

ALCHEMEA
BOOK IV
A TALE OF BLOOD & FIRE



ZOZIMOS

Special Thanks to all my friends, my family, my readers.
For fueling my wild ideas.
For helping me get to the finish line.

This is the final tale of “Alchemea”,
But it is not the end.

This tale is dedicated to
The Unloved.
The Unknown.
The Unhoused.
The Unspoken.
The Untouchable.

One day, you no longer will be.

“When all efforts to restore peace prove useless,
And no words avail,
Lawful is the flash of steel,
It is right to draw the sword.”

- Guru Gobind Singh

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Prologue

326 B.C.

Indus River Valley

Dawn's red glow arose in a cloudless summer sky. Its crimson light shined down upon the Yogi through the treetops, to where he sat beside a steaming pool atop a solitary hill. A gentle breeze played with his thick, white beard, yet he otherwise made no motion and his eyes were closed.

Even the thunder in the distance did not disturb him.

It was not the thunder of the heavens, but of men. Thousands of them marched through the forest, sunlight gleaming on their helmets, shields, and breastplates of polished bronze. There were horses by the hundreds, livestock in the baggage trains, and great trumpeting elephants who shook the earth with every stride. All were clamoring until they were commanded to halt before the foot of the hill.

The Emperor's four best generals rode out from the column then, and ascended the slope to where the Yogi sat. Men would normally lower their eyes whenever the generals approached, but the Yogi did not open his at all. They stayed closed even as the men came within a spear's reach of him. The generals were unaccustomed to such insubordination, yet said nothing of it, for the Emperor's mission superseded their dissatisfaction.

"Hail," spoke the general on the cremello horse, as he was the oldest and most senior of the four. "Our Emperor has

heard tale of your great and many powers, O wise mystic. He would offer you these gifts as a token of his friendship.”

His second in command, a thin general on a black bay, undid a purse around his saddle. The sack was filled with gems and jewels, gold and silver, spices and baubles of every sort, and yet the Yogi’s eyes remained shut. The general held them out for a long and awkward moment before he sighed and threw them at the Yogi’s feet. The purse landed heavily, but as always, the Yogi was not swayed.

“Do you reject the Emperor’s friendship so brazenly?” Growled the third general. He was the youngest of the four and the most hot-tempered. He shifted in the saddle of his fleabitten horse. “I ought to box you in the ears for your insolence, old man!”

“Why box him in the ears, my friend?” The fourth general laughed from atop his blood bay. He was the tallest and largest of them all, and held out a sword in his meaty hand. “Maybe I should just cut them off.”

“Enough,” the old general interjected. “Perhaps our friend needs time to consider. We will grant him that at least. We will return this eve to see if he has changed his mind.”

So, the four generals rode away, leaving their bag of treasures at the Yogi’s feet.

They returned that evening, this time afoot. The purse had not moved at all and neither had the Yogi.

The old general shook his head, and drew his sword this time. The others did as well.

“So you have chosen death,” he sighed, and the four men raised their weapons to strike the Yogi down. As always, the Yogi made no move to resist, nor did he cry out in fear.

“Our Emperor has ordered us to slay you if you did not accept,” the old general explained before the final blow. “And so, we must return to him with your head.”

Finally, the Yogi did speak.

“If you slay me, then your Emperor will never know any of my secrets.”

“Who says you have any, old fool?” The young general sneered.

“Go and tell your Emperor that if he wishes to learn my secrets, he must come to me himself,” the Yogi answered. “And if he wishes to slay me also, he should do so by his own hand.”

The other generals protested, but again, the oldest quieted them and led them away to where their armies had camped.

Finally, at the last gasp of twilight, a lone figure climbed the hilltop.

He was beautifully adorned from head to toe in shimmering bronze. His sword hilt was carved of ivory, and the blade was sheathed in blackwood. A scarlet cloak billowed from his shoulders. He was not tall himself, but walked with the greatest of command. He stopped before the wrinkled, brown, old mystic in contempt, and removed his plumed and lofty helm.

The Emperor was a handsome man, not yet thirty, with reddish blond hair and deep blue eyes. Yet his handsomeness was soured by the frown upon his face.

“My generals have told me that you refused my gifts and demanded my presence,” he said.

“Only you can learn things for yourself,” the Yogi replied. “No one can learn them for you.”

“So, tell me your secrets then,” he said. “Tell me how a man may achieve immortal life.”

“A man must die.”

The Emperor threw back his head with laughter.

“He must die!? What sort of answer is this? The villagers must have lied. You are no wise man. You are a charlatan and a senile old fool.”

“Better an old fool than a young one. An old fool has at least known enough to live so long.”

The Emperor flared. He drew his sword with its ivory grip, and held the point out at the Yogi’s throat.

“How dare you speak to me like this? Do you know who I am? I have won countless victories. I have brought kings and generals to their knees. I have conquered the world. What have you ever done, old man?”

“Victories and conquests mean nothing if you cannot hold them,” the Yogi answered. “And you cannot hold them if you are dead.”

“Which is why I came to you for immortality.”

“I have told you already,” the Yogi said. “No man may conquer death, nor should he, for he would deny himself the greatest change of all by doing so. If you slay me, then you shall be giving me this gift of change.”

The Emperor growled, but put his sword away.

“I should slay you anyway for speaking such nonsense,” he said, and turned his back on the old mystic.

The Yogi only smiled.

“Then I shall achieve what you so desperately are seeking. You may slay me if you wish, and seek the answers from another, or...”

The Emperor turned back.

“Or?”

At last, the Yogi opened his eyes.

“Or you can go.”

The Emperor stood there in confusion for a time. He had traveled across the world, and had conquered every step of it along the way. He had led his armies in triumph over countless miles. They had followed him to the very edges of the earth, believing that some great boon waited for them at the end of it, a promise of eternity.

“What will I tell my men?” He asked the mystic. “They will need an answer.”

“If you are so mighty of an emperor as you say,” the Yogi answered. “You can tell them all whatever you want.”

So, the Emperor donned his helm again, collected his bag of treasures, and climbed back down the hillside as the last light of day faded into night.

The next morning, his army marched away to fight another battle somewhere else.

Four years later, the Emperor died. His generals divided his land and riches among themselves, then fought each other for years thereafter over the other’s pieces. Eventually, their lands and titles disappeared as new ones arose in their place. All that would remain of their great reigns were stones and faded writings and statues that would one day turn to dust. And all the while, the Yogi did not move.

I

Fare Forth, Good Men

Wednesday, April 4th, 1923

Khyber Pass, Afghan-Indian Border

Heat haze arose from the dusty valley. A pair of riders waited on a hillcrest overlooking the pass below. These men were tall and strong, and their skin was darkened by the sun. They rode *Qatgani* horses like the Afghans, and covered their faces in the turbans and cloaks of the Afghans too, but they were strangers in this land and their weaponry was evidence of this. Though both men slung a long *jezail* across their backs, they wore Webley pistols at their hips.

More distinctive though, were the swords upon their belts. Where the Afghans carried the curved *pulwar* or straight-backed Khyber knife, these men wore different sorts of blades. The first was curved like a *pulwar*, but more sharply so, and guarded with a knuckle-bow. The second was long, straight, and basket-hilted. Their outerwear might have been stained with dirt and dust and blood, but these weapons glinted in the sunshine.

These men had sailed from Rumania at the dawning of the year, and crossed the Black Sea during its fearsome winter storms. More than once their vessel had nearly capsized, but that was only the beginning of their journey. When they had landed in Batumi on the shores of Georgia, they found red flags flying in place of the white. Suspicious eyes were everywhere as well, especially wherever two strange men from foreign lands were concerned. The secret police had come for them at a tavern in the night. A gunfight ensued,

and the two men fled into the frosty mountains, leaving several bodies behind them in the snow. Rebels found and sheltered them in their hideaways. In exchange for their lives, the men fought with these guerillas for a month, until the mountain paths were safe enough to travel. They skirmished with Red soldiers, sniping them from a distance, and stealing away back into the summits again. The rebels praised the men for their skill as warriors, and were sad to see them go, but kept true to their word and secured their passage onwards. There was an American pilot deep within those mountains who drank as much as he sought adventure, and who would not turn down a chance to spirit a pair of vagabonds away in exchange for coin. So, he flew them off to Persia, to the land of *shabs*. No longer were there church steeples in the villages, but towering minarets. The men avoided major cities when they traveled, and pretended to be Afghans whenever asked. They traded jewelry and loot from the soldiers they had killed in return for weapons, horses, and provisions. Once outfitted, they rode off into Afghanistan alone. It was fifty days across the rocky landscape, half of which were marked by clashes with different warring tribes and bandit armies. Sometimes, they joined forces with one tribe to fight another. Sometimes, they joined forces with the other to fight against their former friends. Sometimes, both tribes joined together to chase them from their lands. In the end however, the two men had fought for every inch of ground to arrive at where they now stood at full attention, waiting.

For after nine long years of traveling this earth and fighting in its many battles, nothing would stop these two from reaching their final destination.

A train whistle echoed from the valley below.

From around the bend came a great black beast, belching smoke as it roared down the serpentine tracks that wound throughout the tall red hills.

The riders rode down after it.

They discarded their dirty clothes and rifles behind a boulder close by, but kept their swords and pistols hidden beneath their long wool cloaks before continuing on towards the station.

It was hardly much of a station at all really, only a wooden outpost for the garrison and a ramshackle café stand next door, whose only seating was in the sand beneath umbrellas pocked by bulletholes. There was no platform either, only a few inches of trench dug into the sand to lower the tracks. The train itself had stopped some distance back from the station, as a herdsman was leading his caravan of Bactrians across the tracks ahead.

The passengers had swarmed around the train. The British soldiers onboard had to shout for some semblance of order as all of them tried to climb inside at once. There were Pashtun tribesmen, Waziri traders, Balochi families leading all their animals and carrying all their livelihoods, and hundreds of others speaking English, Dari, Kashmiri, and Hindustani.

The two men slipped into the throng and then onboard the train without much notice.

They shuffled their way towards the back, pressing themselves through the cramped and stuffy aisles. A few times they poked someone accidentally with their sword hilts, and apologized profusely in Hindustani, as it was the most common language of the region. Most people understood regardless, though that did little to improve their sore moods or ribcages.

Eventually, the men did find a seat in the last passenger car before the freight. Exhausted, they fell down into it, sighed, and shut their eyes.

When they opened them again, the train was wobbling along. The one nearest the window jerked down its metal blinds and glanced outside.

The dusty red mounds of Afghanistan had given way to the rolling green foothills of the Indian frontier. Shining streams ran down those hills to where they would eventually feed into the mighty Indus, the greatest stream of all from whence all life in this vast country flowed.

He was admiring the wild, untamed land until his friend nudged his side.

The door at the end of the car had just scraped open. The train rattled, and four British soldiers struggled to hold onto something as they came through. The officer at their head, a young mustachioed lieutenant, made sure they were secured before proceeding down the car.

“Can’t bloody breathe in here,” one of the rankers behind him said, and tugged at his sweat-stained khaki color.

“Can’t bloody sit in here,” laughed the man behind him.

“We’ll just stand at the back then,” the officer ordered them, and muscled his way towards the rear of the car, apologizing to anyone he brushed with the sword and pistol on his hips.

When he reached the rear however, the train shook once again, and he nearly fell headlong into the two men seated there. The one in the aisle seat caught him instinctively in the middle of his nasty fall, and helped him find his balance again. The one in the window seat handed the officer back his hat, which had fallen in the scuffle too.

“Thank you,” the lieutenant told them both as he wiped his sweat-soaked brow, and donned the cap again.

“Aye, think nothing of it,” the man in the aisle seat replied instinctively.

Then, everybody froze.

The lieutenant stared at the man in deep confusion for a moment, before his gaze gradually shifted downwards.

The man in the aisle seat followed it down to where his cloak had been accidentally uncovered, and his Highland broadsword was sticking out from underneath.

The lieutenant’s stare twisted into a look of recognition.

Jack MacGregor groaned.

“Aw fuck.”

He threw his cloak and turban off his head and into the lieutenant’s face. He then followed it with a double-footed kick.

The lieutenant flew back onto the passengers across from him, clearing space for Jack to jump onto his feet, and bolt through the door and into the nearest freight car.

The officer recovered for a moment, only for Sanwar to throw his cloak at him and from the window seat, deliver him a second kick. The man had no breath left to shout for the other soldiers to follow them, but they needed no such command.

Sanwar was through the door after Jack, and the soldiers were after them.

They ran through the baggage car, throwing any luggage they could off the racks to slow their pursuers. Heavy packages and parcels clattered on the floor, some of their contents spilling out or shattering on impact. The lead soldier, an old sergeant, tripped over the obstacles, and landed hard on top of an already fragile package, shattering it

further. His fellows, both younger men, grabbed hold of the baggage racks on either side of the car, and leapt straight over their superior without missing a beat. When they cleared him and the other debris, they unslung their rifles and carried on the chase.

Jack and Sanwar were through the door into the supply car then, continuing their strategy of impediment by throwing all of the crates in there to floor as well. Boxes of clothing, fruit, and ammunition splintered and spilled all over the narrow walkway. However, the train rattled as Jack and Sanwar were halfway through, and threw them down to join their mess.

This blunder saved their lives.

One of the soldiers stepped through the door at that very moment, and fired his rifle wildly inside. The bullet bounced about the car, then punched through the wall at about head height.

The soldier paid for his error when a loose crate of oranges fell on top of him, and broke against his head.

Man and fruit went down together, allowing Jack and Sanwar to take off running once again.

The animal car was next in line. Jack and Sanwar swung open the door, and muscled their way through a tight corridor of livestock. Odorous flea-covered bodies were pressed into pens on either side. Beasts brayed and grunted at their presence, so they went carefully to avoid being kicked or rammed by any member of the menagerie. There were horses, cows, goats, sheep, Bactrians, and oxen all mixing about inside, and none of them were taking kindly to the others. A stallion reared, and nearly clobbered Sanwar with his hooves, which in turn knocked Jack dangerously close to a pen of chomping goats. After that, they abandoned

caution and made due haste towards the door, shoving any animals aside as strongly as they could.

The two soldiers were not far behind. The first one had recovered from his blow, despite some blood dripping down beneath his pith helmet.

Jack uncaged a chicken at them, and the bird flew wildly into the leading man's face. The second man pushed him aside to aim a shot, but was subsequently bitten on the forearm by a frightened camel.

Sanwar busted open the door at far end, and pushed Jack through.

Fresh, streaming air assailed them as they burst out onto the observation deck of the caboose. They caught themselves against the guard rail, which wobbled beneath their combined weight and nearly gave way. The train was thundering at a hellish pace on down the track, and there was no other way to go from here, save one.

Sanwar spied a ladder to one side of the car, and climbed it. Jack was close behind.

From atop the train, they had a clearer picture of their surroundings. As the great steel serpent rattled on, it snaked from out of rocky, grassy hills into the shadow of a tall pine forest. A bridge yawned across a rapid stream some miles up ahead, right before the tracks twined around a bend.

Fierce winds up here forced them to squint, and slowed their flight from a spring down into a walk. They hopped the gap between each car as they made their way uncertainly towards the locomotive. So far, their plan was to put as much distance between themselves and the soldiers, yet after that, neither Jack nor Sanwar had the faintest idea of how to get off of this train.

They had made it a few cars down the line when a gunshot blew sparks beside their feet. At once, they spun around to face it, and dropped flat against the hot steel roof.

At the caboose, the young lieutenant's head poked out from just above the ladder. He had his gun hand steadied against the train itself, having tenaciously continued the chase alone. He fired off a second shot with his pistol, which pinged dangerously close to Sanwar's head.

Jack responded by whipping out his own pistol and firing back at him.

His shot cost the officer his cap, and sent him clambering back down the ladder for cover.

"Jack!" Sanwar admonished above the wind.

"Just keeping his head down," Jack shouted back with a shrug. Still, he aimed the next shot a little higher as a courtesy when the lieutenant reappeared to give fire once again. The second achieved the same effect.

"Jack!"

"What!? I'm not aiming for him anymore!"

"Not that! That!"

Jack turned round, and saw what he meant.

More soldiers were pouring out of the cars ahead, and climbing ladders along the outside of the train. Three of them were already at the top and rushing Jack and Sanwar with long and shining fixed bayonets.

Jack leapt to his feet, drew *Lann Dhearg*, and rushed to meet them.

Sanwar sighed, and rose as well, but held his ground for enemies were descending from both sides.

The lieutenant, having seen the reinforcements, had climbed the ladder. Saber drawn, he advanced on Sanwar

with his three own men behind him. Once in distance, he then opened the melee with a thrust.

Sanwar slashed the sword aside, but had no opportunity to riposte, as one of the rankers came in with a thrust of his own. Sanwar parried his bayonet, then a second, then a third. Soon, he was deflecting one thrust after another as each man tried to exploit whatever opening his fellows had exposed. This meant that Sanwar was doing four times the work as well, and quickly began to feel *Cadarama* growing heavy in his grip.

Behind him, he could sense Jack fighting the same battle, although he could hear more men climbing the train and joining the fray. He could see more coming up the ladder from the caboose as well, and knew that the fight was all but lost.

The lieutenant must have caught the recognition in his eye, for he called all the men to halt. The soldiers ceased the attack, and held their distance as their young officer turned his sword point on Sanwar.

“Surrender and you’ll be under arrest,” he shouted between heavy breaths. “Continue fighting and my lads will have no choice but to kill you.”

“On what charges do you arrest us?” Sanwar demanded.

“Well in addition to assaulting an officer of his Britannic Majesty’s Army and resisting arrest, you are wanted for acts of terrorism and treason carried out in the Holy City of Jerusalem. That, and for deserting your posts in times of war. You are wanted as criminals, deserters, terrorists, traitors, and dangers to the State. Now if you please, let’s do this the civil way, shall we!?”

Sanwar held his ground.

Jack, however, hesitated only a moment before sheathing his sword.

“Aye, you better put your sword away, Sanwar, and your hands in the air.”

“Have you gone completely mad?”

“Aye, I have,” Jack grinned. “Now please do it!”

He raised his own hands in the air for added effect.

“Do it. Now. Please!”

Sanwar realized what he meant, and hastily did so, then turned so that he and Jack were both facing towards the locomotive.

The lieutenant put away his sword, and ordered for his men to advance.

“Now jump!” Jack shouted.

The soldiers were closing in with handcuffs right as they leapt into the air. Unlike Jack and Sanwar, they had failed to see the low hanging pine boughs passing over the train just then.

Jack and Sanwar’s hands found purchase on the limbs while their faces found a mouthful of needles.

Their dangling bodies then bowled the lieutenant and his soldiers over like a set of ninepins, and by the time that all of them had recovered, Jack and Sanwar were far behind the caboose.

A few men took retaliatory shots at their hanging targets, but as the train sped farther and farther away, those shots became more and more hopeless.

Finally, the train passed around a bend, and disappeared from view.

Jack and Sanwar were left there, hanging.

“Now you have really done it,” Sanwar fussed.

“Got us out of it, you mean,” Jack laughed.

“Got us into it,” Sanwar corrected. “Now if you please, could we wander closer to the trunk so that we might descend?”

“Aye, I’m moving,” Jack grumbled.

Together the two of them shimmied down the branch.

They were halfway to the trunk when they heard a crack.

“Please, no,” said Sanwar.

“Aw fuck,” said Jack.

The tree branch snapped.

The two went screaming down into the stream below.

II

More Yet Lies Ahead

Wednesday, April 4th, 1923
Northwest Frontier, British India

“Well, we have arrived in India with our typical pomp and circumstance,” Sanwar said, once he had fully wrung his mane of fine dark hair. A bucket’s worth had dripped out onto the shore.

He had done his best to remove the sand as well, but every way he turned on the bank, there were always more grains sticking to him. He settled for just rising to his feet, and just brushing out what he could before draining out his *dastaar* as well, and tying it back on again.

“That’s what I call making a dramatic entrance!” Jack laughed. His friend was completely waterlogged, and yet he was laying in the tide as if he were at the beach on some idle Sunday. What was worse, he had started making sand-angels.

“And with your typical Scottish understatement as well,” Sanwar added. “Those soldiers recognized us, Jack. The Crown must have an outstanding warrant for our arrest all across the Empire for us to be accosted here.”

“Aye, no doubt Saxon’s doing,” he agreed, and jumped to his feet. “So, no sense dilly-dallying then. Suppose we’ve got a long way to go. Better get moving before those men come back to catch us.”

Sanwar sighed.

They climbed the rocky upper bank towards a pine forest on the slopes of some high mountaintop. The current had dumped them off at a ford beneath its snowy peak. It would

shallow out for a few miles before it went downhill once more, and regained its ferocity. They thus had only to follow the stream, for eventually, it would flow into the Indus, and from there, finding their way to Amritsar was easy enough.

A footpath wound through the wood, and followed the contours of the stream. Likely, it was frequented by local goatherds, as it was well worn by fleets of tiny hoofprints and kept the stream within close sight.

As Jack and Sanwar traversed the path, the midday sun began to warm their clothes and thus, their spirits too. Their stomachs grumbled and their legs ached, but at least they were now outside of danger and one step closer towards their final destination.

“So, what’s Dhamija like?” Jack asked as they trod along the dirt road. “You know, all these years I’ve known you, and you haven’t talked much about it.”

“Yes, well,” Sanwar said, smiling wanly. “It is difficult to speak of home. Speaking of it makes one think of it, and thinking of it for too long makes one forget their current circumstances. But seeing as we are near, perhaps I may indulge us both a bit.”

“Indulge, indulge!”

“Our family keeps a big house close to the river,” he began. “There’s a garden out in the yard filled with rosewoods and fruit trees. When we were old enough, my parents let me and my siblings pick them with the servants. Some of the sweetest mangoes that you have ever tasted grow on them. And the land...green fields as far as the eye can see. At sunrise, it is something to behold. You will see it.”

“What about your family?”

“I have three siblings. Ganeev is the oldest, four years my senior. She was always acting like a second mother, always

telling me and Samreet what to do, how to behave, how to mind our manners in front of the adults. Samreet is four years my junior, and listened much less. She was always getting us into trouble, taking the horses out when we should not, and riding off to wherever she pleased. Father was never as strict on her as he was with me, though. She could come home at dark covered in mud and brambles, and receive a scolding, but if I ever did the same, I was given a caning.”

“Aye,” Jack said knowingly.

“Yes,” Sanwar replied. “Amar Singh Dhamija was a great man, and knew what was best for us. Our people loved him, for he was strong and wise, and had made the village prosperous.”

Sanwar grew silent for a while after that.

Yet, when it had become too long to bear, Jack asked him:

“You had only mentioned two of your siblings. What about the third?”

“Ah yes, little Jogandar,” Sanwar smiled once more. “He was eight years younger, and very much unexpected. My mother did not intend to birth another child, and yet, he came to us. When she saw that she had another son, she adored him to no end. He was always the baby, but that never came between us. I was happy just to have a brother once Samreet reached an age that required her to become a proper lady. Once Jogandar was old enough, he and I would explore the woods together with my best friend, pretending that we three were on some grand adventure. I would read to him about Alchemy, and he would listen for hours without ever saying a word. When he was very little, I would take him to fly kites. I used to love watch them ride beneath the sun, flowing in the breeze. But I have not seen Jogandar since he

was a boy of sixteen. He would be a man now. I wonder if he is as tall as I am. When last I heard, he had joined the Army.”

“Do you know if he is still alive?”

“No.”

Things grew silent again, but only for a moment.

Suddenly in the quietude, Jack stopped.

Sanwar paused in confusion as his gaze shifted slowly upwards.

“Ware cavalry.”

Sanwar wheeled his head left to where Jack was looking.

High on the slopes above them was a single rider. He wore the *lungee* turban of the Pashtun tribesmen and a long *jezail* across his back. Seeing that his perch had been spotted, he unslung and aimed the weapon in what looked like a single motion.

Jack and Sanwar dove for the trees.

The bullet slapped into a nearby trunk, followed by the distant rifle crack. A second later, the rider whistled to spur his horse towards them. He had not gone more than a few dozen yards when a whole host of men came riding over the crest to join his charge.

Jack and Sanwar popped out from behind the cover of the trees to see this cavalcade of several dozen men come roaring down towards them.

So, they ran.

