Saxon only shrugged. “It was your proposal. And it will be your funeral too. I get the Tablet *and* MacGregor. Not either or. Right then, time to die, old chap.”

“We would have built God’s kingdom here on Earth,” Cassar spat. “Here, in this city. It would have been beautiful. What would you have built?”

Saxon paused.

“Something better...Are you done yet?”

“*Jesu* save me...”

“He won’t,” said Saxon.

With a snap of his fingers, the Grandmaster Cassar’s head exploded in a burst of gore.

His sad little body collapsed upon the parapet in a bloody mess a moment later.

Saxon straightened his tie and collar. Now that this bloody business was concluded, he had best get back to the Tablet. Carefully, he backed away from the scene to avoid any blood or entrails getting on his clothes.

His shoes had just been polished after all.

It had been a damn fine throw.

Fatima had apparently improved her technique, and now the Hospitaller car was a flaming heap of wreckage in the center of the warehouse.

It had also opened the gap that Sanwar and Ibrahim desperately needed.

With the ground floor clear, they could now run eastwards along the northern wall, skirmishing in tandem from one piece of cover to the next. One would fire while the other rushed to the next steel beam for safety; Ibrahim laying down a heavy walking fire, and Sanwar sniping careful shots. They aimed for the southern towers, which had the clearest line of sight, and gave them unrelenting fire. The guards might have held the high ground, but the two men had momentum on their side, and the enemy's advantage was quickly waning. Suddenly, the initiative was in the hands of these newcomers who had leapt into a private battle out of nowhere, and came in hard and swinging.

The towers were all but decimated by the time Sanwar and Ibrahim laid into them, and their sustained fire was the final death stroke. Soon, the towers were bereft of men, or if they did contain survivors, those



men were wounded or cowering behind the battlements.

The breach had been successful. Now, the three companions were inside the fortress.

Whatever momentum Sanwar and Ibrahim may have had however, instantly evaporated when they reached the eastern wall.

A sudden blast of bullets sent them rolling behind the line of tanks for cover, and when Sanwar dared a glance to find the source, another blast sent him right back.

From then on, the fire became unyielding. It hammered ceaselessly into the steel frames of the tanks, and ricocheted every which way in a shower of sparks. Though they shielded Sanwar and Ibrahim from every bullet, the massive armored vehicles still somehow felt inadequate from the barrage.

“There is a man on the parapet opposite us,” Sanwar shouted to Ibrahim over the din. “He is holding a balcony there alone!”

“Alone? I thought that it was ten men not one!”

“I know this man! He is deadly, but we need to get up those stairs on the other side!”

Sanwar had seen them underneath the parapet during the breach. They led to the only other doors in the entire room, besides the service gate and the entrance to what was presumably the factory floor. Through them seemed the only likely place that Jack could be.

Ibrahim groaned, and not just because a round had clipped his shoulder.

Sanwar had not fully registered that it was Nero standing on that balcony, nor even bothered to wonder how the man was still alive. All he knew was that Nero stood in his way.

However, the angle was not clear. From this low, Sanwar could not get a clean shot on the Hospitaller, and every time the knight reloaded, he stepped back and fully out of view.

“Where is Fatima!?”

Sanwar’s first thought was that she could arc a grenade over the rails, and nullify the angle issue, but when he searched about, he could not find her.

“I am here!”

He jerked his head to the left.

Fatima was behind the tank next to them, pinned down and bleeding just the same as they were. The grenade launcher lay discarded a few feet away from her, with pieces of a Rolls Royce fender lodged fully through its metal barrel. Now, Fatima’s only weapon was a tiny, twenty-two caliber pistol and whatever hand grenades she still had left.

Sanwar sighed.

“How convenient.”

Without the launcher, grenades were right out. A hand grenade was too close quarters of a weapon. Asking Fatima to run out into range and throw it would be suicidal.

“How many rounds have you got left?” Sanwar asked Ibrahim.

“Two spare magazines. Then, I am out.”

“Bloody hell. We’re royally fucked then, aren’t we?”

“No. Now, we are fucked.”

Across from them, a pair of heavy steel doors creaked open, and another host of Saxon’s men came rushing through them. They fired wildly, not bothering to aim, but simply swarm the space. With their numbers though, accuracy was more superfluous.

“*Wallah!*” Ibrahim shouted, and fired back as the men ducked behind steel beams for cover. He gave them heavy bursts, killing a few. Yet even with his rate of fire, he could not match his foes’ sheer volume.

Sanwar could not help him.

He had only a few rounds left, and he was saving one of them for Nero.

Nero loaded in another sleeve of ammunition. Smoking brass was heaped around his ankles, yet he had plenty more rounds to go. He had come in expecting an ambush, and so had covered himself in as many rounds as he could carry. He just had not expected to do this much shooting, but tossed aside an empty clip with nonchalance.

There was shouting below, swiftly followed by heavy fire. Men were flooding the warehouse floor. Saxon must have been hiding them in reserve.

Whatever the case, they were keeping Dhamija and the others occupied behind those tanks. It would have been the perfect chance for Nero to extricate himself and shoot open the doors behind him, had men not come running up the stairs to his right.

Nero wheeled about, and laid a volley into the first man, sending him falling back down the stairs and taking his fellows with him.

A shot then whizzed past Nero's head, and slapped against the wall in a puff of concrete dust. He responded instinctually with a riposte of bullets, but Dhamija had already leapt back behind cover again.

Damn the Sikh.

Nero had known the man would be trouble since the moment he laid eyes on him in Alexandria. Talent always recognized itself. Dhamija was a killer.