Stones and dirt slid out from beneath them as they went, scrambling down the slope back towards the stream bank. To travel down the footpath was to give the riders a clear and easy line of pursuit. Still, the Pashtun were native horsemen, and even riding downhill through dense woods at so steep an angle hindered them little.

Jack and Sanwar reached the riverbank where the ground finally leveled off. They had only run a short distance before they heard the clomp of hoofbeats behind them. The fastest riders had already reached the bank, and were charging straight towards them. The Pashtun brandished weapons of all sorts; swords, axes, lances, and bows.

One even shot an arrow at them as he galloped.

Jack and Sanwar answered by drawing their pistols and shooting back.

There were twelve rounds between Jack and Sanwar's revolvers, and they went quickly into the first few riders. Several fell dead. Others spurred away wounded. Yet the charge was never slowed, so Jack and Sanwar drew their blades to meet the colliding charge.

The leading rider drove at Jack with lance point lowered.

Jack pressed his back into a tree in anticipation.

Then, when the lance closed in, he leapt aside.

The point lodged deep into the bark and stuck fast, forcing the rider to abandon the weapon. It quivered in the tree for a moment before coming loose and falling to the ground.

Jack then snatched it into hand, and thrust it into the next man who came at him. It gored the rider, and hoisted him straight from the saddle. For an instant, Jack lifted him in the air, but then released his grip, letting the man fall away with the long shaft sticking from his gullet.

Sanwar had worries of his own, however, for another rider had charged him with a deadly Khyber knife. The weapon was a short, straight-backed sword with a single wicked edge, and was uniquely carried by the Afghans.

The man swung his down at Sanwar as he went past. Sanwar blocked the blow with a high guard, then spun around as the man went by, and grabbed him with his free

hand. The rider was wrenched from the saddle by his belt. The force of his momentum tossed him into the stream, and took Sanwar with him. The two splashed into the tide together, and floundered for their footing.

When both men got to their feet, they came back swinging. *Cadarama* met the Khyber knife with a heavy swing, and sparked against it. The Pashtun held his grip, and returned with a cruel slash of his own in response. Whereas the *tulwar* favored heavy, drawing cuts, the Khyber knife attacked in long slashes and slices.

One such slash landed on Sanwar's *dastaar*, tearing a deep gash into the fabric. However, the covering did its job, and the weapon touched no flesh.

Sanwar drove the Pashtun back with several strikes to give himself space, but the man parried each. However, he struggled to press the attack as the waist-deep water removed all the subtleties of footwork.

Yet, his attack had succeeded in keeping Sanwar occupied until his rescuers arrived.

Unable to reach his fellow from the bank, a second man had ridden down into the stream to aid him. He came at Sanwar with a *pulwar*, a long, curved sword much like his own.

The newcomer raised it high to strike him wrathfully, but Sanwar spun about, raised arms, and screamed with wild abandon.

This unexpected outburst panicked the horse, which in turn, tossed free the rider. The second man went sliding from his stirrups, and splashing into the shallows.

The first saw this, and rushed at Sanwar to slay him.

However, Sanwar had spun back around to thrust his sword tip into his opponent's throat. The man gurgled, and fell back into red water.

Sanwar waded over to where the second rider was floundering, and snatched him by the hair. At first, he made to strike the man, until he saw that he was young, perhaps not even twenty. Then, he saw too, that Jack was fighting alone with his back against the tree and the long lance back in his hands while a dozen men surrounded him. The Pashtun poked at him with sword or lance, but were always repulsed by Jack's spirited defense, for the huge Scotsman thrust out at them like a wild-eyed and vicious animal.

"Enough!" Sanwar bellowed in Arabic once he had found his feet on dry ground at last. He had dragged his captive with him, leaving deep channels in the sand. The riders turned to face Sanwar, so he held his sword to the young man's throat. "Release my companion or yours will perish! We wish no quarrel with you!"

Arabic was not the Pashtun's native language, though it was something of lingua franca for many Muslims, and his message was understood regardless.

All hostilities then ceased. The Pashtun lowered their weapons. Jack kept his lance braced against the tree trunk, though he made no motion to strike out while his enemies' backs were turned. More men came charging down the slope, but slowed to a halt once they saw that their fellows had ended the attack.

One of their number came forth, an older man in a black *lungie* and cloak. The young man called out to him as he approached, but his senior silenced him with a glance. When he was close enough, the old man dismounted and approached.

“My name is Ghazan,” he addressed Sanwar in perfect Arabic. “And these are my clansman. The one you have there is Angar. My son. Harm him, and I shall leave your bodies headless on these slopes.”

“I have no wish to harm him,” Sanwar replied. “Nor had we any wish to fight you before you attacked us. Even so, if you wish to continue, my fellow and I will slay many more of your clansmen before we fall, your son the chief among them.”

The youth began to utter a prayer. Sanwar tightened his grip.

The old man sighed. Deep lines of age were weathered on his ruddy face. They furrowed with resignation as he nodded in concession.

“We shall diminish as you ask,” he said. “Then if you please, give me back my son.”

Ghazan gave his men the order to stand down.

So, Sanwar let Angar go.

The young man rushed immediately to his father, and the two embraced. The other riders then let Jack be so that they could come over to dismount and embrace the boy themselves. Once everyone was laughing and smiling again, Ghazan turned back to Sanwar.

“You fight well and are a man of honor,” he said. “With the dead men, we have spare horses now. Will you come and join us at our camp tonight?”

A fire was waiting for them upon return, as was the smoky scent of crackling meat. Tender goat roasted over the flame, tended on a spit by two gray-bearded elders of the clan. The Pashtun had camped in a dell partway up the mountain, not far from where they had first spied Jack and Sanwar on the

road. Even so, the steep hill had meant that they arrived at dark, right when the food was almost ready.

Funeral rites were first in order, naturally. One of the oldest men sang the proper section from the *Qur'an*, then the others set about digging. Jack and Sanwar lent their hands first, and dug one of the graves themselves. Once the bodies were covered with earth, the clan then covered over the graves with cairns of stone. Sanwar said a prayer of his own, and wished their souls peace in their new lives. To the Sikh, it was antithetical to the Guru's teachings to worship shrines or icons of the dead. His people would have cremated these men and spread their ashes to the wind, but to the Muslim, anything other than a burial was sacrilege, and Sanwar knew to honor that.

When the funeral was complete, the meal began. Jack and Sanwar received the choicest cuts of the beast first, the tongue and organs. They thanked their hosts in the piecemeal Pashtun they had learned from their travels across Afghanistan, and ate gratefully. Sanwar no longer hesitated at the consumption of meat. He had grown accustomed to sitting by the fire of many a tribal leader at this point, and eating flesh as a courtesy to his host, and Ghazan's fire was no exception. It was all the food they had besides, and he would have starved without it.

Afterwards, the most of the men retired. They broke off into groups to read, tell stories, or sharpen their weapons. Some men played games of chess by drawing boards in the dirt with sticks and using black and white pebbles for the pieces. Only Ghazan and his closest warriors remained at the fire to speak with their guests.

The old man was the most fluent in Arabic, but some of the others spoke it well, and added questions of their own

upon occasion. Sanwar did most of the speaking from his and Jack's end, though Jack's Arabic was proficient enough by now for nothing to be lost to him. He explained only that they were wanted men who were wrongfully accused, and that they meant simply to return home to Punjab. He mentioned their time in the War, and that once he and Jack were soldiers of the Crown.

"This, I understand," said Ghazan after some reflection. "We too, have been reduced to banditry. When the lines were drawn upon the map by the King and his courtiers, my lands were thus divided. Disputes broke out between myself and other clans, who saw my hold on them as weak and this as a perfect chance to expand their riches. My lands were stolen from me, as were our wives and women. Only my most loyal warriors remain to me, and we are forced to wander these hills in search of plunder. That goat you ate, we stole from local herdsmen. That is the living we have been forced to make in these sad times. We had heard of a bounty for your capture. A thousand pounds sterling that could have saved us from our lot."

Jack whistled.

"That money would have re-armed me and found me more men to retake my home," Ghazan continued. "But even without that knowledge, we still would have attacked you, for you were two rare travelers upon the road. We would have killed you even for the clothes upon your back."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't," said Jack after an uncomfortable pause.

That brought some quiet laughter from the counsel.

"We thank you for your kindness and your mercy," Sanwar said more somberly. "And for your hospitality. Again, we apologize for having slain your trusted warriors."

“It was self-defense,” Ghazan dismissed again for the umpteenth time. “Those men would have wanted to die fighting rather than starving as common beggars and thieves. And we have made peace. You are enemies of the British, as are we. Yes, I would have claimed the bounty, but I am sure that I have a bounty of my own. So, that would make allies of us, no?”

“I suppose that it would,” Sanwar ventured.

“If you did not have promises of your own, I would ask you to join us,” said Ghazan. “But, if I release you, then you will surely be attacked upon the road a second time, for these lands are dangerous for the idle traveler. That I could not bear upon my conscience. So, that leaves me with but one option. My men will escort you as far as Amritsar.”

“You are most generous-” Sanwar began.

“Good, then it is done! Now away to bed, everyone!” Ghazan clapped his hands, and said no more about it.

A pair of bedrolls was promptly found for Jack and Sanwar, and space was cleared beside the fire. That night, they slept beneath the shadow of the pines and a shroud of gleaming starlight.

Tomorrow, their journey would resume.

III

Tire Not of Trials

Ghazan's train numbered near to fifty, split into four separate "packs" as he called them. Each contained about a dozen men led by one of Ghazan's closest chieftains, too small a number to be worth much attention and too large a number to be worth a fight. In the case of a fight however, one pack was never too far away from another, and could come to its aid if needed. Several times did other would-be brigands show themselves, only to scamper off when twelve more warriors appeared.

The Pashtun traveled in this way to screen their advance, and also to cover more ground. One group traveled out in front of the rest to keep eyes on the road while the others foraged for food and plunder on their own.

Jack and Sanwar rode with Ghazan's pack, the centermost, which traveled closest to the scouting riders. His pack was also the smokiest. The men in his retinue loved tobacco and practically devoured cannabis. They smoked the rancid leaves all day in the saddle, whether from pipes or cigarettes, so much so that a thin haze followed them wherever they went. Sanwar reckoned that an enemy could smell the riders before he ever saw or even heard them.

That was not to say that they were quiet either. They were a noisy bunch, shouting jokes at one another, talking at more than a comfortable volume, and often breaking out into impromptu songs.

Naturally, Jack fit right in with them.

Sanwar was just impressed by how much the bandits flaunted themselves. Sure, they cut across the back country

to avoid main highways, but the Pashtun never feared an encounter with the British. If any villager was fool enough to report them to a passing patrol, the Pashtun would be long gone by the time any reprisal could be mounted. Then, they would be sure to return when the threat had passed to deliver a reprisal of their own, a sentiment which chilled Sanwar to the bone.

Yet Ghazan also explained something else to Sanwar. Each of his warriors was a free man, and he let them ride with such abandon so that they would not forget their freedom. Any man who tried to take that from them, he claimed, was welcome to try and welcome to perish.

So, the Pashtun smoked and sang, and laughed and talked too loudly.

The days on the road were hot and tiring. Summer was fast approaching, and each day grew longer and warmer than the last. Ghazan kept everyone moving at a jaunty pace, besides. The Pashtun rested little enough already, but their leader kept any breaks to a minimum. They only stopped at nightfall, then resumed mere hours later at sunrise. They rode beneath the shadows of snowcapped mountains, across wide green meadows, and through forests of tall dark pines. They passed hillside farmsteads and villages populated with far more livestock than people.

By week's end, they had reached the Indus.

Crystalline blue waters spanned vast between its stony banks. Farther south those waters would be muddied by the cities, but here, one could see the heavens reflected from its surface.

The Pashtun bribed the local bargeman at the banks not with plundered coins and jewels, but with another curious

stone in exchange for passage. One of Ghazan's chieftains came forward with a satchel, and produced a handful of leaden gray crystals whose lengths were needle thin and widely branching.

"Stibnite, if I am not mistaken," Sanwar commented to Jack once he had recognized it.

"It grows in certain places in these lands and in the hills of ours," Ghazan interjected, overhearing. "We call it "*kohl*". The Whites use it in their factories for Allah only knows what purpose. It fetches close to the value of silver. It is of no use to us, beyond this."

"Curious," Jack mused.

Regardless, the price was paid for passage. Their horses filled nearly half the bargeman's hold, yet he was happy for the business, and so they sailed out beneath the setting sun. By then, the waters were ablaze with flaming reds and oranges. However, cool breezes blew along the river, dispelling the day's heat from their company's tired bodies.

Jack and Sanwar sat at the bow, watching blind pink dolphins leap out of the river as they drifted past.

When night fell, they reached the other side, and camped in a forest near the banks. Above them hung a multitude of stars, and also a great red moon, swollen and bloody.

The Hindus would have considered the latter an ill-omen, and yet the Pashtun performed a *sunnah* prayer beneath its light. Sanwar though, sat in silence, thinking of how the Guru dismayed in either activity. He knew not what such a celestial tiding should mean be on the scientific, yet what he felt was different.

Something strange was stirring deep inside of him, which he could not describe, not even to himself.

That night, he prayed. He prayed in bed at night, staring at the crimson sky that his journey would be over soon.

There were three more rivers to cross before Amritsar; the Jhelum, Chenab, and Ravi. Sanwar knew the northernmost fords of each river better than the Pashtun, and assumed a new role as guide. Punjab was so named “the land of five rivers”, and flowed in his mind’s eye as naturally as the blood within his veins.

As they traveled, Sanwar instructed them to proceed more cautiously. Punjab was not the frontier. There were bandits to be certain, but not in the same quantities as the borderlands. Some folk here would possibly know his face as well, even if he did not know theirs. The British would be closer at hand, and more interested in pursuing someone of his stature than chasing off some common thieves.

Ghazan begrudgingly agreed, though not before he asked who Sanwar really was first.

“I am a man of consequence,” was all that Sanwar would betray.

Over the next several days, they took care to stick the forests and hills rather than the main roads. The trouble was that the land was rapidly flattening out. The hills lowered, and the forests thinned. Villages of hundreds or even a few thousand began to sprout out of the landscape as well. The Pashtun were enticed by the fat cattle and water buffalo grazing on these wide open pastures, but Sanwar warned that any transgressions would be swiftly noticed, especially a missing steer. Many Hindus worked the land here as well as Sikhs, and the death of even one such beast would cause great ire among them. So, they stuck to hunting whatever

small game they could find and whatever edible plants that they could forage.

Crossing the Jhelum proved the easiest. The surrounding area was the most rural, and thus, the least traveled. Sanwar led them to a ford at dusk to minimize the risk of detection. Even still, they happened upon a farmer trying to cross as well. The poor man was likely on his way home from the market for his ancient mule was laden with sacks of goods.

Sanwar only needed to warn him a little in Punjabi, for the man was frightened into silence by the horde of Pashtun anyway. At his insistence, Sanwar bid him run home and tell his wife that a bear had startled him so. Thankfully, the man was off before any of Ghazan's men could properly protest, though he had seen more than a few of them place a hand upon the hilt of their swords and Khyber knives.

The next crossing did not go so cleanly.

The lands on this side of the Jhelum were more populated than the far bank. Villages had given way to towns, and with the townships came more infrastructure. People here crossed rivers with bridges not fords like they did in wilder country. Sanwar knew of one to the north, used only by pilgrims and distant travelers from the mountains, which would be their most discreet passage, especially at night. Their company rode days out of their way to take this route and avoid attention.

However, when they finally came within sight of the bridge one evening, Sanwar was certain that they were lost. Ghazan assured him that they were not. Checking the map again, Sanwar confirmed this, but that left him only more confused.

Concrete had replaced the humble wooden bridge that had once spanned the river. Instead of pilgrims, a pair of soldiers

patrolled its length, and an outpost with sandbags and a machine-gun nest guarded his company's side of the Chenab.

The Pashtun immediately took cover in the foliage, and hid there until nightfall. By then, the guard upon the bridge had changed, though their own circumstances had not. Ghazan had held position until the moon was showing, in spite of Sanwar's urging.

"We should find another place to cross," Sanwar had begged.

"You know that the nearest crossing is days away and close to a large town," Ghazan reminded him. "We have already come this far, and we are not going back. No, we must cross here."

So, when night fell, Ghazan made the crossing.

"Abdul. Gulzar. Darwesh. With me." He called for three of his most trusted warriors to accompany him upon setting out.

Together, they rode forth to the bridge, where naturally, they were halted by the sentries.

Jack and Sanwar leaned forward in the brush, straining to catch any of the conversation. From what Sanwar could gather, Ghazan was pretending to be a pilgrim attempting to cross the bridge. He and his men had not brought any of their firearms with them, further adding to the illusion that they were ignorant yokel tribesmen who had not learnt what the modern age was yet.

Only one of the soldiers was a white man. He was a corporal who spoke with a loud Cockney accent, and ordered his *sepoys* subordinates to translate from Hindustani into English, though they had complained to him that Ghazan and his men were speaking something completely different.

That was all of the distraction that Ghazan needed.

As soon as the soldiers faltered, he and his men leaped from their saddles over the defenses with Khyber knife or *pulwar* drawn. Sanwar only saw the blades rise and fall behind the sandbags and flecks of dark blood gleaming in the moonlight.

One of the Pashtun had hung back while the others killed hand-to-hand. When two other guardsmen patrolling on the bridge approached the scene, he shot his bow at them. The only sound the men made was a splash when they fell into the river. Ghazan and the others relieved the remaining bodies of their guns and ammunition before throwing them in as well.

They rode back to the others a minute later when all was done.

“The bridge is clear,” Ghazan declared. “Now we cross.”

Jack and Sanwar scowled at him, but followed.

Ghazan only shrugged.

The next few days of travel were thankfully without similar incident. It was just a short ride to the Ravi from the Chenab, and they were making good pace now that they had returned to more rural country, away from major highways where the soldiers patrolled.

Familiar sights returned to Sanwar as well. Fields of golden wheat, rice, and millet stretched out for miles. Cotton bloomed in little white puffs like snow. Sugar cane grew as tall as trees. Every orchard was laden with fruit so ripe they were almost bursting.

Yet, some sights were unfamiliar.

Tobacco leaves grew as much as wheat stalks. A handful of farmers had grown it in the region the last time Sanwar had set eyes on his country, and those had only been Muslim or

Hindu growers. Now, it was impossible to go more than a day without seeing a field of it.

They could not go more than a mile without seeing poppy, though.

Scarlet flowers dotted at least one field in every farmstead. Green bulbs filled another. In those fields, farmhands cut the unbloomed flowers to let their milky white fluids flow out.

Trains were also more abundant. The company did not always see one, but every day, they could hear a distant whistle or spy a plume of blackish smoke on the horizon. On one occasion, they had to wait for a great freight beast to pass before they could their lead horses over some tracks. Where once there been almost no trains in Punjab, there now were a fleet.

Soon enough however, the riders stood upon the soggy banks of the Ravi. Soggy, for as soon as the caravan neared the bank, water squelched out from underhoof. The river here had doubled its normal width, and the trees along its edges were submerged almost to the branches. Its once white waters had dulled to muddy stagnation.

“The river is far too swollen for this season,” Sanwar observed. “The monsoon rains have not yet come.”

“It was a warm winter,” Ghazan offered. “Perhaps there was too much snow melt from the mountains.”

That answer did not satisfy Sanwar, but he had no more to say about it. Solving this mystery did not get them any closer to the other bank.

“We will just have to swim the horses across,” he determined after a moment’s contemplation.

“The water here is deep,” Ghazan warned.

“This is the only ford for miles, and I will not have any more blood spilt on my account if you wish to cross another bridge. This is the way.”

The Pashtun eyed him for a moment, but yielded him a conciliatory nod.

“And so it shall be.”

Ghazan then whistled to his men, and ordered them across.

Though a strong and agile runner, the *Qataghani* was not a particularly tall or bulky breed of horse. This meant that the riders went knee-deep across the river and slowly at that, as the smaller beasts fought hard against even a lazy current. In normal circumstances, Sanwar could recall not even his feet brushing against the water, yet here they were, wading through a veritable sea of muck.

It was because of the murky waters that he thought his eyes had betrayed him. A shadow had darted beneath the surface, or at least he had thought he had seen one. He had nearly put it out of mind until something burst forth from below.

A long, scaly snout snapped at Ghazan, and nearly latched onto his leg. His horse had panicked, and kicked away to save itself. A less skilled rider would have lost grip of the reins and plunged headlong into the river, but the chieftain kept his saddle and held his mount in check.

A pair of bulbous, slitted eyes thus turned their gaze on Sanwar instead. The gharial hissed at him, showing off the needle teeth inside its narrow snout. At nearly twenty feet, the bull was larger than most crocodiles, let alone his own species, and every inch of him was coated in scaly lamellar.

He swam at Sanwar to claim him as a victim in place of Ghazan.

Cadarama was drawn and coming down in an instant. The flat slapped against the creature's bumpy snout. The blow was enough to shut its jaws, and drive it back into the water with a second thought.

"Praise Allah! You have just saved my life!" the old man exclaimed.

Sanwar only nodded, and scanned the water further.

"Do not tarry," he urged. "Continue to the bank. The gharials must have swum upstream to feast in these flooded hunting grounds. I have scarcely seen them here before!"

"I have never seen such beasts before!" Ghazan laughed.

Splashes from behind turned them around.

Apparently, other gharials had surrounded the caravan, and Jack had taken to smacking the water around them with the butt end of somebody's *jezail*.

"It's alright, everything's under control," he assured them, then spewed geysers into the air with another whack from the rifle.

Ghazan kept on laughing.

Sanwar only sighed.

The gharials retreated after that, having encountered the only creature wilder than they were; Jack MacGregor.

Then at last, on their sixteenth day of travel, their company stood upon a crest high above the city.

A pinkish haze hung over Amritsar in that small hour, yet to brightened into blazing hues as the dawn began to rise. Light peaked over the tile roofs of the tall, clay buildings, casting long shadows on the city and the crest. Yet, soon the darkness dissipated, and all the city shone with a saffron glow.

“It has been many years since I have gazed upon the Golden City,” Ghazan said with ardent longing in his voice. “In all that time, its splendor has not diminished.”

“Yes, and it has been many years for me as well,” Sanwar agreed.

Together, they and the caravan watched until the sun had reached its zenith. Once the sky had turned from gold to blue, however, Ghazan spoke again.

“My clansmen and I have upheld our end of the promise,” he said. “It is time that we depart. However, I would be unkind if I did not give you one last gift. The horses you have ridden since our meeting. Take them, and all of the supplies which they carry. Including these. You will have need of them, I suspect.”

He gave them a small pouch of the *kohl* along with several bags of food and horse feed.

Jack and Sanwar thanked Ghazan for his generosity, and the three men touched their hearts to each other.

“Go with God,” said Sanwar.

“God is with us both, my friend,” Ghazan answered.

With no more to say after that, he turned his riders round, and rode off over the crest.

Jack and Sanwar looked back down at the city before them.

“Almost home, eh?” Jack said with a wistful grin.

“Almost,” Sanwar echoed.

There was just one more stop that they needed to make first.

IV

Tend Thy Deepest Wounds

Monday, April 16th, 1923
Delhi, British India

Steam was rising off of Chandni Chowk Street, and sweat was dripping off of John Henry Saxon. Today was unusually hot, even for early summer, and his motorcar had turned from a luxury vehicle into a furnace. To call it stifling inside his custom Rolls Royce would have been an understatement. The dashboard stung to the touch and the leather seats were damn near ready to combust, yet he dared not roll the windows down, for the smell outside would kill him faster than the heat ever would.

Ahead of them, a tram had accidentally struck and killed a cow. The damn beast had been split in two, and must have emptied its bowels before it died, for an ungodly curdled stench wreaked havoc on the air. Now, blood and feces were running in the streets, and the traffic had stopped for about a thousand yards. Chandni Chowk, whose streets were already congested with merchants, rickshaws, streetcars, oxcarts, and an armada of pedestrians on an ordinary day, had reverted to a throng on this one.

That left Saxon frozen in the middle of it, seeping in his seat, his new white suit molting into gray around the pits and collar.

Taggart was in the back with Rothstein, pouring sweat and not solely because of the heat. The man had made the mistake of eating street food for lunch in spite of Saxon's warning. Every start and stop from the vehicle were testing

the limits of his stomach. He groaned as the chauffeur braked again for yet another incoming crowd of onlookers.

The Doctor meanwhile, was less concerned with the threat of Taggart regurgitating as he was with the populace. The amount of brown skin around them was enough to make his own crawl. He had avoided speaking to anyone since they landed in Bombay, even Saxon's own driver, Pritesh, who was of the amicable sort. Unlike Taggart, Rothstein had avoided native food altogether. However, he could not avoid the sun, and was already red and peeling after a week.

He could not avoid the natives now, though. The German was squirming in the back as hundreds of them passed by the windows, each trying to see what the cause of all the traffic was.

Saxon strained to see as well.

Even with the extra head room inside his car, he struggled see past the crowd. Not only was the mass of bodies making it difficult to catch sight of anything, but the road was narrow and overrun with dilapidated roofs and overhanging storefronts.

He did finally get a glimpse of some orange-covered Hindu mystic reciting an inaudible incantation for the bisected animal. When it was over, only then did teams of men begin to wrap and carry away the pieces of it in billowing shrouds of cloth.

However, they did this very slowly.

"Get on with it, damn it," Saxon growled.

"Apologies, *sahib*," Pritesh pleaded with him, thinking himself the source of his employer's ire. "I cannot make them move any faster."

"Then I will, by Christ."

He promptly stepped out of the unmoving vehicle despite the smell, drew an automatic pistol out of his suit jacket, and fired one round into the air.

That got everybody moving again.

When Saxon got back inside the car, the way was clear.

“Proceed.”

Pritesh floored it, and made it to the hotel at the intended time.

The *Majestic Hotel* more than fulfilled its namesake. Formerly a Mughal army barracks, the building had all of the era’s onion domes and archways carved into its red sandstone façade. Onyx lion statues guarded the main entrance, a yawning arch lined with lengths of Persian carpets. Valets stood sentry there as well in woolen maroon uniforms, unmoving in the heat until a customer arrived. Pritesh deposited Saxon and his company beneath the overhang, where the valets hopped to, and touted their many bags inside.

Saxon approached the front desk while Rothstein collapsed upon the nearest lobby sofa and Taggart went running for the nearest toilet.

The concierge smiled when he saw him coming.

“Lord Saxon, what a pleasant surprise! Someone is—”

“Hello.” Saxon was in no mood for courtesies. “The penthouse if you please.”

The concierge’s smile faded.

“I am sorry, my lord,” he stumbled. “But the suite is occupied...”

“How can it be occupied? I own this hotel.”

“The gentleman said that he was a friend of yours! He said he was he expecting you.” The little clerk yelped. “He paid extra for it. He’s been a very pleasant customer.”

“Well, I’m about to not be one...”

“A thousand apologies, my lord. I will inform him of the issue personally-”

“No, I’ll deal with him myself,” Saxon said. “Just as I’ll deal with you when I am finished.”

He grinned as turned his back on the man, imagining him sweating even harder. He did not grin for too long, however, as he still had this peculiar nuisance to remediate.

It was a long elevator ride to the top floor, giving Saxon plenty of time to choose his words for this intruder. However, when he finally arrived at the door and knocked, no one answered.

What was more, the door was left unlocked.

Saxon put one hand in his suit jacket, and the other on the knob. He turned it slowly so that neither it nor the door would make a sound as he entered.

It was empty inside.

No one dwelled here, or at least it looked that way. The linens were all fresh, and the bedsheets neatly folded. Not an ounce of dirt or strewn clothing spoiled the tiger marble floor. Other than some buzzing ceiling fans, the only other noise came from the raucous streets far beneath the balcony.

That balcony was the only source of light, as well. Through its Islamic arch and muslin screen, the dim of sunset colored the room in faded hues of lilac, tangerine, and scarlet.

“I apologize for my methods, Lord Saxon,” a voice called from through that archway. It had an all too familiar Scottish brogue, yet bore some of the heaviness of age. “But I am afraid that this was the best method of getting your attention.”

Saxon stepped through the muslin screen and out onto the balcony.

A man was sitting there high above the lowly streets, sipping Scotch from a crystal glass with a carafe of iced spring water accompanying it. He put the glass down, and stood when Saxon recognized him.

“General MacGregor. To what do I owe the surprise?”

Brigadier General Donald MacGregor shook his hand. He was perhaps more than twice Saxon’s age, but his grip was equally as strong. His muscles stretched the fabric of his clothing taut, betraying the lean and powerful physique beneath them. He could look Saxon in the eye as well, as he was not much shorter than the young lord. Those eyes were darkly amber and unsmiling, as well, and suffered no fools upon their contact.

“I understand that you have had several run-ins with my son,” MacGregor told him. “And I have come to India to find him. After all, he was sighted on the frontier just some weeks ago.”

Saxon raised an eyebrow.

“Perhaps then I can help you.”

The General resumed his seat, and Saxon took the one across from him. Suddenly, Saxon found that the heat and nastiness of the day had vanished, and he was in a much better mood.

“As I’m sure you know, your son is a wanted man,” Saxon began.

“Which is why I am seeking him myself,” MacGregor cut him off. “If the Army finds him, they’ll either shoot him dead or he’ll get himself shot.”

“I wouldn’t want to see that happen, even after all he’s done to me.”

“Yes, I was coming to that, my lord. I would like to know exactly why my son has targeted you. He robbed your dig

site. He attacked your factory in Jerusalem. He's repeatedly spoken evilly of you. But why?"

"I really can't say," Saxon answered after a moment's hesitation. "But he and I did have something of a schoolyard rivalry back in our days at Darby, as you know. I suspect that it has something to do with it. But I had heard rumor that he has been associating with communists and natives. No doubt they've been giving him the wrong ideas about our modern world. He does have some Indian always following him about."

"Jack has always been mixing with those outside his station," MacGregor mused. "It isn't proper. But he never learned."

He turned out towards the street then. As the sun set, a smoggy haze became visible over the steaming city. Discordant noises rang out in the street, the clangor of vendors, animals, and automobiles. MacGregor dabbed the sweat from his bald pate, and stroked his thick gray beard in contemplation despite the din. Saxon knew better than to ask what he was thinking.

The answer arrived soon enough.

"I want to use you as bait," the General said at last.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Clearly, my son has a quarrel with you. Clearly, he knows you are here, and is coming this way. After all, why risk re-entering the most populated colony in the Empire? For you, my lord. He will reappear whenever you happen to be, and make his strike. Only this time, we will be ready for him."

Saxon took an exaggerated pause. He should not seem too excited by the notion, he knew.

“I will need to hire men,” he said at last. “I will need protection, and we will need enough hands to actually capture him. He’s proven highly elusive.”

“Consider it done,” the General said. “I can get us a company of *Gurkhas*. My army connections are still strong.”

It was hard for Saxon not appear excited at that notion.

“Consider me game then,” he grinned. “I trust that I’ll be in good hands.”

“You will,” MacGregor assured him. “Now there’s just one more thing that I need to know.”

“Yes?”

“Which way are we headed?”

Friday, April 20th, 1923

Amritsar, Punjab, British India

Jack and Sanwar found a derelict hotel on the edge of town, one with cheap rates and a stable for their horses. They had chosen its repellent appearance deliberately, for the fewer people who stayed there, the fewer who would notice them. Both men had known the risks of entering the city, but they were no fools either, and took their precautions. The manager also had a safe behind the desk, and so Sanwar had insisted that their weapons and supplies be kept there until their return in the evening. Even if the man were untrustworthy, he knew better than to cross these fearsome-looking strangers.

Once their accommodations had been settled, they set out into the crowded streets as early as they could. They had just one day in the city and a very important stop to make. They hurried past the line of storefronts and past the many

temples, churches, *masjids*, and *gurdwaras*. There were soldiers in the street as well, but they took small notice of either man when among the masses. Even without their weaponry, Jack and Sanwar were two more faces in a crowd of turbaned Sikhs and traders from all lands.

They were two more faces in Amritsar whose destination was the Golden Temple.

The Golden Temple, otherwise known as the *Harmandir Sahib*, sat in the heart of Amritsar, for it was itself the center of the center, a *gurdwara* encircled by a shining pool known as the *Amrit Saras Kund*. Its golden walls shone brilliant in the sunlight. Impossible amounts of detail were etched into those proud walls, which towered some fifty feet above the tallest man. A dome adorned each of its corners, and a fifth, its center. Smaller domes lined its walls like a row of golden crowns. A great archway opened at its far end, the entrance of the pilgrims.

Guru Ram Das, the fourth *guru*, had first built the temple as a house of mud brick on the edges of the pool, yet it was his successor, Guru Arjan, who had converted it into a *gurdwara*. From there, he had harkened for his fellow Sikhs to build a city around the temple, so that it might be the center of their lives and worship. Thus, Amritsar sprang from the ground around the *Harmandir Sahib* and the *Amrit Saras Kund*, and housed there would be the *Adi Granth*, the Sikhi holy scripture.

A set of tall white outer walls served as entryway to the temple grounds, where all entrants removed their shoes before entering the sanctuary. Jack and Sanwar did so, the tile walkway warm beneath their bare feet as they approached the *gurdwara*.

Other pilgrims had gathered here by the hundreds, and stood in line outside its entrance. An overhang shielded them the blaring sun as they inched forward every few minutes.

Jack and Sanwar first bathed themselves in the Amrit Saras Kund, so that they were cleansed and refreshed when they joined their fellow pilgrims in the line.

“Long have I awaited my return home,” said Sanwar as they stepped forward. “Long have I desired to make the pilgrimage to this sacred place. I am honored to be here.”

“And I am honored to be with you,” Jack told him gladly.

They followed the line patiently, neither speaking for the next several hours, until at last, they too passed beneath the archway, and entered.

It took their eyes a moment to adjust to the dimness of the inner sanctum. A chandelier glowed above the main chamber, whose largeness was almost entirely filled with the *Adi Granth*.

The holy text was elevated on a dais, where it rested on a cushion surrounded by a bed of flowers and beneath a velvet canopy. Two *granthi* stood to either side of it with golden scepters in their hands, while a third sat behind the great book and fanned its pages. All three wore gold and white *pajamas* and saffron shawls, as was befitting of their high honor. To one side of the dais sat the singers, who chanted *shabads* from the text. The pilgrims passed around the dais from the other, each pausing a moment to utter a prayer before the *Adi Granth*.

As Jack and Sanwar came into the light, their senses so abounded them. Garlands draped down from the arcades. The scent of rosewater and spices wafted in the air. Floral patterns ornamented every inch of the interior from ground

to ceiling. Filigreed in gold leaf then filled with vibrant hues of paint, they bloomed eternal in this holy house.

Sanwar felt a floatiness about himself all of a sudden, as if he could no longer touch the ground beneath his feet. He simply found himself drifting forward around the outside of the dais, towards the temple's halls. The *shabad* rang inside his ears. He did not so much hear its song, but feel it coursing in his veins.

Somehow, he and Jack flowed past the central chamber and into the halls of the *gurdwara*. There, his brothers and his sisters prayed. Hands clasped, they shut their eyes, then bowed their bodies forward in prostration. Sanwar joined them. Others around him heard the song, and followed along to its rhythm. He added his own voice to the chorus. Jack did not know the words, but sat in silence at his side.

Amidst the darkness, Sanwar drowned out all other sounds and feelings.

Then, God spoke to him.

It was a silent thunder, a question burning in his heart, demanding to know why he had come here after all these many years.

Sanwar prayed. He prayed to see Ganeev again, and for her to no longer worry for him. He prayed to see Samreet, and for her to still be as free-spirited as she always had been. He prayed to see his mother and his father. He prayed that his mother might finally be proud of him. He prayed that his father may finally ask him for forgiveness. He prayed for Jogandar to be alive, so that he might know his brother as a man.

And he prayed that he might see Sajan again, if only one more time.

In time, he knew the answer would be revealed to him.

After prayer, he and Jack proceeded out of the temple to the *langar*. This communal meal was held in a hall just beyond the outer walls, where dozens sat on the floor with metal trays, waiting to be served.

The pilgrims were first served *parshad*, a sweet bread to finish the prayer and remind them of God's sweetness. Then, the dozens of volunteers came round with pots and baskets to ladle vegetable curries into the trays and hand out flat *roti* bread.

Everyone ate the plain, simple food together on a plain, simple stone floor, yet to all present, it was a feast. The meal was hot and hearty, well-seasoned and lovingly made. A tear rolled down Sanwar's cheek, as it was his first purely vegetarian meal in many months, and he had forgotten how much he had missed the virtue of abstaining from flesh.

He had missed many things, in fact. Finally having a moment to sit and think, he could not recall when was the last he had been among so many who wore the *dastaar*. He could only think of his army days, and those had been a matter of circumstance. Here, there were only men and women existing alike, sharing in a commonality that only meals could bring. They were all his people, young and old, all shades of skin, and every caste.

A woman sat across from him alone. She was perhaps ten or fifteen years his senior, and had a kindly face. He did not know her, but he was suddenly overcome with a desire to speak to her, as he had never had with anyone before. At first, he resisted, not wishing to disturb her, but when she looked at him unconsciously, he spoke, not wanting to create an awkward moment.

"Excuse me, sister," he said to her. "I have long been away from Amritsar. What news is there of late?"

“How long have you been gone, my brother?”

“Eight years,” he answered. “Each one hard-fought.”

“Then you have not heard?” Her mouth opened in surprise at first, though the expression quickly twisted into one of pain. “You have not heard about the massacre?”

“Massacre...?”

“Yes, at Jallianwala Bagh. Hundreds. Gone.”

The *roti* bread fell from Sanwar’s hand.

“I’m sorry,” the woman consoled him, but he hardly heard it.

“No, no, it’s alright,” he tried to say. “Jack, we must depart at once.”

He stood, and hurried for the door. Jack put down his food, and followed him out.

The site was only blocks away.

A *bagh* was a public garden, but this one was little more than a grassy field with a few shrubs. People walked along its outskirts, but few crossed into its bounds.

Sanwar felt almost sinful doing so, as he and Jack approached a small stone in its center. A bronze plaque had been placed upon it. It read:

“This site marks the site where 1,500 men, women, and children were martyred on April 13th, 1919 in protest of the occupation. May their souls now find peace again.”

What he and Jack found were bullet holes in the outlying buildings around the garden. They found too the well where many drowned to escape those bullets. That was all there was left to find.

Sanwar did not need to find any more.

Sanwar did not hear the people calling out to ask if he was alright. Sanwar did not feel Jack's strong hands upon his shoulders. He did not feel the heat, nor the wind, nor the grass, nor anything at all.

He simply dropped down to his knees, and screamed.

V

Rare Times Are These

Sunday, April 22nd, 1923

Dhamija, Punjab, British India

Verdant fields stretched out before Jack and Sanwar for endless miles. The grass stood taller than their horses and hid a thin dirt road between the furrows, as did the dust clouds about their hooves. The sun seared down upon their necks like a flaming brand, and there were few trees along the way to shade them from its blaze. Yet, their resolve was firm and they did not stop to rest, because they could not afford it. They had traveled this way a full day already, and were so close at last to their final destination.

This morning, they had crossed a bridge that spanned the River Sutlej and thus had passed into Dhamija's bounds. The road from thence turned northeast towards Dhamija village and onwards to Sanwar's ancestral lands.

With every passing step, Sanwar felt his spirit rising. The wounds of Amritsar still burned deep within his heart, but did not harry him. If anything, they drove him harder towards the horizon. Jack kept pace beside him, never speaking either due to both the heat and as courtesy to Sanwar.

By midday, the outskirts of the village came into view.

Just ahead in the distance lay a single farmstead. The little house was nothing more than a low, square mudbrick hut typical of Punjabi villagers. Much like a typical Punjabi home, smoke was wafting from a firepit in the front yard, and cows were everywhere, wandering about.

A woman sat by the fire, cooking *roti* dough upon her skillet. She tossed in a few small logs from an enormous woodpile to keep the fire going while a man pumped water into a jug, and carried it to a low wooden table underneath a *shisham* tree. A modest meal of curries and spicy rices had been laid out beneath its shady boughs. As the final touch, the woman brought over the hot flat breads once they were finished baking.

They had not yet sat down to eat when Jack and Sanwar passed by their home. As the two men did, the couple stopped themselves, and bowed low to these noble strangers, as was befitting of their perceived station.

However, Sanwar did not continue on, and did not accept this greeting. Instead, he halted before them, and looked down from atop his tall horse.

“Has the hospitality of Dhamija lessened so much of late that its people no longer recognize their native sons?” He called out.

The man and woman dared to raise their eyes.

The man’s hair and beard had gone white and the woman’s had become streaked with gray since he last saw them, but their faces were as unchanged and kindly as he had always known them.

“*Sat sri akaal*, Jagmeet and Mata,” he greeted them with a smile.

Their faces twisted in a contorted mix of confusion and recognition.

“Sanwar?” They gasped in unison.

He beamed, and leapt down off his horse.

They ran into his arms.

At long, long last, Sanwar was home.

They stayed out until dusk sharing meals and stories beneath the *shisham* tree. By then, Sanwar had introduced Jack to Mata and Jagmeet and vice versa. Jagmeet, he explained was the local carpenter, and Mata, his wife who tended their small farm. Jagmeet had crafted countless beautiful furnishings for the Dhamija family manor, but had really won the Dhamija children over with his wonderful wooden toys. He and Mata had always welcomed Sanwar into their home, for he had always been naturally curious and polite. Sanwar had once been a friend to their son, Ajab, until he had seen him cut down upon the bloody sands of Gallipoli.

Mata and Jagmeet had grieved for him again now that Sanwar's presence had prompted a reminder.

Yet somehow, they were elated and astonished by his presence too.

"But how, Sanwar?" Mata pleaded. "How are you still alive? They told us you were dead in France. That your body had been burnt, and that none of you was left. You cannot be real. You must be a spirit."

Sanwar held her hand.

"I am as real of flesh as surely you hold me now."

Mata wiped away a tear, as did Jagmeet.

"We thought we'd lost you, my boy," he said. "Truly."

"I know," said Sanwar. "And please, forgive me for the pain that I have incurred. Please know that it was necessary, and not a decision made lightly or from cowardice."

"We would never think such things. But please, Sanwar, tell me at least why you have returned after so long?"

"Yes, I owe you that much of an explanation at least," he conceded, though it did not make his next few words any less difficult to speak. "Dhamija is danger."

“Danger? What danger?” Mata asked.

“I cannot explain everything this moment. I only ask that you believe me. Wicked men are coming to our lands, and our people will be in mortal peril if nothing is done about them. So, I must see my father and my mother at once. I must urge them to heed my warning, and take action while there is time left yet to act.”

It was then that Mata and Jagmeet’s demeanor gravened.

“So,” Mata gasped. “You really have not heard?”

“What have I not heard?”

Jagmeet and Mata held each other close.

“Sanwar, we have sad news for you then,” Jagmeet said. “Your father died four years ago.”

Sanwar paused.

“He took ill soon after the War ended,” Mata went on. “A year later, he was gone. I am sorry. Deeply sorry.”

Sanwar only nodded.

“I will grieve in my own time,” he promised at length. “But before that time comes, I would see Jogandar, and if he yet lives, I will urge the same of him. Perhaps he will even hear me clearer than my father. There has always been much love between us.”

Jagmeet and Mata’s expressions did not lessen. The same grim visage stained their faces, and a longer silence hung about the air.

Again, it was Jagmeet who broke the news.

“Sanwar, there is more that we must warn you of.”

“Tell me then.”

“Your brother is not the same boy you once knew-”

“He rules these lands with an iron grip.” Mata almost spat the words. “Jogandar is not a boy anymore, Sanwar, nor even a man. He is a monster.”

The curse struck Sanwar back into silence for a long while. For a time, the choruses of the evening assumed the conversation; night owls, crickets, and the crackle of the fire. No words were spoken, for any words that they might speak would be inadequate.

Finally, when Sanwar did, it was only to relay this knowledge back to Jack in English.

His friend weighed the words carefully.

“Tell them that no one else can know we’re here,” he cautioned. “Then ask them if anyone else has just arrived in town.”

“You mean Saxon?”

“Aye,” he answered. “Something tells me that he and your brother are going to get along just fine...”

Sunday, April 22nd, 1923

Dhamija, Punjab, British India

Black smoke trailed across the cloudless sky as the train hurtled down the tracks. Miles of great green country flew by in mere instants, but the fields of cotton, wheat, tobacco, and poppy were a constant stream that never vanished from view.

Saxon opened a side door to watch them all go past. He grinned as he held the handlebars in his iron grip, and leaned forward into the rushing wind. The screaming force of it gave him calm. He sighed, and drank it in deeply.

In this vast and fertile land, he vowed that he would capture Jack MacGregor, and that was only something to sweeten the deal. After all, he had great plans in mind.

The whistle blew. Saxon turned his eyes ahead.

The station appeared just minutes later. Really, it was just a platform on a hillside with a ticket booth. Almost no one waited there either, as nothing was around for miles but fieldhands and farmland.

The train halted, and what few passengers were still aboard the line filed out. Saxon and General MacGregor carried their own bags out, but Taggart had to carry Rothstein's in addition to his own. The little man could barely even carry a suit coat folded on his arm, as he was made so ill from the heat. Sweat soaked his shirt from cuff to collar, and he tried in desperation to fan himself with his hat.

"How long," he wheezed. "How long must I suffer this interminable traveling?"

"You would have died a week into campaign in the Sudan, Rothstein" the General scoffed. "At least then, we could have used your body as a sandbag."

The Doctor was too exhausted to offer a retort.

"We're almost to our destination, gentlemen," Saxon said to soothe the mood over. He had little time or energy for bickering anyway, not when victory was so near at hand.

"Has this Zamindar fellow got any good drams?" Taggart grunted as he hefted Rothstein's heavy trunk, and followed everyone down the platform steps. "I'm dying for a stiff drink."

"Good Sikhs don't drink," Saxon told him, prompting an immediate frown. "However, plenty of Hindus do. I know a wholesaler in Delhi, and I've already ordered a supply to our host's estate just for you, Taggart."

That prompted an immediate grin from him.

"Will our gracious host be providing us with a vehicle as well as space for Taggart's vices?" Rothstein asked. "I refuse to walk all the way to his estate."

The answer presented itself before Saxon could give one.

Turbaned in khaki, a troop of sepoy lancers waited on a wide road outside the station. Their weapons gleamed. Their sword belts shone with polish.

A tall, dark man rode at their head atop a gigantic blood bay horse. He was dressed in the finery of an officer's uniform, one with the crown and stars insignia of a full colonel on its epaulettes. He sat expertly straight-backed in the saddle with his jodhpurs and knee-high red leather boots molded to the stirrups. Unlike his men, this cavalier carried no lance, only a blackened Webley pistol and a most curious sword. Saxon recognized it as the 1912 cavalry officer's pattern, or at least he thought he did, until he saw the blade. While it had the large bowl guard of the original design, this weapon had swapped the long and narrow almost spike-like blade for one that was both broad and curved. The whole thing looked to be a fearsome cutter, and perfectly suited to the man who wielded it.

That man was the *zamindar* of these lands and their host this evening, Jogandar Singh Dhamija.

The man dismounted from his blood bay, and strode forward to shake their hands.

As he neared, Saxon almost recoiled.

The Zamindar was so close in appearance to his brother that Saxon had thought it was indeed the latter at first glance. He was of an equal height with Sanwar and possessed the same sharp, angular features. Yet, despite being eight years his junior, Jogandar had a far sterner composure about himself. Where there was always a brightness to Sanwar's gaze, Jogandar's onyx eyes were grave and unsmiling. When he greeted his guests, there was no warmth within the gesture. Even as they shook hands, Saxon struggled to

maintain eye contact, for there was an emptiness within Jogandar's glance that was beyond uncanny.

"Welcome, Lord Saxon," he said in a voice much darker and smokier than his brother's. "Normally, I treat with your representatives. You do me the honor of coming yourself and in such distinguished company."

Jogandar then turned to receive the General.

"General MacGregor, a man of your reputation needs no introduction."

"Neither do you," MacGregor returned, straightening himself to accept the handshake. "Or at least, you shouldn't. I checked your service record before we arrived. Even I'm impressed."

"A high honor from you, General, as is your presence. However, with respect, I wonder what your purpose is here."