In a way, Nero almost relished the challenge. Normally, he approached his duty with a cool professionalism, but nothing could dam the flood welling deep inside of him. His blood was surging, boiling hotter and hotter with every kill, every flying bullet. Where once before, he would have felt nothing from ending a life, now he could feel each one he ripped from the world and how it made him stronger. He was pulsing with vitality.

So, this was ecstasy!

If this was what it felt like in the Kingdom of Heaven, then he would gladly die today. The pistol was

his fiery sword, and he would cast down these devils in the name of God.

Were it not for the rage of battle, Nero would have wept, for he, and he alone, had been chosen by the Lord for Holy War.

He smiled, suddenly awash with tranquility, knowing that his soul was at last ready for the end.

Ravinder jammed an elbow into Jack's midriff as the two grappled on the floor. It gave the Major a chance to go for the gun, but Jack swallowed the pain, and grabbed him by the boots. He yanked Ravinder away, then tried to crawl over him in order to grab the fallen weapon, only to receive another elbow to the exact same place.

"Bastard!" Jack roared between gritted teeth.

Ravinder scampered for the pistol.

Again, Jack swallowed the pain, and sprung after the man.

As soon as Ravinder had his fingers on the grip, Jack was right on top of him. The two men groped about, each one trying to throw a solid punch while lying sideways on the floor.

In their struggle, the gun was knocked aside and went sliding all the way across the room.

Somehow, Jack found himself on top of Ravinder, hammering a fist into his face.

And somehow, Ravinder also drove a foot right into Jack's chest.

It was the second time that Jack had crashed into Saxon's desk today, but this time, he went rolling over it as well. He found himself upended in Saxon's chair, and trying to straighten himself out.

When he finally recovered, Ravinder was staggering to his feet. The soldier wiped blood off of his swollen lip. He twisted out the kinks in his neck, eliciting several audible cracks.

"What are you doing, MacGregor?" His voice was thick and hoarse. "You can't win. You never could. Neither could I. So why are you still fighting? Kill me, and it won't change anything."

"Sure, it will. You'll be dead."

Jack suddenly snatched the elephant gun from its hangings on the wall.

Ravinder only laughed.

"It's not even loaded."

Jack leapt over the desk, and jammed its barrel into Ravinder's stomach to prove that it did not matter if it was.

The Major doubled over from the blow, and Jack brought the stock down on his now exposed back. He flattened on the floor, groaning and spitting out blood.

"Come on, you bastard," Jack egged as Ravinder rolled about his feet. "Is this a fight or are we just doing the Highland fling?"

Ravinder's groans turned quickly into snarls.

In a flash, he leapt back onto his feet and charged.

Jack tried to bring the gun to bear, but Ravinder was already past his defense, and had both arms wrapped around his waist in a full-on tackle. Jack dropped the gun as the two of them went reeling backwards, straight into the heavy set of double doors.

For a moment, they were airborne.

They came crashing through the African Teak, breaking off the lock and chunks of hardwood.

As their momentum took them out onto the parapet, it also took them right into where Nero was standing.

Even with his reflexes, the knight could not dance away from the hurtling mass of men that had come smashing through the doors behind him.

He had only turned his head when they crashed into him, and knocked him right into the rails.

Nero caught himself, but dropped his weapon on the metal grate.

It was just the opportunity that Sanwar needed.

Braving the gunfire, he stepped out from behind the tank, and fired.

As Nero tried to lift himself with rails, Sanwar's bullet took him through the lens of his dark glasses.

He slunk to the grate, missing half his head.

Jack popped out from behind the railings a moment later.

“Sanwar!”

“Jack!”

Sanwar fired again, this time at a soldier who had rushed up the steps and gotten too close to Jack.

With Nero gone, Saxon's men were rushing the staircase with bayonets fixed, trying to reclaim the parapet.

Jack wrenched *Lann Dbearg* and *Cadarama* from Nero's corpse to receive them. When the first man came up the steps, Jack was ready.

In a single motion, he parried the attacker's thrust with one sword and slashed him dead with the other.

The next man was already through the gap, but Jack cut him down just as handily. The staircase was a natural choke point, which meant Jack could the guards off for a time.

But not forever, Sanwar knew.

"We need to get to him!" He shouted to Ibrahim.

"So, it must be."

The *sheikh* threw aside his empty rifle.

Without warning, he wrenched open the side hatch of the middlemost tank.

"Do you know how to drive that thing!?" Sanwar shouted.

"I will try and learn! Now get inside!"

Ibrahim then vanished into the enormous metal beast.

"Fatima—" Sanwar called out, but Fatima did not need to be told anything.

She was already tossing out the last of her grenades. A few were fragmentary, which killed or wounded



some men, but she had saved the smoke rounds for the finale thankfully. In seconds, the entire courtyard was filled with a dense white fog. Then, Fatima came scurrying through it, and jumped inside the tank.

“Come on!” She urged Sanwar.

“Hold on Jack!” Sanwar shouted.

“You bet your arse I will!” He heard Jack shout back from somewhere, before he too climbed inside, and shut the hatch.

When Ravinder came to, it felt like he had awoken in another world.

He had hit his head against the metal grate when he had busted out of Saxon’s door, and everything had gone black.

Now, smoke was all around him. Bullets were flying randomly. Nero lay dead at his feet. Somehow, MacGregor was still alive, sword fighting not five feet away from him like some rum-addled buccaneer.

There came a heavy mechanical whir, then the rev of a monstrous engine. Ravinder stumbled over to the railing. Below him, the gigantic silhouette of a tank lurched awkwardly forward, bumped against the eastern wall, then course-corrected, and immediately reversed.