"I am here to assist to Lord Saxon. The details we can discuss after we dine this evening."

"Very well."

"Allow me to introduce my heads of Acquisitions and Research and Development respectively, as well," Saxon added. "Mister Taggart and Doctor Rothstein. They will also be *assisting* me in my affairs."

Both men shook hands with him in turn. Both men avoided eye contact when they did.

Once introductions were in order, Jogandar called forth their horses. Each one was an Arabian. Saxon and the General mounted theirs easily enough, though Taggart was awkward in the saddle and Rothstein was so afraid of his beast that someone had to lead him by the reins. Thankfully, the Zamindar's home was only a few, short miles away.

Lala Ghara Haveli rested on the sparkling banks of the Sutlej. The path to its court was lined with the groves of

jacaranda that bloomed with purple flowers. Orchards of rosewood and mango trees grew in manicured rows along the green. The house's walls were made of laterite bricks redder than clay, and had many a domed tower along their length. Windowed turrets jutted from every side, and arched cloisters wrapped around every level. A huge arched gateway served as the main entrance, with its heavy cherrywood doors wide open to the *chowk* inside.

The Dhamija family awaited before those great cherrywood doors along with their entire household, some forty servants strong. An equal number of soldiers stood by in their khakis, still as statues in the evening heat.

The family itself was just three women and a single man. The women must have been Dhamija's by blood, as they shared the same strong stock. Each was tall, well-built, and pleasing to the eye, much as Saxon would have expected of the warrior caste. Even Jogandar, in spite of his severity, had a handsomeness about him.

The Dhamija's bowed once Saxon and his company had dismounted. Jogandar then led him and the others down the line, starting with an older woman on their left.

"My mother, Ridhi," he began the introductions.

She was still a handsome woman despite being in her sixties. Her dark eyes especially, were large and bright, like those of a younger maid. Her hair, though gray, still had texture as well. She did look somewhat worn, however. There was a worry hidden in those dark eyes, and a nervousness about her gesture when she bowed to Saxon. He noticed too, that the lines about her cheeks were deeper than the others on her face, as if they permanently drawn back in fright.

He had little time to dwell on it, however, as Jogandar ushered him to the next woman.

“My eldest sister, Ganeev.”

She was the tallest of the three women and the most full-figured. Her heavily pregnant belly only added to her womanly frame, as she looked perhaps eight months along and near to bursting. Beneath her emerald *chunni*, she had long, dark, silky hair and dark, almond eyes. She resembled how Saxon imagined her mother did in her mid-thirties, lovely, lighter-skinned, soft-featured, and full-lipped.

Beside her was a spectacled man, spare and smartly dressed in a navy suit. He reminded Saxon of one of his accountants.

“Her husband, Sajan Ahuwalia.”

Finally, they came to a young woman to whom Saxon had been waiting to be introduced. Like all the Dhamija’s, she was of good make, tall and hour-glassed shape. He found her the loveliest of the three by far. She had the same sharp features of her brothers, but also the softness of the fairer sex in her doe eyes. She smiled sweetly at him, which brought forth a smile from him as well.

“My youngest sister, Samreet,” Jogandar said. “I must apologize for her being thirty and yet unmarried.”

“Apology accepted,” Saxon grinned. “Perhaps you’ll find yourself a spouse soon as well...”

“Once these lands are secured and the business between us is in order,” Jogandar answered, thinking the statement had been directed at him. “Until then, I have enough troubles with three women, God forbid a fourth.”

Without another word, he ordered everyone inside.

They followed into the main *chowk*, or courtyard as Saxon would have preferred to call it. The space was a gigantic atrium, several stories high. Cloisters lined every one of them, as did great gilded archways leading to the *haveli*’s many suites. Silken curtains of turquoise, silver, emerald, and

scarlet covered those entrances, and flowed in the evening breeze. Black and white marble checkered the ground floor, where a central fountain bubbled amidst leafy rows of tulsi. Given the sheer size of *Lala Gbara*, there were likely several other smaller *chowks* within its walls, though the central would undoubtedly be one of its most impressive.

There were more soldiers inside as well. They guarded every level of the courtyard with rifle and bayonet, patrolling the cloisters like a parapet. The men from outside relieved them upon entry with a sharp salute and the click of their heels upon the marble. The now off-duty guards returned the gesture, did an about-face, and marched off to their quarters. The servants moved with similar mechanical efficiency to their own stations around the house.

“You maintain excellent security, *sahib*,” MacGregor remarked, watching the precision at work.

“A necessity,” Jogandar told him. “Bandits continue to plague these lands, and the scheduled castes continue to pollute us with their incivility. Their ungratefulness astonishes me. I must keep my lands and my women safe from them both. Now. Dinner is in two hours. Refresh yourselves. Call for my servants if needed.”

Jogandar then curtly left them all in the *chowk* to be escorted to their chambers by a host of servants.

Saxon used the time to have himself a bath and a cigar. Even in the heat, the steaming waters were a godsend, cleansing away the sweat and grime of a long day’s travel. He smoked while he soaked in a great brass tub. He had replaced his usual stock of Turkish tobacco with a box of his new local crop, and he had to say that he liked the taste so much better. The sweet vapors mixed in with the steam and bath salts, and left a lovely, lingering aroma upon the air. He

would have stayed in the tub all night, had someone not knocked upon his door half an hour before dinner. Saxon reluctantly emerged from the bath, dried himself, and donned his evening best, a classic black tie and white dinner jacket combination.

He and his company met the Dhamija's in the dining room. It was smaller than Saxon had expected, just large enough to fit the nine of them, but was ornately decorated in colored tiles from floor to ceiling and had a small fountain and basin in it as well.

The meal was mostly rices and curries served in silver bowls and platters. Jogandar touched no vegetables, and only satisfied himself with bloody cuts of goat meat. He was still in uniform at the table, although he had changed into one with a deeper color for the occasion.

Conversation was sparse for the first few courses until Ridhi choose to break the cavernous silence.

"I trust that you had a pleasant journey, Lord Saxon?" She asked with the faintest tremble in her voice.

"Long, but manageable," he replied. "I am mostly glad to be here among present company."

"It has been too long," she said. "I believe we met many years ago when you were still a boy, though you may not remember. This was back when Saxon enterprises was still only a defense company."

"Yes, well peace time brings more opportunities than war. We had to expand our product line to different industries."

Jogandar raised an eyebrow at that.

"Your late husband understood as much, God bless him," Saxon went on. "I knew that the company would need to embrace the civilian market once the Great War was won, and Amar knew that Punjab could provide. That's why my

Indian branch began cultivating during the War. Had to get the infrastructure in place for after it was over. Amar understood that. I am sorry that he's not alive to fully see what he has helped build."

Saxon tipped his glass to the man, yet Jogandar was nonplussed.

"I understand that you have many shipping centers across every province of India," he mused. "Why has Dhamija suddenly taken your interest? Our yearly exports for the company are exceptional and need little inspection."

"Jogandar, be polite," Ridhi gently chided him. "And your father never discussed business at the table."

"Enough, mother," was all he said to quiet her, and enough it was.

Ridhi did not speak again after that.

"To answer your question, *sahib*," Saxon continued once the silence had grown intolerably awkward. "I am looking to expand an already lucrative enterprise. As of now, the train on which we arrived is the only access point from Delhi to this entire area. If we expand the railways to connect to other outlying towns and villages, they can ship their product through us, and we can quadruple our export capacities to China and beyond."

"And how do we quadruple our production capacities to meet demand?"

To that, Saxon grinned.

"Your land sits at the confluence of the Beas and the Sutlej," he said. "Dam the rivers at the junction, and you can irrigate your crops miles further through a series of canals. Your fields will swell all across Dhamija, you'll be living in the midst of Eden before the autumn comes."

"And what would we be growing in our fields?"

“Oh, the usual things. Rice, cotton, wheat, tobacco, sugar. But opium, mostly.”

“Opium? I did not know you were in that market.”

“It’s a recent development. Agriculture. Transportation. Manufacturing. Medicines. The wonders of vertical integration and a diversified portfolio.”

Jogandar leaned back in his chair.

“Perhaps, my mother was right,” the Zamindar said. “We should discuss this business in the drawing room after dinner.”

“Very good, *sahib*. I’m looking forward to it.”

“We are truly honored to have you here then, Lord Saxon,” said Samreet. “You will bring even greater prosperity to our ancestral lands.”

“Pleased to be here,” he said with a pearly grin.

“May I ask what brings the General here as well?” She asked. “We are also honored to receive such a man of your stature.”

Saxon and the General exchanged a look.

“I am here to lend my expertise in the construction of these canals,” he said. “After all, I do have experience as a combat engineer, and digging out a canal is not too different from digging out a trench. Besides, Lord Saxon is a family friend, and I am also an investor in his enterprises. He has so kindly allowed me to ensure my own investment, so to speak.”

“We could use more military men around here to instill some discipline,” Jogandar added. “Bandits are everywhere in this country, as I said, and so far, my men have been ineffective in defeating them.”

“If I can handle the Mahdists of the Sudan, I can handle some common bandits here in British territory,” said the General.

“Good. Be wary of the populace, as well. Too much nationalist sentiment is arising in this country, or worse yet, communist. The scheduled-castes would believe that all people should rule themselves, yet where would they be without the Crown? They bite the hand that feeds them, and scorn the patron who sired their good fortune.”

Jogandar hacked off a piece of meat, and devoured it.

“Quite right,” said Saxon. “Perhaps we should allocate a portion of the capital towards an increase in security.”

“That would be prudent.”

The meal continued on in silence until completion. Dessert was honeyed donuts soaked in rosewater, which Jogandar did not touch either. He simply waited for the others to finish before declaring that dinner was adjourned.

“It is time that the women were abed,” he announced. “Sajan, escort them to their chambers.”

“Perhaps I should join you in the drawing room, brother,” Sajan said, rising to his feet. “After all, I am the managing director of this branch. I could offer my professional opinion.”

“I will hear Lord Saxon’s proposal, and then I will consult you.”

Jogandar left with Saxon and the others and without another word.

“Oh, he was in rare form tonight,” Ganeev seethed once they were on an upper floor in a completely different *chowk*. Thankfully, the guards only patrolled the main one and the outer walls, and she had stored her ire for when they were

fully out of earshot. Even still, she took care not to raise her voice above a whisper. “Just what we need around here. More ‘security!’”

Samreet agreed with her sister’s point, even if this was the umpteenth time that she had voiced it. Saxon’s arrival was worth at least some outrage. Sajan though, simply listened along in his usual silence as they continued up the stairwell.

A long climb it was. Samreet’s room was on the top floor next to the guest suite where her sister and husband were staying. They had said goodnight to their mother on the ground floor, as she was having increased difficulty with the steps these days. Thus, she had been spared her eldest’s rantings. Samreet knew that Ganeev would never speak any of her mind in Ridhi’s presence, regardless. No one could speak of ill of Jogandar to her, no matter how much ill Jogandar brought upon others. Mother simply chose not to listen.

“These business men are taking over our estate, and what’s he spending their money on? More soldiers! We could have so many other things, but he wants toys and guns to chase away ‘the bandits!’” It was a wonder that Ganeev still had any breath by the time they reached the top floor, especially given her advanced term. “Sajan, we’re leaving tomorrow. I’ve had enough of this house.”

“I’m surprised you made it through dinner,” he replied, more expressing his own relief than anything. He knew that one remark from his wife at dinner would have resulted in a blow across her cheek from Jogandar. It was a fate that Samreet had witnessed too many times.

“I won’t make it through breakfast if we stay, I swear,” she said, stopping at their door.

“We must stay for breakfast for appearances, but then we will leave straight after,” he assured her. “Now, go ahead. I’ll see Samreet to her room, then ask that some refreshments be brought to you. That might help improve your mood.”

“I don’t want any,” Ganeev huffed, and shut the door behind herself.

Sajan sighed, and walked Samreet across the parapet to her chamber beside one of the towers. It was hardly a distance at all, but Samreet knew the purpose. Under the cover of the moonless, starry night, they stood outside her door and spoke in whispers.

“I am sorry that I have not been much use to the cause,” Sajan began. “What the elders want from me, I simply cannot provide.”

“You have helped!” Samreet urged. “We know about Jogandar’s activities because of you. And we know that we can trust you.”

Warm winds blew tonight. Sajan turned his head into the breeze, and gazed off into the stars, their pale light glinting off his spectacles.

“Jogandar doesn’t trust me, though,” he said at length. “I don’t know enough to help. I’m supposed to be his chief advisor, and yet he keeps me out of everything.”

“He keeps everyone out of everything. Only Jogandar is allowed to know what Jogandar truly thinks.”

“He knows that I’m a spy. He must.”

“If he knew, you would be dead.”

“Then do you think that he suspects or does he just plain disrespect me?” He asked her.

“He disrespects everyone.”

“No, he disrespects men he sees as weak,” Sajan corrected. “He disregards women entirely.”

That brought a sly smile to both their lips.

It did not last, however.

“Something is wrong,” Samreet said. “Why else would Saxon be here?”

“That, I cannot say,” he could admit. “Nor will I find out until everyone else has already learned. I’m sorry that I cannot be much more use to the elders.” He laughed a little. “Maybe Jogandar does know that I am a spy. A bad one. He keeps me alive because it’s amusing how little I can hurt him.”

Samreet touched his arm to will the deceitful thoughts away.

“I will find out their plans tonight,” she promised him. “And I will tell the elders. They’ll know what to do. But I must hurry. I’m missing too much as we speak.”

“I can give you some cover at least, then. Be careful.”

Samreet stepped inside her room a moment to remove her shoes, and change into her *pajamas*, which would allow for better movement. Then, she and Sajan took opposite staircases down to the ground floor of the main *chowk*. The stairs opened right into the courtyard, exactly where the soldiers were patrolling. Samreet stopped herself before the last few steps, and hung closely to the wall in wait.

She would simply need to go down the rest of the way, travel maybe thirty feet down the hall, and turn a corner.

Only, it was not so simple.

A guard stood in the way, scanning the *chowk* with a rifle in hand. Samreet had seen him from the floors above, and knew that he was posted there. If she peered around the corner of the stairwell for an instant, he would catch a glimpse of her.

So, she waited.

Sajan must have come down across the way from her a few moments later, for the faint clap of his heels sounded against the floor just then. The soldiers' own heels slid on the floor, and clicked together. When he called out in greeting, Samreet braved another glance.

“Sir!”

The soldier had slapped out a salute.

Pushing up his glasses, Sajan approached the man, and returned the gesture with his usual feigned meekness.

“Good evening, sergeant.”

“Yes, I wanted to inform you that my wife is feeling a bit ill this evening. You know how pregnant women get.”

“Sir!”

“Anyway, it's nothing serious. But I did just want to tell you that I am going to fetch one of the servants to bring some medicine, and we may be going back and forth quite a bit.”

“Very good, sir!”

“Yes, well I just didn't want to be an issue. I know that you men work so diligently to provide us with security—”

“Not a problem, sir!”

“I am glad to hear it. It really won't be a disturbance whatsoever? I could see how it might be...”

Sajan rambled on for more than an adequate amount of time, a trick he had no doubt learned from his military career or years of official meetings. Whatever the case, it gave Samreet more than adequate time to sneak behind the guard, down the hall, and around the corner.

Barefoot, she was noiseless in the house. This was useful not only for not being heard, but for hearing others. Already, she could hear a conversation in progress through the door at the end of the hall.

That was the drawing room. Four generations of Dhamija had used it, not because they smoked or drank after dinner, but because their British guests always did. Samreet had always spied on those meetings as a girl with Sanwar, listening at the door and peering through the keyhole. Father would always scold them if he caught them. It felt almost comical to being doing the same thing now, even knowing Jogandar punishment would be far more severe than their father's.

Samreet crept to the door, and pressed her cheek against its cool mahogany. Curiously, something was being discussed about a manhunt, and not about business at all. Through the wood, she heard muted talk of criminals and chases, explosions and the destruction of Saxon's property. The list of crimes was too lengthy to follow, so eventually, she abandoned listening, and peered through the door's silver keyhole to watch instead.

Inside, the white men smoked cigars, and sipped on whiskey while her brother and that funny little doctor sipped on tea. A fire crackled in the hearth, though it was barely contributing to the smokiness inside. All five men were coated in the tobacco's pallid haze, making it somewhat difficult to distinguish their faces. However, their voices were distinct enough for Samreet to determine who was speaking.

"I thank you gentlemen for coming to me in confidence about this matter," her brother was saying from his seat upon the couch. Samreet knew his measured intonation at once. "I had indeed heard rumors, but had no indication of either man's identity until now. Alerting my family would only upset them."

"The questions remain, however, of how to handle it, and how to keep them from finding out until the problem is dealt

with,” said Saxon, his voice as deep and smoky as the room around him. He was so tall that he could rest his elbow comfortably on the bureau while he puffed on his cigar. Samreet had never seen a man display such casual arrogance before.

“You have trouble with bandits, do you not, *sahib*?” Asked the Doctor from beside Jogandar on the sofa. He spoke so quietly that he was almost inaudible, and Samreet had to press harder into the wood to decipher him. His German accent was unmistakable from the others’, though.

“On occasion,” Jogandar replied.

“Then why not invent some more? Pretend that the threat has increased, and call more troops from Amritsar here in response. I suspect that you will require additional manpower if you wish to capture your brother anyway.”

Samreet froze at the mention of Sanwar.

He was alive?

And here?

But how?

She almost did not hear what was said next, but willed herself not to process anything until she was safely away from here.

“Good, I do not wish to divert any forces from protecting my property, if it can be avoided,” said Jogandar. “And I trust these new profits will recoup the costs of supplying new levies.”

“Naturally,” Saxon promised.

“I can get you a company of Gurkhas,” General MacGregor offered, his Highland brogue both commanding and refined. He puffed on his cigar a moment, then continued while pacing about the room. “They can track and capture a quarry even on his native soil. I only request that I am allowed to oversee the operation personally.”

“Granted,” said Jogandar. “Though you will ultimately surrender Sanwar to me upon capture.”

“Of course. My primary concern is my own son.”

“I’d also like to join the mission, and settle a bloody score I’ve got with that bawbag,” that foul Scotsman, Taggart, slurred. Whereas MacGregor’s speech was smooth and educated, Taggart’s was coarse and grating to the ear. The whisky was not helping to make his Glaswegian dialect any more intelligible either. Taggart leaned against the couch so heavily, that Samreet was uncertain whether if it was because he was completely relaxed or completely drunk. Maybe it was both.

“Denied,” said Saxon this time. “The General wants his son back alive, preferably in one piece, Taggart.”

“Jack is difficult to contain, but he must be contained, if possible,” the General said with a glare towards Taggart, who straightened and threw his arms out wide.

“Then what’m I s’posed to do around here?”

“I will need an executive officer to oversee the protection of the canals,” Jogandar informed him. “A white N.C.O. with military experience will set a good example for my men.”

“Sort of like a copper?”

“Precisely.”

Taggart sucked on a cigar, then swallowed a tremendous gulp of whiskey.

“Aye. Sounds good to me then.”

“Then we are decided,” Jogandar declared. “I need not remind you all that our mission is discretion. Civility is a fragile thing, and both the MacGregor and Dhamija families have a reputation to uphold. I would like to keep my brother’s legacy intact, as I am sure General MacGregor would with his son’s, so as not to besmirch the rest of us.”

The men all voiced their agreements.

Jogandar then rose, and called for them to retire. He walked over to the door where Samreet was listening, and opened it, but Samreet was gone.

As soon as she had seen him coming, she had run off down another hall towards the nearest window. She opened it, climbed out, shut it behind herself, and sprinted through the gardens towards the stables.

She was not a foolish runner, though. She used the darkness to conceal herself, and avoided crossing spills of light from the *haveli* where she could. She knew the route that worked, and found her usual tree at the far end of the garden. There, she climbed until she was level with the wall, leaped onto it from the branches, and lowered herself down on the far side.

The stables were nearby, and Kamala was waiting.

The white Arabian snorted when Samreet entered. She went to her, and brushed her muzzle. The horse pressed her head against Samreet's in greeting, but remained still as she put on her reins and saddle. Samreet opened the stables, and checked the area before she walked Kamala out into the open. Finally she closed them behind herself, and mounted, fitting into the saddle as she would a well-worn shoe.

Then, she flew.

Galloping for the crossroads, Samreet rode straight for Jagmeet and Mata's house. Fewer people would see her there on the outskirts than in the village proper, and despite the longer distance, she could ride at top speed along the highway. Besides, the old couple could always be trusted to deliver information to the other elders later.

Samreet knew the path well, and at speed, she was there in what only felt like instants. She hitched Kamala to the

shisham outside the house, placing her on the far side of the trunk so that she was at least partially concealed from view of the road. On a nearly moonless night like this, a quiet horse would appear as little more than a shadow beneath the lofty boughs.

Samreet, however, kept her eyes on the highway all the while as she crept towards the door. A lantern hung by the doorframe, burning its embers. Muffled voices murmured within. That put Samreet a little more at ease, as the couple was still awake and her presence would be less of a disturbance. Regardless, she had a mission to accomplish, and so knocked heavily upon the door.

The voices stopped.

There was some shuffling around inside.

Jagmeet answered the door a moment later.

“Samreet!” He sounded almost relieved. He placed his palm upon her head, which brought a smile to her lips. She hugged him close.

“I have important news,” she whispered, moving them both inside. She was sure to shut the door behind them.

“What is it?” Mata asked, stepping forward. She had been awkwardly standing off to one side towards the bedroom door, but now came more fully into the room. The living space was modest mudbrick and carpets, furnished only with what Jagmeet had made by hand. One of his tables stood in the center of the carpeted floor, and had a tea kettle resting on it. Mata glanced at it, then lifted it instinctually. “Please, sit. Have some tea, and tell us.”

“Yes, thank you,” said Samreet. The offer also helped to calm her. Even in this familiar place, the urgency of her news was causing her to forget herself. “Tea would be lovely, thank you. But cannot stay long. I must tell you that-”

Just as she had removed her shoes, Samreet noticed that there were four tea cups steaming on the table instead of only two. As she placed them down, she noticed also two pairs of tall, dusty boots by the door. Her blood curdled in her veins.

“Mata. Who else is here?”

“Samreet, please sit down,” Mata begged.

Yet, Samreet found herself backing towards the door.

“Samreet, please,” Jagmeet urged, reaching for her.

No, she could not. They had told Jogandar of her. She was compromised. He somehow had known that she was coming.

She spun around for the door, and made to run.

Her palm was almost on the handle, when a familiar voice called out her name.

“Samreet.”

It was deep and strong, while also being calm and gentle. It was a voice that she knew well, a voice that she once loved.

“Sanwar?”

She spun back around to face him.

Her brother stepped out from the bedroom. There was a sharpness to his face, a hardness that had not been there when last she saw him. He seemed taller too, and more heavily muscled. Yet, the kindly glimmer in his eyes had not changed since boyhood. He smiled when he saw her.

“I came to tell them...that you were...alive,” she struggled to say.

“I have never been happier to be so,” he replied.

She ran to him at once, and buried her face into his chest.

Her tears seeped into his shirt. He placed his head on hers. He was as strong as he looked, and held her firm. When she looked up at him, there were tears in his eyes too.

They held each other there for a good, long while.

When finally the tears had dried from their eyes, Mata brought them over to the table, and sat them all down. She poured fresh cups of tea for everyone.

“Now, Samreet, please tell us,” she said. “How did you know that Sanwar was alive?”

“Saxon-” Samreet began to say.

“That’s all I need to hear,” a deep voice said in English.

A white man had stepped out of the bed room to join them. Like her brother, he was tall and powerfully built. However, there was a wildness about the way he moved, and a ruggedness about his gesture that most men whom she knew did not possess. He scanned the room with a mad and searching glimmer in his amber eyes. They fell upon Samreet with a bit of curiosity, too.

Immediately, the anxiety returned to her.

Yet, Sanwar was completely unreactive.

“Jack,” he said, switching from Punjabi into English. “This is my younger sister, Samreet. Samreet, this is my dear friend, Jack MacGregor.”

Jack’s demeanor softened at once. A gentler gleam assumed his visage, and he smiled warmly at her when he reached to shake her hand. Samreet’s anxiety shifted again now to a different sort.

Then, something struck her.