Men on the floor shouted and leaped out of the way as the war machine barreled backwards into them. A few instinctively fired at it, but their shots sparked

uselessly off the sides, one even ricocheting back and killing a man.

The tank came through the smoke, and stopped just beneath the parapet.

As if on cue, MacGregor sprang onto the rails, winked at Ravinder, then jumped the eight feet down onto the steel hull. There, a hatch cranked open, creating an instant escape route into the safety of the tank.

Ravinder froze as Sanwar appeared in that hatch, beckoning MacGregor forward.

They saw each other.

Suddenly, the sounds of battle went away, and all the smoke and fire were forgotten. There was only Sanwar, looking back at him.

How could this be?

He was dead.

He had died in those mountains.

Yet, here Sanwar was, standing in front of Ravinder once again. Only this time, there was no love or pity or even hatred in his eyes.

There was only understanding.

It was then that Ravinder knew that he had failed.

Without a second thought, he found his fingers undoing the buttons of his jacket. He reached inside, and removed the *khalsa gatra* around his chest and the *kirpan* holstered in it, and threw it over the rails to him.

Sanwar caught it.

Then, he and MacGregor vanished inside the tank.

The machine bowled forward, this time not bumping into the eastern wall, but smashing right the way through it, leaving behind a gaping hole in the concrete.

Ravinder watched them go.

The guards' commander came running over to him a moment later. His face was flush and flecked with blood.

“Major!? Do we pursue them!?”

Ravinder did not answer, though someone with more authority did.

“Of course, you pursue,” Saxon commanded, stepping through the wreckage of his door way. He at least bothered to open what was left of the doors. “Get into one of those tanks, and get after them.”

The officer nodded and went running off, shouting orders as he went.

Saxon only shook his head and laughed. He looked down at Nero's body, and bared that pearly white grin of his.

“You've made a damn fine mess, Jack old boy,” he said, before turning to Ravinder. “What's wrong, Major? Not in the mood to catch today's fox? He's proved to be a most elusive fellow.”

Ravinder reached down, and took the pistol from Nero's lifeless hands.

“What are you doing, Singh?”

“Consider this a formal resignation, sir.”

Before Saxon could even voice confusion or protest, Ravinder put the barrel against his own head, and pulled the trigger.

Inside the tank was already hot and stuffy from trapped exhaust fumes.

“Nice to see everyone’s still alive!” Jack coughed, clambering down into the metal hull after Sanwar.

“And you!” Fatima shouted from the front. She was seated next to Ibrahim, working the gears while he steered the craft. “Now get on a gun or we won’t be alive much longer!”

Jack and Sanwar assumed positions, with Sanwar manning the periscope. Looking through the lens, it was obvious that there was only one clear path to escape.

“Take us straight ahead and out of here!” He shouted to Ibrahim.

“That gear for forward! I think!” Ibrahim instructed to Fatima.

She pulled what she thought was the appropriate lever with her good arm, and the whole thing lurched forward. Even at a crawling speed, it would have enough mass to take them straight through the wall...

A hollow shudder rung out through the vehicle as they went barreling into the concrete, like a hammer hitting a bell. The vibrations shook Sanwar, causing him to momentarily lose his balance.

“Are we through!?” Asked Ibrahim.

Sanwar regained his hold on the periscope.

“We’re through!”

“*Wallah!*”

The tank buckled somewhat as it rolled right over the rubble. They were in the open ground now, out into the valley’s spacious, rocky plains.

“Take us right!” Sanwar ordered. They would have to travel parallel with the heights until they exited the valley on the south side.

“That gear!” Ibrahim directed Fatima.

Fatima yanked the lever back.

The tank suddenly stalled.

“No, no! The other one!”

Fatima swore, cranked the lever back, then pulled another one. Her blood was spilling all over the floor around her.

The tank resumed its trundling pace once more.

However, that was nowhere near fast enough.

Sanwar’s instincts pulled his gaze back to the warehouse. Through his lens, he could see that the tank had passed its southeast corner, but had only put a few dozen yards between it and them.

He also then saw the heavy metal service doors swing open.

A host of men came running out, followed by an armored truck, and then a second tank.

Sanwar sighed, and wiped the pouring sweat from his brow.

Jack had seen the same through a tiny flap used as a vision port just above his gun. They were all over the vehicle, functioning as loopholes on this mobile fortress.

“Tank! Truck! Infantry! On our tails!” He relayed back to the others. “Can this bloody thing go any faster!?”

“Indeed!” Cried Ibrahim. “That one for speed!”

This time Fatima pulled it off without a hitch.

The tank rattled for a moment, then suddenly began to rumble forward with surprising quickness. Saxon must have greatly improved the engine, for the machine no longer had the sluggish speeds of older models. Its swiftly outpacing the speed of sprinting infantry, which had once been a sight unseen on the battlefield.

Only a few had been able to catch their tank before it reached its full velocity. Metallic thuds rattled on the walls, then ceiling as hobnailed boots found their footing and climbed aboard.

“Are they on top of us!?” Shouted Ibrahim.

“Keep driving! Hit as many rocks as you can!” Sanwar shouted back.

He instinctively reached for his pistol, and not a moment too soon.

A moment later, someone else’s pistol jammed into the vision port right to his left. The barrel was upside down and trained on Sanwar.

Sanwar leveled his weapon, but the attacker fired first.

The bullet missed thankfully, at least at first. However, the bullet ricocheted, bouncing around the steel interior like a stinging wasp. Everyone ducked instinctually, but the bullet's path was unpredictable, and ducking would do little to help them.

A second bang rang out as the attacker fired again, only adding to the chaos and choking smoke inside the tank. This one did land a hit, however, striking the barrel of Sanwar's sidearm and taking it clean out of his hand. It slid underneath the roaring engine, leaving everyone utterly defenseless.