“Wait, you said your name is MacGregor?”

“Guilty as charged,” he said.

“Son of General MacGregor?”

Once more, Jack’s expression changed. This time, the gleam vanished altogether.

“So, he’s here, is he?”

“Yes, with Saxon.”

Jack nodded.

Sanwar rose to his feet.

“Sister,” he urged, taking her hands in his. “You must ride home at once. Please, tell no one of this. Our mother and Ganeev cannot know, not until we have dealt with Saxon.”

“Tell me at least why you have returned.”

He pulled her to one side, and whispered.

“Samreet, the Stone is real.”

“So that is why you have hidden all these years?”

“Yes, for the sake of our people.”

“I know,” she said. “And I should tell you then that Sajan and Ganeev have married. She is with their first child now.”

Sanwar hesitated.

“As was to be expected,” he said after a good, long minute. “Do not tell him of me either yet.”

“I know.”

She hugged him once more, then headed towards the door.

“Take them to the others tomorrow,” she told Jagmeet and Mata. “They’ll know what to do. I will keep my eyes and ears open until then.”

“And your neck out of trouble!” Mata warned.

“*Sat sri akaal*,” Samreet said with a smile, and wiped her eyes.

She went out the door, got back on Kamala, and rode off once again into the dark of night, gone as quickly as she had come.

VI

Sore Days Soon Follow

Golden light shined down upon Dhamija as the dawn arose behind them. Breaths of fog had gathered in the shallow valley between the western edges of the village and the forest.

Below them, the village awakened. Hundreds of men and women left their mudbrick homes to tend the fields. Those emerald swathes were also ablaze with golden wheat in the dawn, ripe for harvesting. Golden too was the rushing river, sunlight glinting off its crystal waters, and the great brass dome of the *gurdwara* in the heart of town. At this young hour, Dhamija arose with brilliance.

Jogandar had insisted that Saxon and the General accompany him before breakfast to the west tower, so that they may view the land themselves.

“Tell me what you envision,” the Zamindar commanded. “Tell me where I am to build.”

Saxon hardly needed to look. He had viewed the maps some months ago, and had known his plans right then. The Sutlej ran straight through Dhamija, with the village on its west bank and the *Lala Ghara* estate on its east. The waters ran high here, for the Beas merged into its flow not but a few miles north and east of here. Just south of the village was where he would dam.

Yet, there was something he had not anticipated.

“What are those there?” He asked, pointing to a series of tributaries that snaked out from the river all along its banks.

“Inundation canals,” Jogandar replied. “They flood seasonally with the river during the wet season, and lay dormant during the dry winter.”

“Oh, those won’t do at all,” said General MacGregor. “What you ought to do is dig out straighter canals that feed right into the fields rather than have them strewn about all over the place. Then, build some embankments to protect the soil when you finally dam the river. You’re at the headwaters, *sabib*. You had better take advantage of that fact.”

“I agree,” said Saxon. “This way, you can irrigate all year round, and bring the water farther inland to expand your cropland. You can grow your fields all the way to the train station like that.”

Jogandar needed no more consideration.

“Send me your plans,” he said. “I will raise the men tomorrow, and set them all to work.”

“Very good, *sabib*,” Saxon and MacGregor said together, and watched the Zamindar turn on his heels and march down the stairs.

“Do you think my son is already in Dhamija?” MacGregor asked Saxon once he was gone.

Saxon surveyed the horizon. Despite the landscape being wide, open floodplains, there were plenty of places that a man could hide. Every house in the village could be a refuge, as could the forest on the edge of town or the tall grass on the far bank of the river. Something told him that Jack was close, a scent perhaps or maybe just a feeling in the air.

“If he’s not yet, he’s coming,” Saxon chose to answer. “Anywhere I’m building something, he’ll be there to sabotage it. Mark my words.”

“He’s got a funny sense of right and wrong, that boy. He thinks what’s natural is immoral. He thinks that petulance and wanton violence is somehow in service of the innocent. He won’t fight for his country, but will against his

countrymen. I don't understand it. Something's wrong with a lot of lads who went to France. Somehow, they came back cowards instead of heroes. They came back funny in the head. It's not like how it used to be."

"You can try and understand him when we've caught him," Saxon said, placing a firm hand on the old man's shoulder. "I think you ought to stay close to the canals. That's where he is likely to attack."

Sparks flew with Randeep's final hammer stroke. They and the embers of his coke fire were the only true light in the darkness as evening's curtain billowed over the flickering sunset. In the half light, he lifted the spade head with his tongs until its red glow dulled into cold, black metal again, then tossed it onto a pile beside his work bench.

He could not count how many spade heads he had made today. Mata had passed a message for him this morning underneath a basket of fruit and milk, saying that Saxon himself had arrived in Dhamija with designs to build a dam. One of its size would take dozens, if not hundreds of men to build, and therefore just as many tools. So, Randeep had decided to get ahead of the work.

Sure enough, by that very afternoon, Jogandar had issued a decree that dam construction would begin tomorrow morning.

Damn Saxon.

Ever since Randeep had first heard that name, it had brought a curse upon his house. The first Saxon Arms factory had appeared in Amritsar just before the War. The young lord had just assumed his father's empire back then, and knew that it would be cheaper to hire low-caste Indian laborers than white working Englishmen. They had left their

villages in droves for hope of better pay and greener pastures inside the stuffy plants, or simply to escape conscription.

Yet when peace at last arrived, Saxon men had come to offer the lands of Amar Singh Dhamija a different sort of proposal. Months later was when the cotton, wheat, and tobacco factories had appeared in the fields thicker than they ever had before. Months later was when Amar Singh had died. And that was when all their troubles truly began.

Damn Saxon.

Randeep threw down his hammer, and wiped his brow as he stepped out of the stuffy forge. The cool night air greeted him. He breathed it in, and sighed it out heavily. His body ached, but he knew that the pain he felt now would be nothing compared to the pain yet to come. Longer days meant that more work would be expected and less time to rest and recover. Saxon would squeeze every drop of blood from them to build this dam, he knew.

He sighed again, and turned back to his shop. Its shelves were lined with acids for etching and staining, oxides for enameling, and antimony for hardening into alloys. For generations, his family had been craftsmen. Some said that skill with metal was in Randeep's blood, going back all the way to when the first cities were built upon this valley.

Now, he was reduced to little more than a quota.

With night approaching, Randeep put away his tools, closed shop, and walked the empty streets towards the main *chowk*. The village was deathly quiet, much as it was every night. Compared to the ring and clangor of Randeep's hammer though, the silence was altogether deafening. The sole sounds tonight were crickets and the footsteps of the patrolling soldiers. Rumor had it that the Zamindar was about to double the usual amount of picquets and impose a

stricter curfew for fear of “increased activity of bandits and wanted criminals”. More men would be arriving soon from Amritsar, Mata had included in her note, which always meant more trouble.

She had also included, the names of those “criminals” who were coming tonight to visit in the *gurdwara*.

When Randeep had read the note, he had almost cast it into his forge out of disbelief. Only his love for Mata and her earnestness had stayed his hand, for he could not believe that she would lie to him so. Yet, he could not believe what she had written him either.

He had no inkling of how to feel other than thankful that the “visitors” had arrived before the guard had doubled. Otherwise, they and the elders would surely have been caught and executed by Jogandar.

Eventually, Randeep had burnt the letter for security not disbelief.

Nightfall had been the decided hour, and that was all he need know.

He passed the shadows of the Saxon factories along the way. Most of the village’s women and children slaved away in there, ginning cotton, bleaching sugar, or drying poppy. The buildings were the largest in the village other than the *gurdwara*, long, plain oblong monstrosities. Though made from mudbrick also, they had none of the outer decoration of Punjabi homes. Their only designation was the golden Saxon logo above the front doors, threatening with its crossed arrows insignia.

A section of guards patrolled each company building day and night. Some of them nodded to Randeep as he passed. By now, they knew his routine and his reputation in town, so it

was no surprise to see him coming home from work even at odd hours.

Yet once they were out of sight, he slipped around a corner toward the *gurdwara*. The temple stood in Dhamija's main *chowk*, which was too exposed to cross even at night, so he walked the alleyway behind it instead. Curiously, Jagmeet's cart was parked back there to one side of the *gurdwara's* rear entrance.

Randeep stood gave a gentle knock upon the door, one hand kept upon the handle of his *kirpan*. His father had made it for him, and he trusted it more than any other blade or firearm. Should this meeting actually be an ambush, he trusted that his father's steel would save him.

He released the hand when Jagmeet answered the door. The old man hurried him inside.

Whereas the *darbar* was at the front of the *gurdwara* for worship, the *langar* was at its rear for after-service meals. No food was to be served at this late hour, though. The windows were cloaked with curtains, and only a few small lanterns illuminated the meal hall.

The elders sat around the flickering lights, just as they did whenever a meeting was called. However, two strange faces were with them. Though Randeep knew one, both were unfamiliar to him.

"Captain?" He said to Sanwar.

"It is good to see you again, Sergeant," Sanwar answered him. His voice was as calm and powerful as Randeep remembered from Gallipoli, though it was sadder too. "And they saw fit to make me a major, as it were."

"So how do I know this is really you, Major?"

Sanwar outstretched his hands. In them was the sheathed blade of *Cadarama*. It was sacrilege to draw weapons in a holy

house, so Randeep only exposed the base of the blade to verify its make. Sure enough, its rippled Wootz steel glistened in the firelight, proving that this was indeed Dhamija's ancient sword. Randeep bowed as he returned it.

"This is too much to understand," he could admit.

"Come sit beside me, my love," said his wife, Kiranjit, appearing from the darkness. Word had passed to her as well, and she had agreed to meet him there. "Come, and we will make it easier."

"Yes, sit," beckoned Dilnoor. She was a *Granthi*, a keeper of the holy text and the reader of its scripture. She was usually the one who arranged the secret meetings here in *gurdwara*. Her warm voice brought Randeep and Jagmeet to the floor with the others.

Then, she spoke of Sanwar's purpose here; of how he had come to fake his death; of his companion, Jack MacGregor; of their many journeys across the globe; of Saxon's villainy; and of the Philosopher's Stone.

"It is like the Chintamani Stone, as Hindus know it," Dilnoor explained. "Great power flows from within it."

"I remember vaguely of your interest, sir," Randeep recalled. "And you know this to be real?"

"It is," Sanwar replied. "It is why I vanished, and I have returned. It is Saxon's true purpose here."

"And his defeat is ours," Dilnoor agreed. "As is Dhamija's liberation. That is what we have been working towards while you were away. While your brother and the British have tried to keep us all in line. It is upon us, the eldest of the village to ensure its youngest will indeed have a future. A future in a free and independent India."

"The Stone will liberate us all," Sanwar vowed. "Our crops will flourish. Our water will run clean. Our people will be

healthy and strong. All peoples will. No longer will there be want or suffering.”

“I would gladly fight for that and alongside you once more, sir,” Randeep vowed as well.

“There has been too much fighting already,” said Jagmeet.

“We have lost too many of our sons,” agreed Mata.

“And too many martyred at home,” Navtej the farmer said. “And more soldiers are on their way.”

“We are no soldiers ourselves, Randeep,” Dilnoor said. “You and Kiranjit are the youngest of us. Your passion still burns deep in you, but our bodies do not match our hearts. Ours must be a clever way.”

“And which way is that?” Randeep begged of her. “We have tried strikes. We have tried protests. We have tried everything, and yet we have achieved nothing. The British do not yield for us. We are less free than we were four years ago, and men like Saxon are only richer!”

The heat was rising in his voice. The day was long. The hour was late. He could admit these both. However, too long had these meeting resulted in little more than talk when action was required.

“What of the dam, then?” Asked Kiranjit gently, but firmly. Such was her way of arguing. It soothed Randeep to hear. “How can we help with Saxon and the Stone when all of Dhamija will be underneath Jogandar’s boot?”

“We are not yet ready to confront Saxon or my brother,” acknowledged Sanwar, as her words were said to him. “Not until we recover the elements which we have lost and discover the fourth and final for ourselves. That will be my and Jack’s primary duty. Yet, we will still help you. Randeep is right. We must act. While I agree with this council that our first solution should be to avoid fighting at any cost, we

must be prepared for combat should that cost be spent. This is our duty to each as friends and neighbors and as Sikhi.”

There were silent nods of sad agreement around the fire.

“So, what will we do, sir?” Randeep needed to know what their strategy was to be.

“Reconnaissance is first required,” Sanwar said. “To defeat our enemy, we must first know his weaknesses.”

“And then?”

“Yes,” said Dilnoor. “How will we stop the building of this dam? If our people die from exhaustion, there will be no one left to save.”

Sanwar raised an amused eyebrow.

“Who said anything about stopping it?”

“Talion! Form line!”

Mister Taggart did not speak a word of Hindustani or Punjabi, nor did he need to. The villagers knew either from their years of service or just his fearsome shouting to shuffle into something resembling a parade formation.

Several hundred sweating natives stood to attention on three sides of Dhamija’s main *chowk* in the baking morning heat. Soldiers handed each man a pick or spade and organized the lot into brigades under Taggart’s supervision.

Donald and Saxon strode alongside Jogandar as he inspected the “troops”. They were all between the ages of sixteen and sixty, most stained with dirt from working the fields. Donald could pick out who had been soldiers from the straightness of their stance and the firmness of their gaze. At least a quarter of them had those qualities by his reckoning. Those men would make strong workers, as was their nature, and would be divvied as evenly as possible into each brigade.

Jogandar gazed upon them with contempt, however. Perhaps that was just his manner, but Donald felt something seething behind his onyx eyes. Nearly a foot taller than the average Punjabi, the Zamindar's height only exaggerated how greatly he looked down on all of them, and he surveyed them in this way until all of the equipment had been parceled out. Then, he called to Taggart.

"Sergeant Major," Jogandar addressed him, though hardly above speaking volume. He never yelled, Donald had noticed. He never raised his voice, because he never had the need. Everyone went quiet in his presence.

"Sir!"

Taggart snapped into a salute. Donald had to admit that even a man as ugly as he looked smart in British uniform.

His khakis had once belonged to a Sergeant Major McCandless who had been assigned as a drill instructor to the Zamindar's troops. The man had died of Yellow Fever the previous year and without family, thus leaving all of his personal belongings behind. Those effects had included his uniform and a set of bagpipes, and since Taggart had no use or talent for the latter, he had appropriated the former instead. McCandless had been of similar build to him, and Jogandar had required a white NCO to maintain discipline among his laborers anyway, so Taggart had been promoted on the spot. Saxon had assured everyone that the man's time in the Royal Irish Constabulary would make him an ideal candidate.

Donald wore his own uniform today as well. It had been some years since he had donned it, yet it was still as supple as a glove. He assumed a different gait and a different demeanor when he had it on. He was no longer a retired old man, but Brigadier MacGregor, Hero of the Sudan once more. With

his face shaded by his cap, he knew how frightening a visage he cut before the men, and could almost smell their fear upon the air. It was a level of respect that he had not enjoyed in quite some time.

Beside him, Saxon had the luxury of a servant shading him with a snow white parasol. That left the young lord's hands free to light himself a cigar, and smoke it leisurely while perusing the lines. He was proving himself to be quite fond of the local tobacco. Donald supposed that any businessman might enjoy his own brand, but Saxon took that adage to the highest degree and never was without one.

Last in their company was Jogandar's civil engineer, a skinny, anxious man from Amritsar. He had arrived late last night at the Zamindar's beckons, and had no time to even introduce himself. Now, he was struggling to keep stride with the other men's long gaits. All he could do was hurry along after them, and dab away the sweat of trying to do so.

Thankfully for the little fellow, they had all stopped to await Jogandar's command.

"Form column," the Zamindar ordered Taggart. "The column will advance on me."

"Very good, sir! 'Talion! Four ranks!"

The men turned raggedly shuffled into a four rank marching column.

"'Bout face!"

They spun west as Jogandar assumed the head of the column with Donald and Saxon on his flanks. The engineer scurried along behind them.

"Lead on, General," Jogandar bade him.

With that liberty, Donald marched them out to the western edges of the town where the ground sloped down from the last few houses into a small valley below. Three low

hills lay there and there was a patch of tall grass to the east, but otherwise the terrain was flat and clear before the valley sloped back up again into the forest.

The column halted on the ridge so that the commanders could assess the landscape.

“We’ll dig our main canal here,” Donald instructed. “Then several sluiced canals can run downhill from it to inundate the valley. If we level those hills, we can dig even more canals and transport water to outlying areas.”

“Good. Sergeant Major?”

Taggart appeared at his side.

“Sir?”

“Get the men digging. My men will oversee. Do as the General instructs. Deal with any infractions personally, but report them all to me afterwards.”

“Sir. Alright, you lot! Let’s get to diggin’!”

Taggart’s shout was enough to motivate the men to life. They all ran forth, and dug their spades into the ground.

Seeing that the work was under way, Jogandar turned on his heels, and began to leave.

Meanwhile, a look of utter horror spread across the engineer’s face.

“*Sabib*, please, I beg you,” the man pleaded as he followed behind them. Desperately, he dabbed at his sweat-soaked brow and neck. “This dam will prove disastrous! We are meant to follow the seasonal tidal patterns of the river. Year-long irrigation would cut off everything downstream!”

“It is a good thing that we are upstream then,” Jogandar said without a second glance over his shoulder.

“Please. I would be failing you if I did not provide my professional opinion. You must reconsider.”

Jogandar stopped.

This time, he did face the engineer when he spoke.

“The only thing that I must do is fire you,” he said.

“General, remove this man, and find me another chief engineer. A competent one, ideally.”

Donald saluted him instinctively.

“At once, *sahib*.”

Some guards appeared to escort the man away.

“I must commend you for expediency so far, *sahib*,” Saxon complimented Jogandar. “I suppose that I ought to let you and the General get on with it in the coming days, seeing as you both have a firm grasp of the situation. I fear that I would only be a hinderance at this juncture. Would you permit me to entertain myself by hunting your woods in the meantime?”

“Granted,” Jogandar allowed. “But under strict guard. There are criminals about, remember.”

“You are most gracious, *sahib*. Perhaps if I nab a brace of them, I’ll share the catch with you.”

“It will be arranged,” Jogandar said finally and sharply. His tone removed the pearly grin from Saxon’s face. Clearly, the Zamindar was finished with this line of conversation.

Donald was about to bid him farewell and get on with the work just then, when he noticed something strange in his periphery. Following its motion, he turned around to see one of the local men staring right at him.

This one was far taller and broader built than most of the others, and he had a weird, mad look in his hard, gleaming eyes.

The General was about to reprimand the man for insolence when Jogandar suddenly called his attention away again.

“General MacGregor.”

“Sir?”

The Zamindar had offered him a hand.

“Work them hard,” he said. “I will be at my estate if needed.”

“Very good, sir.”

They shook hands, and said no more. Jogandar simply walked away, followed by Saxon and the servant who was shading him.

Once he was gone, Donald turned back to where that tall man had been, but he was gone as well. Even searching furiously about the ranks, the General could not pick him out again.

Perhaps, he had imagined the whole thing.

In either case, Donald began his march along the lines of sweating, digging men.

After all, there was much work to be done.

Black ink streaked across the page as Sajan penned another entry into the ledger. Turning over the leaf brought on dozens more that needed to be filled, and with it, a heavy groan from him. All of these sudden changes in Dhamija meant nightmares for the records. There were now hundreds of laborers working the canals and mountains of supplies to be processed in order to pay, feed, and equip them all. Even if he enjoyed accounting work, that did not make Sajan’s task any less frustrating. Jogandar had simply given the order to construct these dams, and the rest of Dhamija was left to carry it out.

The project was surprisingly involved, and also sadly, less costly than he would have anticipated. Seeing as almost all of the village was in debt, the men were being paid in forgiveness instead of wages. Loans had been common

practice for any *zamindar*, but Jogandar had increased their size and scope to maintain the factories and employ his soldiers. Most of the crop yield went to export as well, meaning that the villagers no longer asked for loans to receive an education or start their businesses, but to buy necessities to feed and clothe their families. What was more, British taxes on Indian goods increased every year, meaning that they would have to purchase those necessities from England rather than from local tradesmen.

If Sajan's estimations were correct, none of villagers would be totally forgiven by the end of the dam's construction. Even months or years of hard labor would not be enough to free them from their bonds.

Last year, a village man named Gurjinder had self-immolated in the main *chowk* outside the *gurdwara*. Lamed from shrapnel in the War, he could no longer work to pay back his interest. So, he had stolen oil from the poppy factory, doused his body in it, and made himself a martyr in the square.

Sajan sighed, and had to shut the book at the thought of it.

He removed his glasses for a moment to rub his eyes, then looked around his study in empty thought.

As a boy, Sajan could remember trying to sneak into this very room while his father was working in order to spy on him. He wanted to climb the huge, tall book shelves; wanted to hide under the red wooden desk; and wanted to be next to his father while he was making big, important decisions. Yet Sajan was caught red-handed every time right at the door, because his father noticed the light go out in the keyhole. His father had always laughed about it, saying that one day the study, the house, and all their lands would be his, before carrying him off to bed.

That day had come sooner than expected.

Scarlet Fever had taken both his parents twenty years ago, leaving Sajan the sole heir to the estate at the stripling age of sixteen. By God's virtue, Amar and Ridhi Dhamija had swept in immediately to save him. They took stewardship over the house, and oversaw Sajan's education. They often came to visit or invited Sajan to their house. It was only a few miles from his own, but to Sajan, it was a world away from all his troubles. They had gone above and beyond what any neighbor should have done. They had given him a family again.

Sajan found himself thinking of Sanwar again as well.

All those years together were burned into his mind. They had become more than brothers then. Sajan had thought of him every day since he had left. He had dreamt of him every night since he had died.

Sajan's eyes drifted across the room towards an ancient grandfather clock. The hour was late, even if the sunlight was only just beginning to wane outside the study's enormous double windows. One could easily lose track of time in these long summer days before the monsoons came. Then, there would be little sun at all beneath the clouds.

He still had some time before dinner. He stood, and put away his ledger inside a locked cabinet in the old teak desk. Of an age with the clock, the wood was worn of lacquer. It still carried some of its luster, though. Its cerise color gleamed in the sunset with a certain glow, if he stood at just the right angle.

Like many items in this room, the desk had come from his grandfather's time. Once, his house of *Hara Baga* had been styled in the Mughal fashion with mosaics and floral patterns on every wall and tile. Yet when the Crown came knocking

on the Sikh Empire's door, all of that had changed. The floral patterns were painted over. The scrolls in Arabic and Persian on the study shelves were then replaced with books and novels in French or English, and the master of the house sat at a desk instead of on the floor. His grandfather had learned English, and insisted that it was the only language spoken in his house.

Sajan crossed the room to the double windows, which overlooked the garden. He found that viewing something growing helped to clear his head.

Down there, Ganeev was fussing with the flower beds. She did that whenever she was anxious. She would overwater them or over-trim the hedges, and the gardeners could not complain, because that would only make her angrier.

Even heavy with child, she labored in the heat, wiping away her brow in order to tend another bed. He could see that she was beautiful, even if he could not feel that beauty for himself. She deserved far better than this; a loving home with a man who could show his want for her, a life outside that home, and something more for her to live for.

So did he.

Ridhi had encouraged them to marry. Sajan had insisted that they should.

He had wanted to stay close to Sanwar, to his family.

The War had different plans.

A head of house without an heir was exempted from front line duties, not that Sajan was much of a fighter anyway. Someone like Sanwar was expected to lead. Someone like Sajan was expected to administer.

So, Sajan had stayed while men like Sanwar had gone. He had stayed behind making lists and shipping off supplies while men like Sanwar had fought and died. Sajan had sent

off more men to die whenever the men before them needed to be replaced.

Most days, he wished that Jogandar had been the one to perish in place of Sanwar, even if he knew that he should not think such things. Somehow the man had proven unkillable. Sajan had heard stories from the veterans around Dhamija about his exploits, and if only half of them could be believed, then Jogandar's ferocity was well attributed. Never had the man been wounded despite the many tales of gunfights, shellings, and charging machine gun nests that had apparently transpired. The Zamindar had seemed at home in that chaos, and indeed, Sajan had seen a change come over him many years ago. At sixteen, he had ceased to be a boy, and started acting like a soldier. He had waited the two years needed before joining, and then followed his brother off to war. Then, he returned unchanged.