Only a bump on a loose stone saved them.

Ibrahim must have followed Sanwar's advice and driven over a rock, for the assailing guardsman was shaken from his perch. He had been hanging over the side by his waist, and slid right off. With no handholds to save him, he went headfirst into the rocks beneath them at the full speed of the tank. There were several shouts from above and several subsequent thuds as some of his fellows joined his fate.

Sanwar checked the periscope to confirm if all of them were gone, but unfortunately, he was proven wrong.

One last guard was angling himself over the side, in a last-ditch attempt to finish what his friend had started.

"Pistol!" Sanwar shouted.

"Here!"

Fatima fumbled in her sleeves, then tossed back her puny twenty-two caliber handgun.

It would have to do.

Sanwar grabbed the weapon where it had landed on the floor, and jammed it through the vision port right as the guard was reaching his own pistol inside.

Sanwar was quicker, though.

One shot knocked the man off the top in a spray of blood. Even a low caliber weapon at point blank range packed a decent punch.

The victory was short lived.

A huge explosion shook the vehicle. Sanwar struggled to hold onto the periscope, and was instead unceremoniously launched into the steel walls of the tank. A hard bang to his shoulder reminded him of old wounds.

Groaning, he did his best to recover.

“Are we hit!?” He called out, manning the periscope once more.

“Yes, but still alive!” Ibrahim called back.

Sure enough, the engine was still chugging. The shot had not quite been direct enough.

Sanwar glanced back into the periscope. The other tank was behind them and to their right, smoke chortling out of its barrel. Another round was sure to follow.

“Is the starboard gun loaded, Jack!?”

“Aye! Just tell me where to shoot these bastards!”

“Rightwards two degrees!”



“Like this!”

“No! Just a tick to the left!”

Sanwar had remembered to give a little bit of leading room.

“Now!?”

“Yes! Fire!”

The command was lost as the other tank fired first.

The shot came a little short, but still too close for comfort. Dirt and broken stone were blown into the air, and straight into the vision port.

Jack and Sanwar recoiled from the debris, faces brown with dust and lungs filled with the stuff too.

It took several seconds for Sanwar to even clear his throat.

“Did you fire!?” He wheezed at Jack.

“What!?”

“Just fire, damn it!”

Jack squeezed the trigger.

Sanwar was almost thrown back against the wall a second time.

The six-pound gun erupted, and almost threw the entire vehicle to one side with the strength of its recoil. An enormous blast belched forth from the gun, its empty cartridge ejecting out of it to land with a weighty clang onto the steel floors.

Sanwar hacked and wheezed as the whole tank got filled with thick black smog, but forced himself to hold his breath and check the periscope.

When he looked back, the enemy tank was just a smoking wreck.

“Direct hit!” He tried to say, but coughed instead.

“Did we hit the bastards!?” Jack shouted at him.

Sanwar simply coughed, and gave him the thumbs up.

“What about the truck!?” Cried Fatima.

“What!?”

“What about the truck!?!?”

In the excitement, Sanwar had nearly forgotten all about the thing. He rushed over to the periscope, and spun around in a complete circle, searching for the missing vehicle. Through the dirty lens, he finally found it.

“It’s right behind us...”

And it was getting nearer.

There must have been a dozen men inside, all ready to jump onto the tank and fire in through the vision ports. Sanwar would never be able to fight them all.

“Right behind us!?” Called Ibrahim. “How close!?”

“Right on our tail!”

The truck was just a few yards from them now. Men were rising in the open bed, poised to leap the shrinking gap between the vehicles.

“Very well! Hold on!”

“Why-”

Somehow, Fatima and Ibrahim’s minds were both in tandem, although Sanwar had not been privy to their sudden decision.

Without warning, Ibrahim let his foot off the gas, and Fatima cranked back the brakes.

The tank hit a hard stop.

A second later, the truck did too, only this one was at full speed and into the tank's rear end.

Jack and Sanwar were thrown back the sudden halt in momentum, then forward when the truck collided with them. They hit the floor on top of one another.

“Hold on! Again!”

“What-”

The tank was already moving, grinding back in reverse. There was the grating scrape of metal on metal and the sharp tilt of the entire vehicle, as the great big war machine rolled back onto the hood of the truck, crunching it beneath its treads. The windshield popped and shattered. Men screamed as they were crushed or fled. From inside the hull, Sanwar was content to let his imagination do the work.

The tank slumped back down once it had fully flattened the truck, and banged its rear into the dirt. Fatima and Ibrahim tried to work the controls to get it moving again, but the sharp stop had destroyed the transmission completely. Smoke and sparks puffed out of the driver's seat, and the whole tank came promptly to a halt for good. Now, it was nothing more than an oversized hunk of metal sitting in the dust.

“Alright! Final destination!” Ibrahim called out.

Sanwar was the first one out of the top hatch. He burst free of the acrid fumes below, and immediately

vomited upon contact with fresh air. He stumbled down a side ladder, and dropped onto the rocky ground.

What was left of Saxon's men was fleeing into the distance. The battle was finished, and they had lost too many men and all the thrill of the fight. Those who had survived now made a hasty, unprofessional retreat back to the safety of the warehouse.

Sanwar sighed, shut his eyes, and sank down to his knees. A breeze blew through his beard, clearing the heat from his face. He breathed deeply, letting it expel what was left of the sickness inside of him. Somehow, it made him feel exhausted and renewed all at once.

Finally, it was over.

The others climbed down from the tank, and joined him. Carefully, they helped him to his feet when he was ready.

Their getaway car was not too far away, so they carried other the last few dozen yards; four battered and injured warriors limping their way back to where they had stashed their truck behind the bend of the eastern hills.

The sun was setting, and night would cover their tracks.

It had been one very long day.

## XVI

### For a Tale Unknown

*Gaza, British Mandate for Palestine*  
*Saturday, November 11th, 1922*

By nightfall, the Army had placed Jerusalem under lockdown. But by nightfall, Jack and Sanwar were already far outside the city. Kether had loaded them into another truck, and spirited them away.

For Sanwar, the journey might as well have never happened, for as soon as the car was moving, his head had dropped into Ibrahim's lap and he had fallen fast asleep. The Kabbalists had a safe house in a tiny village just outside the city, and he could remember vaguely being ushered inside a spacious barn, but afterwards, his mind was blank.

When he awoke, the sun was near its zenith. Golden light shimmered down between the clapboard slats of the roof and the crack of the unfinished door. The day was strangely cool however, despite the lateness of the hour, and Sanwar could hear a strong breeze shaking olive trees outside.

Ibrahim was asleep beside him in the hay. Sanwar rose slowly, careful not to wake him, and crossed to the door.

Outside led to a hilltop overlooking Gaza and the coast. To one side was an olive grove, and across the way stood a small drystone house in the shadow of a cypress tree. A trestle table sat beneath the shady boughs as well, laden with wooden platters of salad, pickles, cheeses, fish, and bread. There were jugs of water and a steaming pot of tea.

Jack and Fatima were there already along with a shepherd and his wife. They smiled when Sanwar took a seat beside Jack.

“Friends of ours,” Fatima explained.

“Thank you for sheltering us last night,” Sanwar said to the couple. His Arabic was still a bit formal, but in this case, that was perfectly acceptable. The compliment was well received. He then turned back to Fatima, and spoke in English. “I see that your wound is troubling you no longer.”

She simply smiled and shrugged at him. “You would know.”

Indeed, the Stone had worked its magic on all of them after the battle. Injuries that would have taken weeks to recover were little more than faint scars that had healed in seconds. It never ceased to be amazing.

The shard was all but faded now, however. What had once been bright crimson was the darkness of dried blood. Little luster was left inside of it, but for a pale shimmer when lifted to the light. Sanwar touched his breast pocket, and a sudden twinge of sorrow came over him, as he knew that it was nearly spent and he

would have no chance to study its properties further. His quest was far from over.

Yet, at least it could continue, now that the most important thing had been returned.

Sanwar placed a hand on Jack's shoulder as he took his place beside him.

"I am glad you are still with us," he said.

"Aye, as am I," said Jack. "But I knew you'd come and get me."

Sanwar raised an amused eyebrow.

"Oh?"

Jack grinned.

"I'll know when you're truly dead."

"And how is that?"

"Because I'll be dead too."

"As much as I am loathe to admit it," Sanwar conceded. "I did miss your sense of humor, Jack MacGregor."

The two men shared a well-deserved laugh.

"Hokmah and the driver have gone to the city to arrange your travel for tonight," Fatima mentioned after a time.

"Travel?" Asked Jack. "The entire Palestinian garrison has got to be guarding all the ports after the shite we pulled. Sanwar and I have already torn a bloody warpath through two cities."

"The rabbi has her ways," Fatima assured him.

"Very well," said Sanwar. "Shall we wait for Ibrahim before we feast?"

“No need.”

Sleepy-eyed, Ibrahim appeared from the barn. Half-awake, he looked very much against his station; his clothes were filthy, his long black hair was a greasy mess on his uncovered head, and his voice was hoarse and weak. And yet, nothing lifted Sanwar’s heart so much as seeing him then.

Ibrahim returned the look with a weary smile, and joined them at the table.

“Please, let us not wait longer,” he told them. “None of us has eaten in a long, long time.”

Without any more care for courtesy, they tore right into the food.

Hokmah returned with the truck before evening. The rusty old vehicle wined along a dirt road to the hilltop, and parked itself outside the house. They stood in a line in front of the door as the old woman exited with the help of her driver. She smiled sweetly when she saw them all, though there was a heaviness to her movements. Slowly, she crossed over to them.

“*Shabbat Shalom*,” they said when she was near them.

Hokmah returned the greeting. “*Shabbat Shalom*, my friends. May God smile on you. I am so happy to see all of you here again. I had prayed each day for your safe return, and for your victory. God has been kind.”

“As have you,” Sanwar returned. “All of you. We should have trusted you from the beginning. For that, I apologize.”



Hokmah waved a wrinkled hand at him. “Trust is not an easy thing to give, even to one’s self. That is why our faith is tested. So please, apologize to yourself alone.”

Sanwar simply bowed his head, for her words rang true.

“Now,” Hokmah continued. “I am afraid that our time is short. There is a small fishing boat waiting in the harbor. Its crew will take you to a ship that awaits offshore.”

“And where is this ship going?” Jack asked.

“To the next step in your journey,” she replied. “Your quest for the Stone must continue. Saxon is not yet defeated. Although, Kether’s part in it may be over now, I know someone who can help you. There was more in the diary than just Godfrey’s account.”

“Would that we had it,” said Sanwar. The last he had seen of it, it was in the hands of the French, along with Godfrey’s map.

However, Hokmah seemed none too troubled. “You still have it.”

A moment later, it seemed to materialize from out of her sleeves and into her hands. However, it was not Godfrey’s original. The loosely bound cover was a pale eggshell color instead of black, and the pages were made of paper instead of parchment. Hokmah placed both of her small brown hands on it, and handed it to Sanwar.