If anything, Jogandar came back fully realized. He was as tall and strong as Sanwar by then and just as handsome, though there was no kindness in his deep, black eyes. At only twenty, he was already a major, and knew no other life. It was funny, Sajan admitted. The boy whom he had played with like a little brother had died before the War had even begun.

Sajan needed some air.

He went downstairs and out into the garden while there was still some time before dinner. By then, Ganeev had already vanished to busy herself elsewhere, perhaps with some of the fruit trees.

Hara Baga's garden was a majesty of color. He passed through the rows of catalpa, hibiscus, creepers, trumpet flowers, blood lilies, and firebush. Every shade and hue imaginable were on display, each bloom more brilliant and precious than a jewel, for their beauty could not last more

than a season. Sajan was spending more time in the garden than ever, wishing for the days when he would run about it, pretending it was the jungle and he an explorer in it. Wild animals and hidden treasure were behind every leaf and frond. When they were younger, he and Sanwar would play this game together whenever he came to visit, pretending they were off on some grand adventure in the great unknown. When they were older, their explorations turned towards each other. Sajan had known all the secret corners of the garden where the servants rarely worked, after all.

Their favorite spot had been the turtle pond. On hot days, they used to laze around it for hours. The day was cooling now as the sun was setting, but Sajan wanted to sit beside it anyways, before the darkness took it over.

It lay in a deep, dark grove, tucked back near the wall and behind a thicket. beneath the shady branches of a *palash* tree, those murky waters waited for him. Sajan took a seat on the mossy stone bench pressed against the twirling tree trunk, and watched them for a while. Lotus leaves floated on the surface. A feather drifted down, and caused a gentle ripple. Every now and then, a speckled turtle would appear, then vanish back into the gloom again.

“Reminiscing of days gone by?” He thought he heard someone say.

Sajan almost answered instinctively, then froze at the familiarity of the voice. He turned, and gasped.

“Sanwar...?”

“Sajan.”

This had to be a ghost, and yet he had never seemed more alive.

Darkened by the backlight of sunset and the shadow of the trees, Sanwar appeared almost phantom in these twilight

hours. He looked better than Sajan had remembered too, for in eight years, he had grown stronger and there was a hardness about his face that had come with that strength. Yet, his tourmaline eyes were just gentle as Sajan had remembered. The boy within him now was hidden, but not forgotten.

“You were...” Sajan began, struggling to rise.

“I am not dead,” he said, and strode over the pond. Sure enough, his reflection shimmered in the water. This was no mirage.

“What...what are you doing here...?”

“I thought that I might hide here until nightfall, then sneak inside to seek you. It seems that God had other plans, however.”

“I meant *why* are you here?” Anger was rising in his voice without his wanting it. “Where have been for all these years? Why have you only now returned? Why-”

There were a thousand questions that he wanted to ask. A thousand questions were already burning in his mind, and Sanwar had barely spoken.

He barely needed to speak either.

Four words were enough.

“The Stone. And you.”

“Me?”

Sajan sunk back into his seat. The bench was already cool beneath his legs, but a chill ran down his spine as well. Sanwar had spoken of the Stone many times before, of the dreams he had about it. Old wives called it the Chintamani Stone, but nobody believed in it, not truly. Those were just old stories. Yet, the look in Sanwar’s eyes said otherwise.

“You have the Stone?” Sajan asked only after a good long while.

“No,” said Sanwar. “But Saxon will soon unless we thwart him. In his hands, it will destroy Punjab and the world over. In ours, we can save them.”

“Ours?”

“I was told that you aid those who resist. You can help me stop him and my brother.”

“I abet those who resist,” Sajan corrected with a humorless laugh. “Your sister is the real organizer. I just make a few ‘mistakes’ in the books whenever she or the village need something to disappear.”

“I have already spoken to her. I am speaking to you. You are someone whom we both trust.”

“Well, I’m not a fighter!” Sajan said, and louder than he wanted. He hushed his voice, remembering where he was. “We cannot all be like you, Sanwar. We are not all brave, strong soldiers ready to run headlong into the midst of battle.”

“You served.”

“An adjutant is hardly an elite warrior, now is he?”

“All men have their place. All people. I am not asking you to fight.”

Sajan could not help but smile.

“You always had an answer for everything, Sanwar Singh,” he laughed. “You should have been *zamindar*, not Jogandar. Why? Why didn’t you come home? You could have spared us all this nightmare. You could have saved us from what you now fear.”

Sanwar did not answer right away, and Sajan realized that his words had come out harsher than he had meant them. Yet, in true fashion, his love did not relinquish his composure.

“This was always to be our future,” he replied. “Whether I ruled this land or not. No world exists where Empire and our people are compatible. When the forest fills with rotted trees, one must cleanse them with a fire in order to seed the land anew. I have returned to ignite that fire. I only ask that you pass me the torch.”

Sajan hesitated.

“What is it that you ask of me?”

“Arms,” Sanwar answered without hesitation. “You ran the supply chains out of Punjab during the War. You run the supply chains for Saxon Enterprises now. If anyone can make a canal happen in this time or get me a thousand rifles, it is you, Sajan.”

“So, they finally want a rebellion, do they?”

“Nobody wants a rebellion,” Sanwar replied. “A rebellion is demanded of them. Will you answer to that demand?”

Sajan did not reply right away. Instead, he sat silent for a moment, gazing into the pool. He could not meet Sanwar’s eyes, not directly. He could only stare at his reflection in the murky water, a pale comparison of the man he knew. The breeze blew ripples over the water, scattering the image. A turtle splashed a moment later, scattering the image altogether.

“The Army sent your ashes home to us,” Sajan said at long last. “I helped to scatter them. Your mother and your sisters wept for days, even if I never cried a tear myself.”

“I did not mean to hurt them...or you, Sajan. I did what duty demanded.”

“I know. Which is why, I wish that I were there with you. Or at least that I had known.”

“How could I tell you?”

“I know,” Sajan said again.

“Perhaps it was a mistake to come here,” Sanwar acknowledged, then turned to leave.

Sajan caught his arm.

“Wait.”

Sanwar waited.

“A shipment of Saxon Arms arrives tomorrow at midnight,” Sajan told him. “It arrives at the train station under an armed escort. Jogandar’s men are waiting there to retrieve the cargo, and transport it back to *Lala Gbara* personally. It is supposed to supply his new garrison. If it gets here that is.”

“It never will. Thank you.”

“And Sanwar?”

“Yes?”

“Please don’t die for real this time.”

“I cannot die until I have spent a life with you,” he said. “Nor can I live.”

“So, kiss me at least before you leave again.”

They did.

It was a kiss they both had waited almost ten long years to share. It was the sweetest kiss they both had ever known.

“Soon,” Sanwar promised.

“Soon,” Sajan agreed.

Then, Sanwar pulled away to go. Sajan wished that he could linger, but knew why he could not.

Sanwar had only taken but a single step when a voice called out through the trees.

“Sajan?”

A moment later, Ganeev stepped into the grove, looking this way and that. Her eyes fell on him, her confusion plain to see.

“Who were you talking to?” She asked. “I heard voices.”

Sajan had turned instinctively when he heard her. Fear had sparked inside of him then, for he thought that she had caught them, until he spun around again and saw that no one stood there at all. A gentle breeze wisped through the leaves revealing that none hid behind them either.

Sanwar had simply vanished as if he had never been.

“Sajan?”

“I was speaking to myself,” he answered truthfully after a moment. “Just reminiscing of days gone by.”

“Well, this day hasn’t gone by yet,” she reminded him. “Mother’s visiting for dinner this evening, if you remember. It’s been a while, really.”

“Worried about us, is she?”

“When is she not?” She asked with an eyeroll. Then, she sighed. “When am I not?”

“Go and rest,” he told her. “I’ll be along shortly.”

Ganeev simply nodded, and waddled back towards the house.

Sajan lingered for a moment longer before he followed her.

A gentle breeze wisped from the open window of the kitchen. The scent of saffron floated on the air.

To Sajan, it smelled like memory.

“There is little time,” Sanwar urged the council. “We must act now.”

Tonight, they had gathered again in the *gurdwara* at his behest. He had snuck back into the building once it was dark, and urged Dilnoor to send a message to as many members as she could. Many had arrived within the hour, and sat before Sanwar now with eyes and ears at full attention. Today had shown them all a taste of what the future held, and he knew that he could not lose this moment while he had

it. He had explained what Sajan had told him earlier that day, and now finished his tale with a call to action.

“We must steal those guns,” he continued. His voice resonated within the marble walls of the *langar*. “Should they arrive tomorrow, Jogandar’s grip around Dhamija will tighten while we become too weak to prise ourselves from out of it. We must arm ourselves or face our own destruction.”

There was some chatter from among the elders. They sat no easier on the carpeted marble floors with these grim words. Navtej took it upon himself to raise his voice and speak.

“You call for drastic measures, Sanwar Singh,” he said. “We must urge you to strive for more peaceful options.”

“There are no peaceful options while Jogandar threatens us so flagrantly,” Sanwar sighed. “Elsewise, I would have urged for them.”

“We have urged for them enough already!” Kiranjit agreed. “Sanwar speaks true. We would be fools to ignore the executioner’s sword hanging above our head. White men have taken over our village. Soon we will have nothing left to defend!”

Voices began to raise either in agreement or protest.

Dilnoor rose to quiet them, not simply for peace of mind but also for fear that the soldiers outside might hear them.

“Before anything is decided,” she said, her voice as low and gentle as a breeze. “We must first hear what Sanwar has in mind. Then, we could better make our choices.”

All eyes turned back to him then.

Sanwar had anticipated the question, and had been hatching his answer all evening.

“We would ambush the escort in transit,” he answered. “That is when they will be most vulnerable. Moreover, we can do so non-lethally.”

“How are we to do this without weapons?” Randeep asked. He had not spoken as of yet, presumably from the sheer exhaustion of having been working in the canal all day. “And how are we to do this non-lethally?”

“Have you saltpetre, Magnesium, Copper Chloride, and Lithium Carbonate in your forge?”

“I do...”

“And if I were to give you this, would you be able to refine it into pure Antimony for me?”

Sanwar had brought with him his sack of stibnite, and placed it on the floor in front of Randeep. The smith drew out one of the spiny hunks of metal, and examined it.

“I suppose I could...”

“And could you also procure me five trustworthy men with combat experience?”

“Yes...Is that everything...?”

“I have but one more request,” said Sanwar. “A most unusual one.”

“Because all your other requests were perfectly reasonable before... Well, what is it?”

“Have you still got your old uniform?”

VII

Dire Shall They Be

The sun seared down upon the filthy, toiling men.

They dug their spades into the dirt and flung them overhead in steady, rhythmic motions as the sepoy in their khaki watched from above. Down in the ditches, the earth was somewhat cooler, and there was some shade at least from the scalding sun.

Even so, sweat oozed down Jack's neck and brow so thick that he feared it would run the color in his beard. Yet whenever he dabbed his face, the handkerchief always came back clean, nor did anyone make any remarks. Jack reminded himself to trust Sanwar, who had assured him that the dye would hold.

He had concocted the mixture last night by powdering iron from Randeep's forge and combining it with boiled pomegranate skins and other natural colorings. The result had been a deep sable liquid, which they had soaked into Jack's eyebrows, hair, and beard. Kiranjit had gifted him some clothing and a *dastar* from one of the taller men in Dhamija to fully sell the role. Between the outfit and his already sun-tanned skin, Jack could perhaps have passed for Sanwar's brother.

Yet no matter how convincing the disguise had proven, Jack still feared that his amber eyes would betray him as an outsider, especially to his father, as they were far lighter than any of the Punjabi's.

So far, none of the guards had noticed him or paid him any mind while they patrolled above the trenches. They were busy eyeing for infractions more than anything. If they

deemed a man was working too slowly or too poorly, it was first a warning. If it happened twice, that soldier would box him in the ears on the spot. A third or major infraction would result in lashings, and a fourth was death, or so they had all been promised. No one had incurred anything past the first thus far, and those reprimanded were keen not to repeat their action. As long as Jack kept pace, he would avoid their fate himself.

Thus it had been for several days. The men labored while the soldiers lorded over them, and Jack in the meantime became secretly acquainted with the village's defenses.

Jogandar had a whole company of sepoy to oversee the canal project, while another was stationed at his manor in reserve. The two would rotate each day, one out in the heat guarding the workmen, and the other given lighter duties guarding the house.

Cavalry troops patrolled the perimeter of the village throughout the day, also on rotation. Jack estimated their numbers at no bigger than a squadron. The Zamindar himself rode among them in the mornings, often passing by the workmen to inspect the progress of their toil.

Jack also noticed that in the morning, a second troop would ride out past the canal and into the forest on the far hill. These men were Saxon's escort. Saxon himself rode no horse however, but sat with Rothstein inside a shaded canopy atop a great brown elephant.

Jack was sure to keep a note of that, though there was little he could do about it at present. With soldiers guarding Dhamija day and night, there was little chance that he and Sanwar could steal away to explore those woods themselves.

What he could do was help the village tarry.

Each day, barrels of supplies like nails and planks came courtesy of Jagmeet to the dig site. Heavy stones and boulders were hidden beneath them though, as the barrels, he had specially designed. By simply twisting their base, a wooden peg could hook or un-hook from place. When unhooked, the barrel's bottom would come loose, leaving the stone right where it was dropped as if it had always been.

A man would request some water or to use the privy, and when he did, two others would drop the boulder into the dirt and quickly cover it over while the guard was distracted. They would then have to spend extra time "removing" the stone and carrying it out of the ditch, only to load it back onto Jagmeet's cart and repeat the process the very next day.

Jack was often instrumental in these duties, as he and Randeep were two of the strongest, and could carry the barrels without making them look as heavy as they were.

It was a trick that could only be done a few times a day and by different teams of people, otherwise it risked giving away the ruse. The workmen would find other ways to dawdle, though. A nail would go loose here, a spade would break there. Sometimes, they would work to perfection on a useless task, and other times perform an important one so carelessly that it would fail and force everyone to start all over again. Sometimes, select men's wives would borrow Antimony powder from Randeep's forge and spike their canteens with a dash of it in the morning before work, so that they would be hunched over the privy all afternoon. Production would then be short that many men for the rest of the day.

Everything was done to slow the canal's advance by even a second at a time. All they could hope for was the moments to gradually build into days and never to be caught in the process.

At least, this was the plan for now.

Jack knew the sensibility of caution, but liked it none himself. Every day that passed was another where Saxon was closer to the Stone. The village needed to rise against Jogandar and stop both men, yet they could not do this without guns. Dilnoor and the elders were aware, and promised that they would try their best to adapt new tactics, if Jack could just be patient. In the meantime, Sanwar was working in secret to acquire the weapons.

Four days had passed already since they had arrived in Dhamija, and Jack was growing weary of these games. Reconnaissance was pointless if it did not lead to action, and tarrying the enemy was not the same as beating him.

He was anxious about tonight for that reason among others. Sanwar's plan not only needed to succeed, it needed to convince the village that it had been worthwhile. Whatever the outcome though, Jogandar would be immediately alerted to their presence and the real game would be on. Jack just hoped that Sanwar's plan would win them the advantage. There was no choice in an insurgency but to strike first, hard and fast. Waiting often proved a greater risk than not.

So far, he could be thankful that he and Sanwar had not yet been detected. Only key member of the village knew of Sanwar's presence so far. The elders were housing him in the *gurdwara* while Jack stayed in Randeep's home, pretending to be his distant cousin stricken by muteness. Though the villagers did not know of Jack's true identity either, they knew enough to go along with the story.

It did not make the isolation any easier. Jack no longer spoke outside of necessary exchanges with Randeep and Kiranjit who spoke some English, and even then, only briefly

in private. Few people spoke to him already, usually just to order him around. It was no way for anyone to live.

A moan sounded beside Jack. It had come from Navtej, one of the older men. He rubbed a hand across his face to wipe away the pooling sweat, and when he removed it, that face was pale and yellow as the morning sun. The old man gave out another moan and swayed before toppling over.

Jack and Randeep ran to him at once; Jack fanning him, Randeep keeping the others back so as not to crowd his air.

One of the guards shouted down from atop the trench. Randeep answered him with a shout himself, and the two went back and forth for a time. At one point, the soldier shouted something to Jack, who froze, until Randeep said something on his behalf. Somewhere during the whole affair, a sergeant came over, took one look at the fallen man, and ended the whole thing by waving his subordinate away and saying something to Randeep.

The smith nodded in response, then touched Jack on the shoulder.

“You’re helping me carry him out of here,” he whispered, and there were no more questions about it.

Together, they hoisted poor Navtej by the arms and legs, and ferried him out of the trench. They then began a long march through the streets back to where the old man lived. He was mostly skin and bone, so he was hardly a burden at all, but he was moaning and shaking all the while, which made it a bit more difficult to keep a hold of him. All of the carts and pack animals were filled with tools and dirt, so it had fallen on them to carry out this rather undignified means of transportation.

“What did the soldier ask me?” Jack wanted to know from Randeep once they were on the northern edge of town and

far from any earshot. Language was a considerable factor in his position, and he did not want to give himself away.

“He wanted to know what you saw, but don’t worry. He knows your story now. The guards now think that you’re as dumb as the rocks we just filled in. Just like we had planned.”

“Very clever of you...” Navtej muttered.

“Quiet, you’re supposed to be sick, remember?”

Navtej went back to moaning.

They were at his door soon enough. His wife opened it and began weeping and sobbing profusely, a façade which ended the moment that the three of them were inside. Navtej leapt out of their arms, and walked himself over to the bed where he pretended to languish while his wife only shook her head. She came over and fussed at him with a wash cloth, complaining that he had gotten some of the ochre dye into his beard. She and some other women had made the stuff this morning out of curry paste to mimic Yellow Fever. In a few days, it would “spread” to a few more man, then gradually take over most of the digging operation.

Jack and Randeep let the couple be.

“Now the ‘infection’ has begun,” Randeep said with a knowing grin when they stepped back outside. “But we shouldn’t dawdle getting back. The guards are eager to deal some punishment in order to ease their boredom.”

Both men were accustomed to long marches, so they were sure to be quick about it. Even so, they had a long way to travel, and it did not help them any that trouble was waiting for them just before they had reached the village proper.

As they neared, they came in sight of some children playing in a tree just beyond the mudbrick houses. One boy in the group had been particularly adventurous, and had climbed too high and far too quickly.

Jack and Randeep were already running by the moment that a limb snapped out from under him, and they were at his side just seconds after he had hit the ground.

Dark blood had caked in the dirt beside his tiny body. The fall had not been from high, rather it had been where the boy had fallen that inflicted the wound. A jagged plank of wood had been lying loose by the trunk with nails and splinters sticking out. The boy had fallen right on top of them, puncturing his thigh upon impact.

Jack and Randeep rushed to him.

The other children had scrambled down the tree to onlook. Jack kept them back while Randeep worked. The nails had punched in deep, and the edges of the plank had cut a long laceration down the leg. Judging from the wound, the boy had luckily missed his femoral artery by mere inches, but it was still oozing blood at an alarming rate.

Randeep immediately undid his *dastaar*. A black mane of hair falling down below his spine as he did. He wrapped the cloth around the child's thigh, working it to cover the gash entirely. Jack kept the other children back, so they would not see.

The child cried out as Randeep tied a knot in the bandage, not because of his wound, but because the compression was so tight. Randeep finished by jamming a stick inside the bandage to keep it all together, then snatched the boy into his arms as soon as it did, and turned to Jack.

"Stay here," he ordered.

Then, he sprinted towards the village.

The other children followed.

Jack just watched them go, fearing for the boy, who had gone so pale so quickly. He stood there in awkward silence as

they vanished from sight behind the curtain of the mudbrick houses.

For a while, he could only worry about the boy and of what Randeep would do, but as the minutes wore on and the heat bore down on him, his thoughts turned elsewhere.

He found himself a sliver of shade beneath the tree where the children had been playing, and sat there with his eyes closed and his back against the trunk. Exhaustion overtook him. This was the first moment in weeks that he had stopped to take a rest, he realized, and it elicited a heavy sigh. He would wait here for Randeep to return, and have a respite while he did.

A noise interrupted his quietude not long after, the cllop of hooves on dirt and stone.

Jack opened his eyes.

A rider on a white horse was coming down the road. The beast had slowed down from a trot into a walk, and was walking awkwardly at that. One of the front feet was barely touching the ground whenever it stepped, and so the others stumbled to maintain the horse's balance.

As the rider neared, Jack could see that it was Samreet upon the saddle. Without thinking, he stood, which caused her to turn his way.

She waved and smiled emptily at first, then looked again, and almost laughed.

"Oh, excuse me, Jack," she said with a startle. Her tawny skin went flush with scarlet. At least she remembered to lower her voice down to a whisper. "Your disguise is so convincing that I almost did not recognize you."

She stopped her horse in front of him.

"Well, thank you," he returned. "I suppose there's no disguising you though, Lady Samreet."

She smiled at him, her teeth as argent as her mount in the bright, clear day. She patted the horse's mane with a gentle hand.

"Could you help me with my horse?" She asked. "I think that something's hurting her."

"I noticed that. It's on her front foot. Let's have a look."

She reached for him to help her down from the saddle. Instinctively, he caught her in his arms, and hoisted her to the ground. He did not expect to feel such excitations when her skin touched his. Even though she was stained with dust and sweat, when her hands gripped his, they sent a tingle through arms. She landed right in front of him, her body very close to his.

"I was not expecting to see you here," she told him, seemingly unfazed by their proximity.

"Nor I to see you."

"I take a daily ride around the edges of the village. I see the men working out there in the ditches. I keep an eye for a particularly tall one if I can..."

Jack grinned. She was too sly, this one.

"Randeep and I had to help carry a sick man home today," he explained, more soberly. "Then a boy hurt himself, so Randeep ran him to the doctor."

"Was it bad?"

"It was. But I trust Randeep."

"As do I. And you. You've fought alongside my brother for years, after all." She then stepped away, which allowed Jack a moment to catch his breath and wipe the sweat from his brow. She went over to stroke the horse's head. The poor beast whinnied. "Kamala's normally sure-footed, and I just shod her last week...Here, hold her still."

At Samreet's command, Kamala brought up her leg, and Jack stepped in to hold the foot in place. He kept a strong but gentle grip on either side of the hoof, so that Samreet could look more easily. Sure enough, this revealed the culprit to them.

A long, thick splinter had lodged itself into the sole just beside the frog. No blood leaked from it thankfully, and it did not look to be in deep. Continued riding would surely drive it in farther, however, so it would have to be removed at once.

Samreet growled at the sight of it.

"More of Jogandar's doing, no doubt," she remarked. "I have seen all sorts of debris all over town."

"They have been overloading Jagmeet's cart, and that's what injured the boy," Jack noted.

The old wagon was often overladen with lumber to meet the demands of schedule. The deeper and wider that the men dug the canal, the more planks of wood they needed to support its walls. Many fell loose from the back of the cart, and everyone was too preoccupied to clear them away.

"Jogandar thinks only of his bottom line," Samreet growled. "And forgets about all the little pieces that he leaves along the way."

"All the same, let's take care of this horse quickly."

"Hold her firm, Kamala is a spirited one," she warned, pulling a large handkerchief from her saddlebag. Keeping one hand on the reins, she wrapped the other in the cloth and reached down to grip the splinter's base.

Kamala shuddered and whinnied as she did so. Jack had to use all his might just to keep her steady.

Yet, Samreet was quick about her business. Her grip clamped down, and in a single, careful draw, plucked the wooden spike free from the hoof.

Kamala gave a whiny when it was out, then another Samreet dabbed away the blood. Jack then released the hoof so that she could console her beast. She stroked her mane and nuzzle until she had calmed again.

“She’ll need a vet,” Jack advised. “It didn’t look serious to me, but you best get her back home soon.”

“Yes, you’re right. Thank you.”

“The utmost pleasure, lass.”

“You have strong hands,” she told Jack with another smile.

“And you’ve got a way with stubborn beasts,” he returned.

“Most animals are fairly tame if you treat them right.”

This time, it was Jack’s turn to smile.

She was too sly, this one.

The sound of thundering horses interrupted them. They spun around at once to receive a cloud of dust coming northwards down the road, and with it, the patrolling cavalymen. They blinked away the debris, and when they could see again, Jogandar had appeared before them atop his blood bay and with his troop of lancers all around him.