“Fatima and I spent the week you were in bed copying it,” she said. “A colleague of mine will help you

translate it. She knows much of the Art. You will meet her where you are going.”

Jack and Sanwar bowed low to her.

“Thank you,” they said together.

Then, Sanwar reached inside his breast pocket, and removed the shard. Gently, he turned the dark stone over to Hokmah.

“This is all that remains of Jabir’s Stone,” he explained. “Its power wanes, but there may be some yet within it. Please use it to cleanse the sickness in Jerusalem. Too many have died of the plague that lingers there. May it be no more.”

Hokmah smiled, and accepted the small gift.

“Thank you, Sanwar.” She took his hand in hers.

“You are a good man. Truly.”

“Thank you.”

She turned to Jack. “Take care of him.”

“Always, ma’am.”

Sanwar smiled, and tried not to cry. He was a good man. He should have always known that, for how else could he be among such admirable company?

He turned to face them now.

“I suppose good-byes are in order,” he said to Fatima and Ibrahim. “I wish that I could express my gratitude for you, but alas, any words would be inadequate. That is the measure of your quality.”

“No words are needed,” Fatima told him, and rushed forward to hug him fully. Her head pressed into his

chest, and she would not let go. Sanwar held her dearly. “I will miss you, Sanwar. And you, Jack.”

She ran to give him the same treatment. The two held a close embrace for a good long while.

“Aye, you’re a brave lass,” he told her. “And I admire you. I hope you’ll accept the compliment from a blasphemer like me.”

“Stop,” she said and hugged him tighter. “You are a godly man, Jack.”

When finally, she relinquished him, Ibrahim took Jack’s hand and shook it. “You have my highest respect as both a fighter and a friend. I am proud to have fought alongside you.”

Jack firmly shook his hand. “All that and more for you, Ibrahim. I owe you my life. *Shukran*.”

To that, Ibrahim bowed.

Then, he turned to Sanwar, and smiled sadly.

“And what can I say to you, my dear Sanwar?” He could only shrug. “I wish that I could come with you on a hundred adventures more, but...my place is here. The fight for me did not end yesterday. My land, my people, they will always need me.”

“As do mine,” said Sanwar. “And there is another who waits for me.”

“Then you must go to them,” said Ibrahim. “But please, accept a gift from me. Something to remember me.”

“How could I forget?”

“Please carry it with you all the same.”

Ibrahim leaned in, and kissed Sanwar's lips.

His touch was tender, longing.

They held the embrace for a good long while, forgetting the urgency of time for just a moment, and letting the breezes blow between their hair.

"Go with God," Ibrahim said at last.

"And you, my friend."

There was no more to be said. Jack and Sanwar loaded into the truck, and drove away, waving one last goodbye before their friends and Palestine vanished behind them.

It was getting close to sunset when the truck dropped them off by a tiny coastal village just outside of the city. Jack and Sanwar had to walk the dirt road by foot towards a boathouse where a single boat was waiting. The way was lined with olive trees, whose branches held the nest of cooing doves. The two men rambled down the rocky path together, Jack singing "The Twa' Recruitin' Sergeants" softly to himself.

About halfway through, he stopped his song, and began fumbling about his person.

"Ah! I forgot something," he said.

"Well, we will simply have to do without it," Sanwar told him, perplexed by Jack's suddenly frantic behavior. "We cannot just go back for—"

"No, not like that. I forgot to *give* you something."

“What?”

Jack then presented him with *Cadarama*. Sanwar realized that Jack had just been wearing around his waist for safe keeping since the tank, and had simply forgotten about it.

His friend now offered the weapon with both hands to Sanwar.

“Happy birthday,” said Jack.

Sanwar accepted it with reverence, and drew the blade. At once, he felt its strength surge through him once again. He had not realized how much he lacked without it in his hands. Now that the strength had been restored, he never wanted to be apart from it again.

He sheathed the sword with a satisfying swish. It felt good to have the familiar weight upon his hip, just as it felt good to wear his *kirpan* as well. It had been another item lost to the French, but now Ravinder’s was fastened to him underneath his shirt.

Thinking of it reminded Sanwar of him. It had been a curious final act, but from it, he knew that the man he once had loved was now dead. Whatever the gesture had meant however, Sanwar would honor the man he knew by wearing it, not the man he had become.

He turned back to his friend, suddenly guilty that he had nothing to exchange for such a meaningful gift.

“I am sorry, Jack,” he said. “I have nothing for your birthday.”

To that, Jack only laughed. “That’s because you had your bloody hands full! Besides, you’ve already given me your gift.

“I have?”

“Aye. You gave me my life back.”

No truer words had ever been said, and what was more, it was a gift that he and Jack could share together. Sanwar would have happily given it all again, no matter what.

Jack put a hand on Sanwar’s shoulder, and carried on down the path again, his sobriety instantly replaced with his usual jovial demeanor.

“You know, it’s funny.”

“Yes?”

“After all these years, I never asked you...why did you save me that day in No Man’s Land? You didn’t know me then.”

Sanwar nodded.

Come to think of it, he had not rightly known himself. Not until now at least, when the words finally came to him.

“I had spent the whole war ending so many lives that for once, I decided to save one.”

Jack smiled.

“Well, I’m glad that it was mine.”

“As am I.”

“*Mera bhra.*”

“*Mo bhrathair.*”

As they continued down the path together, the sun began to sink behind the sea. It would be a long road ahead for them, and they did not even know where they were going.