“Samreet, what are you doing?” He demanded of his sister. His icy onyx eyes glared down at them. “Who is this man?”

“Just one of the villagers,” she answered with a deep bow. “I do not know his name.”

“Then why are you speaking to him?”

He and his men rode closer, their polished sabers glinting in the sunlight.

“Please, *sahib*,” she said to him. “I had asked this man for help. Kamala took a splinter, and I needed a strong hand to help me fix it.”

Jogandar turned his gaze on Jack, who did not lift his eyes to meet it. From the drawn out silence though, he could tell the man was looking him over, assessing the level of his threat. Jack slouched and sloped his shoulders instinctively, and kept his head hung low.

“Give me your name,” the Zamindar commanded him in Punjabi, or at least that was what Jack imagined he was saying.

Right or wrong, however, he only had one possible response.

He only shook his head.

A long silence followed.

The thud of the Zamindar’s boots hitting the turf was what broke it, each long stride he took crunching dirt and gravel beneath his red leather heels. Despite himself, Jack raised his head to see the Zamindar advancing on him.

Jogandar was twisting a riding crop in his hands. The motion was mechanical, dispassionate.

He stopped in front of Jack, the leather crop taut between his fingers.

“Name,” the Zamindar commanded him again.

Again, Jack did not reply.

Although this time it was no charade, for the very moment he looked upon Jogandar in full, he froze.

The very likeness of Sanwar was staring back at him, staring with a cold and hateful fire burning in his eyes.

Jack was so stunned that he did not react as Jogandar released the leather twines, and raised the riding crop above his head.

A shout was the only thing that saved Jack from its wrath.

The cry had come from Randeep, who had come running over, waving his arms about. He had replaced his *dastar*,

though there were still bloodstains on his shirt and trousers. At once, he fell upon his knees in front of Jogandar, and pleaded. His voice was weak and wheezing, but still he begged with all the breath he had. Samreet added her own to the cacophony, crying out for her brother's mercy.

A single raise of the Zamindar's hand ceased both their babbling.

"I told you to only ride within the manor grounds," he said to his sister in English. "Dhamija will not be safe until I fully remove the threat."

He then asked something of Randeep, who nodded and pointed back to the dig site.

Jogandar nodded, and hooked the riding crop onto his belt. He then removed an ink pen and a booklet from his breast pocket, scribbled something on the first page, tore it out, and handed it to Jack, before turning on his heels and leaving him and Randeep both in the dust.

Jack looked down at the paper as the Zamindar mounted, and beckoned for his sister to do the same.

It was a ticket of leave, explaining Jack and Randeep's delayed absence. That would save them from a sergeant's lashings at the very least.

He looked back as the Zamindar and his contingent rode away. Samreet was looking back at him with a sad and sympathetic gaze.

Then, she vanished in a cloud of dust.

"We had best be getting back," Randeep told him.

"Aye, we'd best," said Jack with a shiver.

Somehow, this sweltering day had gotten much, much colder.

Steam rose off of the forest floor. The air was so thick with it that Saxon could only see a few feet in front of himself. A sensible hunter would have refused these conditions and hunted on another day, but Saxon relished the challenge. A man needed to be as much an animal in the bush as his quarry, relying not on sight, but sound and smell. A man needed to behave like the predators that he pursued.

His sweatdrops pattered off the foliage.

That was the only noise that he made.

The same could not be said for Rothstein, who was heaving breath behind him in a vain attempt to keep pace. Out here, Saxon was his only protector from whatever lurked within the forest, and even then, a big man with a big gun was not always enough to stop every beast.

The lieutenant in charge of their escort had insisted that Saxon remain atop the elephant. It was better to have a height advantage when hunting tiger, he had warned. One could see farther and protect himself from the reach of a tiger's leap in an elephant's litter. Yet, Saxon had ignored him altogether by dismounting and taking Rothstein with him. The troopers had tried pursuing, but Saxon had learned to cover his trail while on safari in the East African bush. All he had to do was double back a few times, and lead them on a loop for an hour or so before slipping away into the mist.

He had been sure to keep Rothstein close, as the Doctor held the map marked with their intended coordinates. The sagging paper was glued to his bony, sweaty fingers just as it had been since the hunt began.

"We are now within the proximity," the Doctor huffed as they stalked through the misty veil. He rubbed clean his glasses yet again when he said so, and then the compass too. How he could even find their axial lines in all this steam was

a mystery to Saxon. It was even thicker here than it had been elsewhere in the brush.

“Quiet,” Saxon growled.

He needed total silence to do his work. The Doctor’s labored breathing over the past few miles had probably given them away already.

After a long enough quiet though, Saxon determined that no one or no thing was following them, and so waved the Doctor forward.

In only a few short yards, the ground began to incline. A few more after that, and the steam thinned as the slope continued to steepen. Rothstein wheezed and strained to carry himself uphill. Saxon pushed him along, his stout, powerful legs taking the climb in stride.

When at last they reached the crest, the sun blinded them once more with its full brightness, for the air, while warm, was not so choked with moisture at this height.

There was still steam about their ankles though, for in the center of this hilltop was a bubbling pool shaded by a grove of tall, dark trees. Misty breaths of it drifted past Saxon and Rothstein to flow downhill into the wood. The pool released a sighing sound as its waters churned and frothed.

Saxon peered about the place.

“There’s nothing here,” he said, and meant it fully. In addition to being empty, the place was deathly silent save for the tremble of the spring. No birds sang amid the foliage. No flies buzzed about the air.

“These are the precise coordinates, my lord,” the Doctor assured him.

“Let’s look at it then, damn it.”

Saxon drew the machete off his hip, and hacked away a mass of vines and foliage that was in their way. Sweat was

dripping down every inch of his khakis, and the heat was rising in his blood. He put his irritation into every stroke until they had made it to the poolside.

Still, there was no sign of anything when they neared it.

“I could spend a lifetime researching the flora of this location,” the Doctor murmured to himself as he wiped clean his glasses and examined all its greenery.

“Why don’t you spend a second finding us the damn thing?” Saxon spat.

Rothstein gave the area a hurried glance.

“I see nothing,” he squeaked in fear.

“Damn it, where’s this forge!?” Saxon roared. He buried his machete in one of the tree trunks, which made the Doctor flinch. He absolutely cowered though when Saxon strode towards him, armed with just one large, accusatory finger.

“You said it was supposed to be here. Now how are we going to smelt the ingredients of the Philosopher’s Stone? Boil them together in this pool like it’s a bloody stew pot!?”

“My lord, please-” Rothstein pleaded as he stumbled backwards. He then found himself with his back against the tree bark, enshrouded in Saxon’s shadow. Steam was no longer just about the tall lord’s feet, but rising from his face as well.

“Tell me where it is, Rothstein.”

Rothstein’s eyes went to his feet. He was about to beg for his life, when suddenly, and thankfully, the answer came to him.

“Wait, my lord! Let us inspect the bottom of the hill!”

Saxon paused, and glanced down to where the Doctor was looking, then back towards the bubbling pool.

“Lead on...”

Rothstein obeyed.

They traveled down to the far side of the hill, and circled around its base for quite some time. All the while, Saxon bore his gaze into Rothstein as he scurried about, rubbing his glasses and checking every inch of ground.

Eventually, Saxon grew weary of this game, however, and felt the heat of anger rising deep inside him once again.

Rothstein did not notice this time, however, as he had stopped abruptly in the brush, presumably out of exhaustion.

“Why have you stopped?” Saxon was near to striking him for being so pathetic.

“I see it, my lord.”

There was a bald patch of stone on one side of the hill. Within it was a narrow defile, just wide enough to fit Saxon’s shoulders. Rothstein stepped inside of it, and ran his finger down a long crack in the rock wall, caressing its surface with his palm.

“Yes, yes,” he said with glee. “Here. Open it here.”

Saxon pushed him out of the way.

Driving his fingers in between the crack, he prised the entrance open. He grunted in pain as he did so, not just from the exertion of wrenching heavy stone apart, but because that stone was stinging hot. Yet he would not allow that pain to conquer him, and so, he forced the doors to open.

An oppressive heat blew forth. A hot breath like an oven’s wind blasted him, and singed his cheeks. Saxon willed himself through teary eyes to look into the gaping crack and see what awaited him within.

Inside, a passage curled down deep into the earth, flanged with rough hewn steps. A scarlet light glowed from down the winding stairs, and somewhere far beneath them, a fire churned and crackled.

After a moment's time, the heat became unbearable, and Saxon heaved the doors shut once more.

"So, we have indeed found the final location," Rothstein said with a smile. He made a pencil mark upon his map. "Now we must return with all the necessary items by May the Fifth."

"Is that the day?" Saxon panted.

"Indeed," Rothstein replied. "For the earth's magnetism will be altered on that day, and will result in the strongest outcome possible. A perfect, flawless Stone."

"Good," Saxon said, and wiped the sweat from his brow and face with a handkerchief. He did not understand the science, nor did he care enough to find out. He was simply tired. "In the meantime, let's get the bloody hell away from here."

They headed back towards where Saxon had abandoned their cavalry escort initially, an overgrown glade whose creep had easily disguised their footprints. Fronds of leaf and grass brushed against Saxon's knees and Rothstein's thighs as the two waded through it.

"Are you sure that they are near?" Rothstein begged, tugging at his collar. He stopped to clean his glasses, this time of his sweat more than the steam. By now, the mists had largely dissipated, giving Saxon a better view of their surroundings.

"They can't be far," he knew. "I made sure they'd go round and round in circles."

"Perhaps we could rest here, a moment, my lord?" Rothstein was pale despite the heat, while his clothes had darkened several shades from sweat. "Please, I cannot go on much longer—"

Saxon clamped a hand over his mouth.

Then, he lowered them both onto the ground.

From out of the brush had come a tiger.

The great striped beast stalked through the trees and into the clearing. Black striations flexed along its musculature as it padded towards them on noiseless paws. Its saffron raiment stood stark against the emerald backdrop of the foliage, making it an easy target, especially at this short distance.

Saxon trained his rifle.

Rothstein was squirming in the grass beside him, but Saxon ignored his fidgets. Right now, the world had narrowed down to him and his quarry and the front sights aimed right at it.

He let his finger ease onto the trigger, and took a single breath.

Rothstein took a breath as well, and bolted.

The tiger bounded forward.

Saxon stood.

Suddenly, its golden eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed as it steered its charge at him instead.

Fast as flame, this saffron streak flew forward.

Saxon fired at it four times.

Each shot halted its advance, until the last one pierced its heart.

The body fell just several yards from Saxon's feet, sliding in the steam-soaked grass as it lost grip on the earth.

When it had lain motionless for some time, he finally approached to inspect his kill.

Looking down at it, he slung his rifle over one shoulder and grinned.

"You can come back now, Doctor!" He called across the clearing. "I got it."

It took a moment for the Doctor to return. Even on his knobby knees, Rothstein had gotten farther than Saxon would have thought. The little old man was red-faced and wheezing until he saw the body. Then, all the color drained from him completely and his voice caught in his throat.

“What’s a matter? Cat got your tongue, Doctor?”

“It nearly killed me,” he rasped.

“Astute observations as always,” Saxon said, and lit himself a cigar from his breast pocket. “Death doesn’t always look the same when your subject’s not yet been sedated, does it?”

Rothstein stepped forward, and crouched beside the lifeless animal. He put a bony finger to its face, and stroked its fuzzy cheek.

“Such a specimen...”

“Well, you can’t have it,” Saxon snapped at him. “It’s my trophy. It’ll go nicely with my white one.”

“How will we even transport it back?”

“Don’t worry, the whole forest heard the shots. The servants’ll be along shortly with our escort. For now, let’s sit and wait for them to come.”

He found himself a rock nearby to do exactly that. After a few drags of local tobacco, he had himself a laugh as well.

“Never killed a red Bengal before,” he said. “Wasn’t expecting to catch anything today really. Now, I’ve got my last big cat. I’ve done my white and the big five. Lion, leopard, rhino, cape buffalo, and elephant. Panthers even. But not a red tiger. That just leaves me just one last prize.”

Rothstein looked away from his examination.

“And which is that, my lord?”

Saxon blew himself a ring of smoke, and grinned.

“Jack MacGregor.”

VIII

Fend off Their Despair

Gunkar sat in the cart, waiting for the train.

It was probably the most comfortable seat available, even if the wooden box was making his bum sore. The soldiers commandeered the vehicle from an old man in the village whenever they needed to collect shipments at the station, and Gunkar, being a corporal, was the dedicated driver.

Around him were his guard of lancers, unenviably seated in their saddles. Training dictated that they remain upright at all times, even while at ease, and that their grips remain firmly upon the haft of their great, long weapon.

Gunkar was no cavalryman, and he was thankful for it. His steed was the smelly old water buffalo that dragged the cart, and he would take that over saddle sores and back pain any night of the week.

Most of the troop was waiting at the bottom of the steps while the officer and a few guards were dismounted on the platform. There was no railyard out here in the countryside, although Colonel Dhamija was looking to change that in the near future. So for the time being, all supply shipments were collected here at the station. Usually it was uniforms, medicine, and other standard military issue items. This time, Gunkar had heard it was weapons and ammunition to reinforce the garrison. Word was that more men were coming, not just the promised Gurkhas. Colonel Dhamija wanted an army to expand, then protect his dam once it was fully built. Some of the men had said the village was about to explode into a full-on city, and that Lord Saxon had seen to it personally that its soldiers should be supplied from his

armories. Gunkar hoped that the idle talk was true. There was little to do here in the village. The men needed some action. He hoped that they would find the Colonel's rogue brother and his bandit army soon, and kill or chase them off for good.

However, he hoped there would be no action tonight. Only a quarter moon shone in the sky, and the troop had naught to guide their way save two small lanterns hung on either end of Gunkar's cart. Another hung from the awning of the ticket booth up on the platform, illuminating little more than the silhouettes of the men who stood beneath it. The lancers down on the road with Gunkar were little more than silvery outlines themselves, silent and motionless as statues in the night. Were it not for the fidgeting of their horses, Gunkar might have very well believed them to be. If an attack were to happen tonight, even these well-trained troops could quickly fall into chaos.

Suddenly, the silence broke.

One of the horses snorted.

The lancers turned their heads left in unison.

Gunkar followed their gaze. In the distance, an orb of light was speeding towards them. Chugging gears and engines destroyed all tranquility. The conductor's horn blared brash and raucous in the valley, and the train tracks rattled as the great machine grew ever closer.

Gunkar straightened in the box seat, and checked his sidearm. One of the cavalymen always lent him a pistol whenever they went on this mission, as it was far more manageable to fire from the carriage than a long gun.

Above them, the locomotive screeched towards a halt. Its headlight split the shadows with an almost blinding golden beam. Black smog billowed out the smokestack as it idled

there and a host of soldiers dismounted from its cars. Some conversation ensued on the platform between the commanding officers, then the enlisted men carried the crates down in pairs. At that moment, Gunkar gave the buffalo a whip, then used the reins to steer the cart around so that its bed was facing the stairs.

The cases were long and wooden, probably big enough to fit twenty or thirty guns apiece. There were at least a dozen of them, and twice as many crates of ammunition. A whole platoon of men had come from Amritsar to deliver the cargo, and they made short work of it. The shipment was fully loaded in about a quarter of an hour.

Gunkar had thought that would be the end of it. Usually, the infantry stood guard until the cavalry were out of sight before departing themselves, just as a safeguard against an ambush at the station. Yet, before the caravan could get moving again, a familiar voice called out in the night.

“Attention!”

Gunkar froze along with the entire column.

A tall, dark shape strode out of the shadows.

Only their lieutenant dared to step forward.

“Colonel Dhamija, sir, we- we were not expecting you.”

“Nor should you have been, as I did not announce that I was joining the mission this evening,” the Colonel said from the edges of the light.

He stepped closer to the cart, and inspected that all of the crates had been loaded in properly. All the while, he kept his arms crossed behind his back, as if he could not be bothered to use them. Though half-obscured by shadow, the lantern’s glint in his dark eyes was unmistakable.

“To what do we owe the honor?” Asked the Lieutenant in charge with practiced cordiality. He was sure to never look directly their commander in the eye.

“I am overseeing the delivery of this very important shipment myself,” the Colonel replied. “I did not wish to alert the bandits of my presence beforehand, and so I rode among your ranks in disguise. I have reason to believe that they expecting us this evening...which is why I am leading this detachment personally on an alternative route to throw them off our trail.”

“But sir-”

“Are you questioning my direct orders?” The Colonel snapped in a way that was quite unlike himself, and Gunkar knew right away that this matter was deadly serious for him to act in such a way. He just kept his mouth shut and his eyes ahead in order to avoid the Colonel’s ire.

“Not at all, sir,” the Lieutenant saved himself. “I only wished to remind you that the men are used to the usual route.”

“As are the bandits,” the Colonel countered. “My brother will no doubt be waiting along the road to *Lala Ghara*. That is precisely why we must travel the long way around. You. Driver. I will guide our route.”

Gunkar instinctively saluted while looking straight ahead as the Colonel clambered into the box seat beside him.

“Tonight, if you please,” his commander growled at him.

That got everybody moving. The infantry got back onto the train. The Lieutenant jumped on his horse, spurred the lancers into formation around the cart, and set them off into the night.

It was slow going. They normally had only a few miles to travel, though that usually took at least an hour or two, since

they could only move as fast as a fully-laden cart. Yet now, this new route would add unknown amounts of time to their journey. Gunkar did not like the idea of being out in the night any longer than he needed to be, but he supposed the Colonel's decision was right. It was better to travel slow and safely than ride quickly into danger.

About a mile into their journey, the Colonel veered away from Dhamija and towards the crossroads. Gunkar was unsure of how this detour would eventually loop them back towards the village, but it was not his place to question the Colonel's judgement. Even if the man's experience and rank did not already far exceed his own, there was still the threat of punishment. The Colonel was a strong leader because of his strictness. He expected the best out of his men, and that was what he made them into. It was your own failing if you disappointed him, and Gunkar knew he could not disappoint.

The caravan had to be far outside the village now. By the lantern light, only a few yards were visible in front of them, and there were almost no means to tell how long they had been going or even where. When Gunkar did manage to steal a glance to either side, he could just make out the swathes of fields and the deep gutters of canals running parallel to the road. The farmers used the different tracts seasonally, and so these irrigation ditches currently were dry, likely to be filled again whenever the monsoons came.

Gunkar could not tell exactly how long it had been since the convoy had changed its course, but he had noticed that the creak of his cart wheels, the clop of horse hooves, and the jingling of spurs and stirrups had fallen into almost a hypnotic rhythm. He was suddenly conscious of how long his focus had been solely on driving, and it began to wander.

Then, he noticed something in the road ahead, and jerked the reins to pull the buffalo to a halt. The rest of the column followed suit.

Illuminated by the narrow scone of light, was a spade buried in the very center of the road. Hanging from its handle was a wooden sign, which read:

“Dig your own ditches.”

The leading lancers lowered the weapons, and advanced towards it.

They had only made it a few steps forward when there came a sudden and massive bang.

Gouts of color exploded in the air; violet, white, teal, and crimson.

The garish flames sprang out from both sides of the road, their tongues sprouting so high, they nearly licked the moon.

The whole troop’s horses reared. Some even threw their riders. Many who kept their saddles dropped their lances in order to do so. A few men reached for their pistols or carbines.

Someone shouted “ambush”.

That was when the grenades went off too.

They banged and burst from every side. A brilliant flash blasted in front of Gunkar, and blinded him.

Startled, the water buffalo bellowed, and took off charging. Gunkar throttled the reins, and tried to steer the beast as it barreled forward, so that they would not crash into a ditch. He yanked them hard, and managed temporarily to stop the beast.

However, he heard a shout of countermand beside him.

“No! Go! Go! Go!” The Colonel urged him.

Gunkar’s discipline kicked in. He thrashed the reins, and spurred the water buffalo forward again. Around him, horses

fled or fell and their riders did the same. Bullets cracked across the sky from wild shots sent off into the night. Gunkar screamed as the cart swayed and swung, and tried to keep control of the massive beast in front of him. The cargo jostled in the back, and he, the driver, jostled in the front.

Then suddenly, the chaos was behind him.

At first, he thought he was still blinded, as there was only black ahead of him. Yet after a moment, the lantern's glow reminded him of the road and grass around them, and he realized that he and the Colonel had broken free of the ambush.

Glancing over the shoulder, he watched the rainbow of flames shrinking off into the dark. The sounds of screaming men and horses grew faint. Only scattered gunshots and grenades split the blackness with their sound and brilliance. Soon, it was all behind him, but he did not slow his speed.

He turned back to his commanding officer, whose face was solemn and impassive in the lanternlight.

"Which way do we go now, sir?" He was about to ask, then stopped himself.

He had not until this moment noticed anything amiss with Colonel Dhamija, yet in this heightened state, the details were suddenly registering.

The sleeves of his uniform ended too far from the wrist. The cut of it was far too tight across the chest and too ill-fitting. His boots were black, where he normally wore red leather. The Colonel had no pistol either, nor weapon of any kind except his *tulwar*. It was then that Gunkar saw that neither the cuffs nor epaulettes were bare of the crown and star that marked his rank. In fact, the uniform was rather dull and shabby upon closer inspection. Surely, this was part of his disguise?

However, Gunkar's gaze slowly returned to the man himself.

The man was staring back at him now, too.

"Colonel Dhamija, sir...?" Gunkar asked, reaching for his pistol.

"My sincerest apologies," said the man who most certainly was not.

In a second, he had his *tulwar* drawn.

In another, the knuckle bow had collided with Gunkar's face.

Gunkar was still reeling from the shock of his realization that he did not feel the blow, nor falling off the cart, nor hitting the ground, nor the whole suddenly go numb.

"So, you lost them all?"

The worthless corporal could only nod his head in response. The man was even crying, which Jogandar could not stand. As *zamindar*, he had been left in the charge of a household full of weak women and helpless *dalits*. He could not have his soldiers blubbering in front of him like infants. His father had clearly grown too frail in his old age to have kept them all in line.

He was not just angry at this one soldier after all. Lieutenant Ramdas and two large lancers from last night's escort stood before him, as did General MacGregor. The latter had encountered the troop straggling back to Lala Ghara during his early morning constitutional, and had brought them to Jogandar's office in the northwest tower at once. There, they had recounted the details of a nighttime ambush, in which "a sorcerer's demonic flames had driven them to madness and caused the weapons shipment to totally vanish into thin air". The cart had been found only an hour

ago, turned over in one of the empty canals near the crossroads. The bodies of the dead men had been discarded there too, stripped of any weaponry.

Two men had apparently died in the attack and four men were injured, not from the enemy, but by having shot and trampled each other completely by accident during the confusion. The corporal was one of the injured, claiming that Jogandar himself had changed the orders, then struck him. He stood there with snot and blood running down his crooked nose as he wept at his own incompetence.

Jogandar groaned, rose from his chair, and crossed in front of him.

“How?”

After a long and empty silence, only Lieutenant Ramdas dared speak.

“Sir, we were ambushed-”

“No,” Jogandar interrupted, and got very close to him. “How did you fail to recognize that it was not me? How?”

The last question was directed at the corporal who had been the wagon driver. He shivered at the question.

“He looked just like you, sir, I swear!” He pleaded.

“Naturally, do my brother and I look alike. But even a great fool would know that I would have no reason to even be there.” Jogandar chastised him, then turned to the other soldiers. “If you wanted evidence of Sanwar’s viciousness, well now you have it. As do you have proof that villagers in Dhamija are aiding and abetting him. How else would they have known about this shipment? Someone had to have informed them.”

“I assure you we will find them, sir,” the Lieutenant promised. “I can pass orders onto the units that every house is to be searched until the guns are found, and do the same

with all of the servants here in *Lala Ghara*. Arrest anyone who is found with them, then interrogate them for how they came upon such information. Get the names of any possible conspirators.”

“No, Lieutenant, you will wait.”

“A full day, sir?”

“Yes, Lieutenant. You will wait. They will be expecting that. No, if we allow the anxiety to grow. The conspirators will grow uncomfortable. Then, they will reveal themselves. This, I know.”

“Yes, sir...”