Sanwar thought it best to start a song:

*Ga-orbee sukhmanee mehlaa  
Salok.  
Ik-on kaar satgur parsaad.  
Aad gur-ay namah.  
Jugaad gur-ay namah.  
Satgur-ay namah.  
Saree gurdayv-ay namah  
Asatpadee.  
Simra-o simar simar sukh paava-o.  
Kal kalays tan maahi mitaava-o...*

*Ten Miles North of Jerusalem, British Mandate for  
Palestine*

*Saturday, November 11th, 1922*

Saxon stepped over the blood and rubble, trying his best not to get any debris on his clean white shoes. He reached the top of the heap, and stared out the gaping hole where the tank had smashed through the concrete. He looked out at the plains and distant hills as the sunrise slowly crested over them. What had been previously been a battlefield less than a day before now looked so strangely peaceful.

The battle was over, and Jack MacGregor had escaped him yet again.

Saxon laughed, and lit himself another cigar. He had to admire the man.

“So, the game’s still on, eh, Jack old boy?”

He gave the cigar a puff, and blew the smoke into the air. It was the least he could do to dispel the lingering stench of sulfur.

Down in the courtyard, the men were still cleaning the blood and detritus off the floor. Taggart was directing them until Saxon waved him over. The Scotsman bellowed one last order before climbing over the rubble and joining Saxon on his perch.

“My lord?”

“How’s the head?”

Gingerly, Taggart touched the bandage wrapped around his skull. “It’ll mend, sir.”

Doubtless, it would add another scar to his collection.

“What about the bill?”

“Sixteen dead, almost twice as many wounded,” Taggart reported. “Major Singh was among them, sir.”

Saxon laughed, then sighed. “Well, you can thank Major Singh for that. You invest all your time and money into them, and they still squander it...What else, Taggart?”

“Of course, we’re down two tanks and a truck. We’ve probably been set back a few million pounds in damages. And Storrs has been on the line winging on



and on about how the High Commissioner wants those tanks for Sunday.”

“Well, you tell Storrs or the High Commissioner or anybody else that containing domestic threats is their responsibility. Remind them who dealt with the city’s Consumption crisis in case they’ve forgotten.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Get that mess all sorted out, then I’ll have the factory manager deal with the rest around here. Then, pack your bags. We’re heading back to Jaffa tonight.”

“We’re leaving, sir?”

“Of course, we are, Mister Taggart,” Saxon said with a smile. “Our quarry’s gone, isn’t he? And besides, I’m sick of Palestine.”

“So where are going next, sir?”

“When I know, you’ll know.”

“What about MacGregor?”

“Asking more questions than usual, aren’t we, Taggart?”

Taggart fumbled for an answer. “We’ve got a score to settle, me and him. That Indian too.”

Saxon grinned. “Don’t you worry. We’ll be seeing them both again very soon, I imagine. Now then, I’ll let you get back to work.”

“Sir.” Taggart instinctively saluted.

“Oh, and Taggart,” Saxon remembered, stopping him before he got too far away. “Send the good doctor to my office, if you please.”

Dutifully, Taggart nodded and took his leave.

Saxon dismounted the rubble, and returned to his office. It had been spared the worst of the damages (just a few blood stains and a broken door), but Jack had ruined some good whiskey, and there was nothing to drink. A few minutes later, Rothstein convened with him. Though Saxon had no refreshments to offer him, the Doctor was none too bothered. The little old man seemed eager to know what was on his mind due to the recent “developments”.

“Well, was any of our progress damaged in the attack?” Saxon asked him. He had not intended for his business with the Hospitallers to get so out of hand. However, he should have anticipated chaos wherever Mad Jack MacGregor was involved.

“Not seriously, no,” Rothstein admitted. “But I fear that this facility will be...unsuitable in its current condition as our project advances.”

“And you have some place else in mind?”

Rothstein gave a peevish little smile, which Saxon liked none at all. “I do. However, there will be some complications. Expenses.”

“I’ll handle them,” said Saxon. He had spent a good deal of the funds from his Turkish arms commission on Rothstein’s equipment already, but there was still a good deal left. “Now, what is this place?”

Rothstein told him.

Saxon chewed it over for a moment before speaking. “And it has everything that you need?”

“Yes, and more.”

“Why didn’t you ever go there before?”

“Because I did not have you, my lord, as a benefactor,” the Doctor replied. “Nor did I possess the Tablet.”

Saxon nodded. “Very well. Then only take what you absolutely need. We’re down a few trucks as it were, and space is limited.”

“So, we shall leave tonight?”

“We shall.”

Rothstein rose, and bowed.

“Magnificent, my lord.”

The old man hobbled out of the room, quite pleased with himself. Saxon was glad to see him go. Every interaction with the man made his skin crawl, but he could not deny that Rothstein was indeed his most valuable asset. Thankfully, the man preferred to be down in the darkness most of the day, toying away with his “experiments”.

Even so, Rothstein had brought forth an interesting proposal. If the man spoke truthfully, then it would accelerate the process greatly, and it was certainly taking too long already.

Saxon sat and mused on the idea awhile. Besides, he needed some time away from enemies and dotards. He needed time to think. Finally, when he had smoked his cigar all the way down to its stub, he snuffed it out in the ashtray.

It was time to get his things together.

After all, he was going to need a winter coat.

## Historical Reference & Author's Note

Perhaps the biggest misconception about the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict is that it is complicated.

The second is that it has been ongoing for thousands of years.

Such myths are perpetuated by many to this day, but the reality is that the foundations of this great catastrophe started within the time frame of this novel's setting.

Before the Great War, Palestine had been an ancient province, part of Greater Syria and under Ottoman control. During this time, Muslims, Christians, Jews, and many other religions were all peacefully cohabitating in the region.

After the War and the resulting dissolution of the Empire, the Allied Powers divided the former Ottoman territories among themselves. Turkey itself was spared from annexation, for reasons explored in the previous installment of "Alchemea".

Palestine was not so lucky, however.

Britain had overpromised during the War, offering large portions of the Middle East to their main ally, France. However, they had also offered to create a homeland for the countless Arab fighters who had warred against the Turks on their behalf. And finally, Britain had also promised to give the European Jewish

population a homeland as well, in exchange for their wartime support.

Needless to say, no one was going to come out of this deal completely happy, and the Holy Land was the most contested location on the map. Britain would act as mediator between all three groups; French, Arab, and Jew, and would succeed at alienating all of them.

Palestine was officially mandated on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1922, but formal British control was not fully assumed until September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1923. I set the date to September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1922 to coincide with events of this novel, for which I hope you will forgive me.

Though much of this story is obviously fiction, many facts have been included. For one thing, Sir Ronald Henry Amherst Storrs was indeed the first military, then civil, governor of Jerusalem. He is perhaps best known for being a close friend to T.E. Lawrence (“Lawrence of Arabia”), and was a pallbearer at his funeral.

Storrs’ tenure in office was marked by greatly appeasing British interests at the expense of everyone else. Famously, he started a chess club in the city to foster co-operation between settlers and locals, but which ultimately generated further competition between the two. His lack of cultural awareness did not end there, however. The scene where he insisted Ibrahim wear traditional costume was based on a real-life interaction, except that the line was spoken to Prince Faisal, leader of the Arab Rebellion. To Storrs’

admittedly minor credit however, much of the native limestone in Jerusalem's architecture was deliberately preserved, and although he was not the most tactful leader, he is not solely responsible for the mishandling of the situation.

Storrs had essentially been thrown into a quagmire. Beyond the tense relationship between its leaders, Palestine was ablaze with unrest while also going through the immense undertaking of modernizing its entire infrastructure. The protests depicted in this novel were inspired by the 1920 Nebi Musa Riots and the Palestine Riots of 1929. Although there was no outbreak of Tuberculosis in Jerusalem, Storrs did fear that an outbreak of disease would occur, given how increasingly crowded the city was becoming. It was an uncertain time, which only worsened in subsequent years.

However, there is more to the story of Palestine and the Arab World than just the previous century.

Enter the Islamic Golden Age.

From the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Middle East was the greatest center of learning in the world. This was the time of Jabir ibn Hayyan, or Geber, as he was known in the West, an 8<sup>th</sup> century Arab mystic and scholar, who is widely considered to be the father of modern chemistry. His contributions to Alchemy are too numerous to list, but one of the most important was his synthesis of compounds that did not occur in nature, such as the gold-dissolving Aqua Regia. Some

also credit him with the invention of the alembic retort.

For the purposes of this story, I have framed him as a singular historical figure, yet many historians dispute whether or not he ever existed. Given that three thousand texts are attributed to his academic corpus, it seems unlikely that one person could have written all of them. Scholars posit instead that “Jabir” was probably an honorific pen name used by a variety of authors throughout the centuries.

His laboratory in the middle of the Syrian Desert is purely my own invention, as is the Mountain of the Crescent Moon. The symbol of white eagle breathing fire is also a creation of mine, but one based in actual Alchemical practices. Alchemists would frequently use the coded language of artwork to pass knowledge onto each other. To the layman’s eye, these were simply bizarre, unseemly images, but to an Alchemist, it held the secrets of formulas and experimentations. Jabir was highly interested in creating the Philosopher’s Stone, hoping that he could combine acids and other substances together in order to create one.

As for the connection between the Philosopher’s Stone and the Holy Grail, the comparison has been made before. Wolfram von Eschenbach, a German poet of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, interpreted the Grail as a magical gemstone. Modern writers frequently equate the two as well, although there are disagreeing voices about these two legendary objects

being the same. Whatever the case may be, the powers of rejuvenation that each possess are undeniable.

It should be known however, that obtaining the Holy Grail was never an objective of the Crusades. Although many holy relics did come into Christian hands, the goal of the Latin conquerors was first and foremost, capturing the Holy Land. Christian orders such as the Hospitallers were founded to maintain governance of the region after the First Crusade, and by the Third, had become major powers in the region. Popular imagination would have us believe that these were genocidal conquests motivated by religious fervor alone, and not a series of complex and interrelated socio-political events. It is easier for the average person to imagine bloody thirsty zealots slaughtering Muslims in search of a magical cup than a centuries long dispute over say, trading access.

That has not stopped certain groups from mythologizing these events to suit those very ends, however. Much like Cassar, many religious radicals, whether Muslim or Christian, have still adopted the perceived views of these orders as justification for continued violence across the Muslim World. By contrast, many well-meaning people believe its current unrest to be a direct continuation of the numerous Crusades, and evoke it in their political critiques. Both are incorrect.

The current situation in Palestine is one of colonialism, plain and simple. Britain facilitated the



displacement of a native population, and created a new settler state called Israel. That legacy continues to this day, with the major world powers supporting Israel and the expansion of its borders, all at the expense of the indigenous Palestinians.

As I write to you now from Nablus, the Israeli Army has been besieging the city for days on end. Each night, the firebombs and the machine guns sound in the distance over city-wide chants of anger. The Palestinians continue to resist against their oppressors, because for them, there is no choice. Many claim that both sides must be understood, but the simple fact is that Israel does not experience the level of death and devastation that Palestine suffers on a daily basis.

If anything is to change, then the world must recognize who here is at fault, or else many more people will continue to die.

Yet, if Jabir and his fellow Alchemists are to be believed, the act of transformation is inevitable.

From the River to the Sea...

**Zozimos,**

November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2022