“Besides, we have another matter to handle in the meantime, regarding the punishment for last night’s failure.”

Jogandar sighed, and turned his back on them. He was disgusted by them for one thing, but also needed a moment to think clearly and consider his options. He gazed around the room in empty thought. The walls were bare of decoration or ornament. While his father had kept a study in the house, Jogandar had no need of it. Books reviled him, so did idols. He found no function in them, and had always hated them as a boy. He preferred spartan rooms like this one, once the chamber of a guard captain in the Mughal era, where there was nothing to distract him. Decadence led to comfort, and comfort led to complacency and weakness.

Finally, he arrived at an answer.

“I will present you with a choice, Lieutenant,” Jogandar said to Ramdas. “Twenty men were guarding that shipment last night. I can give them each twenty lashes myself or each of them can give this corporal twenty lashes themselves. After all, it was he who was driving the cart and was within reach of my brother. It was he who failed to thwart him or save the guns.”

The Lieutenant hesitated.

General MacGregor used the pause to step forward.

“*Sabib*, I must protest this use of cruel and unusual punishment,” he began. “Your men were ambushed—”

“My men forget the price of failure.” Jogandar had to cut him off before his insolence continued. “Just as you forget that I command here.”

The General diminished without another word, although his cheeks were reddening from holding his tongue.

Jogandar turned back to the petrified Lieutenant.

“Well?”

“My men will give the lashes, sir,” he answered, finally finding his voice.

“Good. I expect four hundred lashes by this evening. Then, strip him of rank, dishonorably discharge him, and get him to work digging in the canal tomorrow.”

The Lieutenant nodded, and the two large troopers dragged the sobbing, former corporal out of the room. The doors shut heavily behind them.

General MacGregor stood there a time, as if he might say something.

He did not.

He merely opened his mouth, then shut again, and awkwardly waited about as if he had some purpose there when he had none.

“When are your Gurkhas arriving General?” Jogandar demanded of him, disliking the vacancy.

“Tomorrow,” he managed.

“Good. I will have need of them when the time comes. We will find those guns soon enough. We will find my brother. And we will find whomever is abetting him.”

“And then, *sabib*?”

“I will deal with them. You are dismissed.”
MacGregor nodded curtly and exited after the other soldiers,
once more leaving Jogandar all alone.

IX

Bare Thyself to All

A whole day passed without incident, which set Jack ill at ease. Sanwar's raiding party had discussed a cover story beforehand and had anticipated intense questioning, but not its absence. No, the day after the attack began as normal with the usual digging in the ditches, as did the following. No guards were tearing down their doors. No questions were being asked at all. It almost seemed like the raid had never even happened. Unsure of what to do, the elders had instructed everyone to carry on with plans as usual. So, more men fell ill with "Yellow Fever" and took Antimony pills to help sell the illusion.

Jack and Randeep exchanged uneasy glances with their fellows as they labored. Two nights prior, he, Randeep, and several other village men had laid in wait at the bottom of the seasonal canals to strike the weapons caravan. They had acted as trenches for the men conceal themselves and also their explosive charges. The latter were various pyrotechnic chemicals, which Sanwar had manufactured with Randeep's help. Jack meanwhile had synthesized a small amount of gunpowder to act as fuses. Once they hit their charge, bursts of various and brilliant colors had exploded into the night to startle the escort.

For good measure, the trio had also crafted a pure and highly explosive Antimony allotrope. Although only a direct hit with the metalloid could do much damage, the loud bangs and bright flashes that it produced were more than sufficient to send the cavalrymen packing.

The plan had gone off brilliantly until now.

Now, they were just...waiting.

They had been expecting an immediate reprisal, a brutal crackdown which would incite the villagers to arm themselves in self-defense and fight back. Yet, none had come. So, what was happening? Jogandar surely knew of the attack by now, so why did he delay and to what ends? Did he want to lull them into a false sense of security? Did he want them to strike first? What game was he playing?

The first sign came that second day.

At noon, the Gurkhas arrived.

A small company of them came marching down the road from the train station in full kit, their entire lives contained inside sixty-pound bergens on their backs. A cloud of dust arose about their ranks, turning their uniforms a deeper shade of khaki. Where Sikh troops bore the *dastaar* on their head, the Gurkhas wore a wide-brimmed hat with one side pulled back against the crown. They were short men, but deadly. Most were not more than five and half feet, yet each wore the same hardened look up their bony faces and the same huge knife upon their belts. It was called the *kukri*, a fighting knife with a banana-shaped blade, and it had earned a frightening reputation upon the battlefields of France, Palestine, and Afghanistan.

The workers watched them pass beyond the village, and over the bridge towards *Lala Ghara*.

“More treachery,” Randeep cursed to Jack in whispers.

Yet, Jack’s sights were on the *gurdwara*.

Sanwar was hidden within its walls, and safe from prying eyes. Dilnoor had not even Jogandar would risk searching it, for such a deed would be delegitimizing sacrilege. However, circumstances were different now. Sikh troops might have

qualms against desecrating a gurdwara, whereas Hindu or Buddhist Gurkhas might not.

Whatever the case, the taskmasters barked at all of them to stop gawking and get back to work, so there was no more time to dwell on it. Thus far, there was no obvious indication that any of the raiders had been discovered.

That came later.

They had almost completed a full day's digging when a sergeant's whistle blew. The men all dropped their tools while the soldiers screamed at them to vacate the canal, and form a parade in the main *chowk*. The men jumped to it, and scurried to the square, where they formed the three-sided box of a parade formation with the open-side facing the *gurdwara*. Jack and Randeep stood side by side in the left line. Together, they watched with trepidation as the soldiers mirrored the villagers' parade formation, and face them.

Jogandar was waiting in the center of the square. He stood with several officers and Taggart at his side, his dull eyes scanning the villagers' ranks. In spite of his exhaustion, Jack remained calm and confident. The Zamindar had no evidence. They had been sure to leave nothing incriminating behind.

What little confidence there was in Jack began to waver when Jogandar stepped forward to speak. He had not heard the man say much until now, and only then did he realize his great fortune, for never had he heard so fearsome a voice.

Thunderous and sonorous as a storm, it roared throughout the village streets so loud that Jack was sure that all of Dhamija could hear its rancor. Though he did not know the words which Jogandar spoke, the malice and the cruelty of his Punjabi needed no translation. He accosted the villagers, looking upon each of their frightened faces with nothing but

vile ichor. When at last, the beratement concluded, the Zamindar proved to him that the game was over.

The “sick men” were dragged forth from around the corner of a side street. Several dozen of them, including Navtej, were thrown into the parade ranks by even more soldiers. Each one was bruised and bloodied in addition to looking deathly ill. Their fellows tried to help them stand, but were smacked by rifle butts as a reprimand, leaving the injured men to suffer on their feet alone.

Jack was nearly sick himself.

Then, Jogandar held out a bottle of Antimony pills, likely taken from the village doctor, and smashed it on the ground. His voice grew quieter, yet darker then, and the whole parade seemed to shiver at his words.

Upon that cue, the soldiers turned their weapons onto the crowd.

“What is it?” Jack whispered frantically to Randeep.

“What did he say?”

“May whoever is responsible for the ambush come forward to receive their punishment,” he translated. “Otherwise, I have no hesitations in killing all of you.”

That was it for Jack.

The game was done. He had done enough. These people had suffered for far too long, and he would not allow more of them to take his place.

He moved to step forward.

Only, Randeep pushed him back, and came forth instead.

He strode out into the square, one man facing a company of soldiers.

“You want your culprit, Jogandar!?” The smith called out to him in English. “Well, here he is! I attacked that caravan last night. I poisoned our men. I am responsible. Do what

you will to me, but spare my brothers. They have no hand in this. But know that my only crime is being loyal to my true friend and captain, Sanwar Singh.”

Randeep was a short man, yet in that moment, he stood taller than the rest of them, even Jogandar. Although much of the crowd could not understand his words, his actions spoke for themselves, and they all stood a little taller too.

The Zamindar saw this defiance in the ranks, but did not react right away. He simply said nothing, and nodded to his men.

A pair of them seized Randeep by the arms, and shoved him to the ground. He struggled, but their grip on him was tight, and he fell onto his knees before the crowd.

“Thank you for volunteering,” Jogandar said. “Now let us demonstrate what happens to those who disobey.”

The village men gasped at what came next.

Taggart stepped forward, and drew a huge trench knife from his belt. Brass knuckles lined the hilt of its gleaming nine-inch blade, and he locked the wielder in a death grip. With his free hand, Taggart snatched Randeep by the *dastar*, and undid the fabric.

Billows of his long black hair spilled out onto his shoulders.

“No!” The smith protested, until a soldier kicked him in the guts.

Then, Taggart clutched a clump of Randeep’s hair, and pulled it taut. He put the knife’s edge against it, ready to slice.

“No!” Jack cried out as well, not realizing that he had done so in English.

Before he made a cut however, his eyes flicked up and met Jack's within the crowd. Recognition struck him in an instant.

He lowered the weapon in confusion.

"MacGregor...?"

"Aye. Yours, truly."

The sound of a Scottish brogue from a Punjabi mouth stunned everyone in earshot.

That was all the hesitation that Jack needed.

He leapt through the guards and into the square, and landed one hard punch in Taggart's face.

The man went down with a twisted, bloody nose.

Jack grinned, even as the soldiers rushed in to restrain him. Half a dozen of them descended on him, kicking and punching him as they wrestled him to his knees. Even Jack, for all his strength, could not defy them. His legs hit the dirt. A fist hit his guts. When he doubled forward, a hand wrenched back his head, and a man came forward with a gag and a length of rope.

"Bring him to Lord Saxon," Taggart ordered. He was still getting himself off the ground, with one hand clenched around his dripping nose. "But only after you've brought him to me..."

The soldiers held Jack's head and arms in place as the gag came forward.

Then, the shot rang out.

The man with gag fell back with a red hole gaping in his chest.

Everybody turned.

Before the doors of the *gurdwara*, stood Sanwar Singh Dhamija, a smoking rifle in his hand.

The soldiers turned their guns on him, but Jogandar raised a hand and ordered them to hold their fire.

The Zamindar stepped forward alone, and drew his curious saber.

Sanwar threw his gun aside, and drew *Cadarama* out instead.

The two approached each other until they were close enough in measure, then assumed their stances. No one moved to interfere. No one said a word, besides the pair, of which Sanwar was first to speak.

“Brother,” he said to Jogandar.

“Traitor,” Jogandar said to him.

Then, the fight began.

Their blades met in iron fury. Steel clashed steel. The curved swords slashed together, parried, reposted, then repeated the sequence.

Sanwar fought in a way that Jack had never seen before. Normally, his companion kept his movements minimal, always blocking and striking in a measured style so as to conserve his energy. But here, Sanwar exploded with every motion. He leapt great distances, sometimes twirling his body in the air to put all his energy into a single cut.

Jogandar often had to break his stance in order to gather back or forward and maintain his measure. Yet, he stayed grounded, taking on the familiar fencing guards that Jack had practiced hundreds of times while at the Darby Academy. The Zamindar would throw a textbook cut and Sanwar would strike back at full force, meeting technical skill with unbridled rage.

The exchange went on for minutes. Not once did either man tire from the strain, nor did the crowd tire of the excitement. They watched in utter silence as the two men

battled in the square, unifying villager and soldier in the equality of awe. Only when the fight drew too close to them, did they back away, or rather they were pushed back by Jogandar's men.

Sanwar had repulsed his brother back into the right side of the parade line. Jogandar, seeing that he had nowhere to retreat, held his ground and parried a savage oncoming blow from Sanwar on his shell-guard.

Then, the Zamindar shifted his weight from his back foot to his front. He swung his weapon in tandem with the motion, forcing Sanwar to recover and parry in response. Yet, Jogandar continued to press the attack, each blow hammering Sanwar backwards.

Suddenly, Sanwar was on the backfoot.

Jogandar was fighting with renewed tenacity. Now, he was flying through the air, abandoning his textbook style for those wild, bestial swings.

The fight quickly returned to the center.

There, Jogandar unleashed a tremendous blow.

Lifting his saber high above his head, he hewed straight down with two hands on the hilt and the weight of his entire body behind the blade.

Sanwar held *Cadarama* sideways overhead with his offhand braced against its spine, and dropped down to one knee in order to protect his head.

Sparks flew from the blades as they struck against each other.

Jogandar's sword turned harmlessly aside in spite of its ferocity, yet a killing blow had never been his intent.

With Sanwar kneeling on the ground, Jack saw then that the attack had simply been to create an opening. For right

then, Jogandar brought his heavy boot to bear, and kicked his brother firmly in the chest.

The force of it shoved Sanwar to the ground. He landed on his back, and sent a cloud of dust into the air. He lay in a heap of helpless ruin, all the wind and pride knocked out of him, defeated.

Jogandar stood over him, his sword turned downwards and still held in both hands.

“Father always knew that I was stronger,” he said. His once booming voice was dry and hoarse. “And so have I. Now you will die in the dirt like the disgraceful coward that you are.”

“And yet...” rasped Sanwar from the earth. “I returned to face you...”

For a moment, Jogandar stayed his hand.

It was only a moment, but it was enough.

“Sanwar!” Somebody cried. “*Bole so nibal!*”

“*Bole so nibal!!!*” The village roared.

Inspired by the defiance of Randeep, the spirited fury of Jack’s attack, and the return of their once and future lord, the workers on every side of the parade rushed forward then to his defense.

. The soldiers, suddenly swarmed by hundreds of villagers, tried to open fire. Yet, the fastness and ferocity of the crowd prevented them from firing forth a volley, and they were thus shoved aside by the mass.

Seeing the masses of them closing in on him, Jogandar sheathed his sword and frantically drew his pistol. Running while he fired, the Zamindar fled to the safety of the village streets, as did his men.

Several villagers were struck down by the fire, but that was not enough to slow their charge. They collided with the soldiers, grabbing both men and weapons as they

overpowered them. The fray was so close and thick that they could only use their rifles to push back the mass. Yet, that was to no avail. The tide of angry workers only swept them underfoot. Any sepoy who could not escape was thrown down and trampled by the mob.

With the sudden surge, Jack and Randeep found their strength again, leapt to their feet, and struck down the men around them with their fists. The villagers came to their aid, landing blows against the startled infantry.

Jack found himself slammed against Randeep, fighting not against the soldiers, but against their fellow workers to avoid being crushed. He grabbed Randeep and yanked him to his feet, then snatched a rifle free from a soldier as the mob dragged the man to the ground. He looked for Taggart on the field, yet the Sergeant Major had vanished in the chaos, so Jack turned his sights on Sanwar instead.

The crowd had lifted him from dirt, and Jack could see him towering above all others. He pushed his way through mass, trying to get ahold of his friend. The journey was a struggle. Around him, the villagers were grabbing any weapon or tool that they could find, and raising them in open defiance. They shouted out in victory against Jogandar, but it was far too soon. Only Jack's own great height gave him a view of what was happening around him, and what was coming next.

From the river rode the cavalry. Jack watched the troopers' pistols raise and their lance tips lower as they descended on the village.

Bunched together, the workers were an easy target.

Troopers were pouring into the streets, firing and stabbing into the crowd. This was no longer a fight that farmers with workman's tools could win. A few shots were all it took to

drive the masses back. Once several men were killed or wounded and the horses came smashing in, the villagers lost their resolve.

They broke, and ran.

The lances drove them back into the streets or into houses. Anyone who could not escape was trodden underhoof. Anyone who fought back was impaled upon their spear tips. The fallen infantry gathered themselves. Those who had not been trampled to death by the mob regained their feet, and searched for a rifle.

Jogandar, now mounted, rejoined his troops. He rode into the crowd, firing at anyone who crossed his path.

Jack shoved men aside, and grabbed Sanwar by the shoulders.

“Run!” He cried.

Yet, Sanwar tried to wrench Jack’s rifle from him.

“No! I can end this!”

There was a clear shot on Jogandar, who sat high above the crowd, emptying his pistol into them.

“Then they’ll end you!” He cried. The lancers were drawing near.

Jack yanked the rifle back, and grabbed his friend.

“Come on!” He screamed, and shoved Sanwar through the crowd.

Randeep was suddenly there too, helping Sanwar along.

He could not fight both him and Jack together, and so resigned himself to flight.

They broke free of the crowd, and ran towards the south end of Dhamija, where the canal lay abandoned. Beyond it was the safety of the forest.

The three of them knew that was their escape at once, and so together, they vaulted over the trench, landed on the other side, and sprinted down the hill.

Not far behind, a few troopers had managed to escape the bedlam, and had caught sight of them. They jumped their horses over the canal as well, and gave pursuit.

The trio was almost to the other slope when the shots came flying in after them. The horsemen were gaining fast, lances swapped in favor of carbines or pistols.

“Go on!” Randeep urged Jack and Sanwar, and sprinted off to one side. He weaved around the hillocks in the valley, using them for cover as a few men broke off to chase him.

Jack and Sanwar kept on running towards the slope.

When they made it a few yards up, Jack wheeled around, and fired his rifle at whomever had kept chase.

Three lancers had followed them. One shot struck one rider in the arm, and he dropped his pistol. Another took a second from his saddle. The third man, seeing that he was riding uphill at point blank range, veered away, and fled. His wounded fellow joined him, leaving the dead man and his horse.

Jack and Sanwar did not stay to watch them go. A short climb more, and they were safely within the cover of the forest.

Only then did either man look back again.

Across the valley, Jogandar’s men had overrun the canal. The workers had scattered. Gunsmoke covered over the village. Horses whinnied somewhere within the haze, and cries broke out between the rifle cracks. Bodies lay in the dirt, soldier and civilian alike. The burning scent of sulfur was in the air.

Dhamija was in chaos.

“Come on,” urged Jack.

Yet, Sanwar hesitated.

“Come on,” he said again, but gentler this time.

Sanwar relented.

Together, the two men ran off into the wood, the sounds of shots and screams ringing out behind them.

X

'Fore the Mighty's Ruin

"I ought to burn that forest to the ground."

Jogandar clenched his grip upon the banister above the drawing room hearth. His nails dug into the wood, but he hardly felt the pain, even as the blood ran down his fingertips.

All he felt was the deepest, blackest rage.

"*Sabib*, you will destroy all of your lumber supply," Lord Saxon protested.

"You'll kill my son, that's what you'll do!" General MacGregor steamed.

"I'll kill my brother that's what I'll do," Jogandar seethed.

"What happened to capturing him with discretion!?"

"That was before all of Punjab knew he lived!" Jogandar flared, and spun around to face them.

Silence came over the room.

The four white men all stood before him; Saxon, the General, the Doctor, and Taggart with his bandaged nose and a bag of ice, awaiting his command.

"Might I advise an alternative solution, my lord?"

Of all of them, it was the Doctor who addressed him. Jogandar had hardly heard the man speak before, as his voice scarce rose above a whisper. What was more, he was almost a whole foot shorter than the Zamindar, and often vanished into the background during conversations. Yet the old man spoke with great familiarity as he adjusted his glasses and stepped forward.

"And what would that be?" Jogandar found himself subsiding at the placidity of the man's voice.

“MacGregor, as we know, has a great vengeance for my employer, Lord Saxon,” the Doctor explained. “Send him with a force into the wood. Lure MacGregor into an ambush. Capture him by this method. Perhaps you might allow the General to lead such an expedition, so that he may ensure his satisfaction with the result.”

Jogandar considered the proposal for a time, the others’ eyes transfixed on him all the while.

“They will know it is a trap,” he said at last. “We used the same strategy in the village. Besides, my brother knows the forest better than anyone. It is more likely that he would ambush regular troops than vice versa. And as a final note, I hear that Lord Saxon has a habit of wandering idly when under strict orders to the contrary.”

Saxon grimaced, and fumed at that.

“But we must send someone! We must do something!” The General implored him.

“We will,” said Jogandar, finally decided. “Send in your Gurkhas,” he bade MacGregor. “I place them under your direct command. You may deal with your son however you wish. Kill my brother if you can.”

Jogandar would have led the company himself, if not for the disaster here in Dhamija. His troops were still struggling to keep order. He had captured many of the “sickened” men for questioning, and arrested Dilnoor, Navtej, and several other prominent community members. Randeep and his wife had fled in the confusion, but Jogandar had larger concerns at present, chief of them, his family. They would have been taken under control and soon.

As much as he would have liked to kill Sanwar himself, he preferred restoring order and one less thing to do.

“I’ll brief the men within the hour,” MacGregor answered with a nod. “They can track by night as much by day.”

“Good. Then get to it.”

“Allow me to accompany you, General,” Saxon insisted. “Talk some sense into this man. You need me as a lure. Besides, I’m a skilled hunter myself—”

“There is no need to put yourself at risk, my lord,” the General declined. “And you heard the Zamindar’s case against it. But don’t worry. My Gurkhas will find him like a hawk hunts rabbits on a cloudless day. By tomorrow, he’ll be in my capture, rest assured.”

Saxon growled. His entire had visage changed tonight. No longer was the young lord jovial and genial in his manner. No longer did those white teeth smile. His mouth was twisted into grim resignation. He looked to Jogandar, who simply said no more.

“Very well, then,” Saxon pouted, and followed MacGregor out of the room.

“What are you orders for me, *sahib*?” Taggart asked from the sofa. He was sitting there icing his nose, and looking at Jogandar with big, dumb eyes.

“Get whatever you can out of the prisoners,” he ordered the Sergeant Major. “Find out what my brother and MacGregor’s son were plotting. And why he chose to reappear now of all times. Use whatever methods you wish, just don’t kill anyone. I’ll decide what to do with them after my brother’s been handled.”

“Very good, *sahib*,” Taggart replied. He exited the room, but not before pouring himself a glass of whisky on the way out.

That left only Rothstein.

The little German doctor had retired to the sofa, and was sipping tea without a sound.

“A useful suggestion, Doctor,” Jogandar said, sitting on the sofa opposite to him. “It seems we are the few men of sense about this place. Perhaps you are the true reason for Lord Saxon’s success.”

“Lord Saxon has a mind of dominance,” the old man gently rebuffed. “His arena is in competition. Like you, he is an *übermensch*, unencumbered by conventions of morality. My arena is in study and experimentation. I exist to execute his vision, for he is the one who shall achieve it, not I. The world needs a man like him to usher in a new dawn for humanity.”

“And what about a man like me?”

The Doctor smiled.

“Did you know that Caucasian Greeks once settled in this valley some millennia ago?”

“I did not.” In fact, Jogandar failed to see the relevance of this at all.

“Some informed communities believe this region to be the origins of the Aryans, one of the seven root races.”

“Speak your point.”

The Doctor sipped his tea before he did.

“You, my lord, are of a martial race. That comes from your Aryan lineage. I have studied your brother. The propensity for greatness is in your blood. You are a warrior and conqueror by birth just like my people. You do not allow others to dictate your actions. You seize your destiny for yourself.”

Jogandar sat assessing the old man’s words.

“It was always expected that Sanwar would succeed my father,” he said at long last. “And that I would be his close right hand. Yet there was too much kindness in Sanwar’s

heart. He had sympathy for the schedule-castes, and love for animals and nature. He had the makings of a strong warrior, but was too interested in his studies. Once he was gone, I was made to lead, I saw his weaknesses for that were, and how he had tried to indoctrinate me with them. I think then I realized what perhaps I always knew; that I was to be the one who succeeded. That I was strong enough to lead. The War proved that to me, if Sanwar's absence did not."

"I read your record. You killed sixteen men single-handedly during but one action, and wounded dozens more."

"My entire section died in that attack, so I alone, was left to carry it out. I captured a machine gun nest, and got most of them that way. The rest, I burned alive with a flamethrower. Does it not distress you to know that I have killed so many of your countrymen?"

"I admire strength, which is why I would offer you another proposal."

"What do you suggest?"

"I have watched your brother and the young MacGregor evade capture on numerous occasions. You rightly fear that they will be wary of another ambush. However, there is one scenario when they always run headlong into the abattoir."

"When?"

"When there is someone else in danger."

Jogandar considered the claim.

"You had the correct method in the square," Rothstein continued. "Only you did not kill those who betrayed you outright. Had you executed them, Sanwar's sympathies would have led him to his demise. I still see vestigial kindness of his in you. Do not allow it to restrain you, my lord. Be your own man, and do what is needed to draw him out."

"Suppose MacGregor catches them before I do this."

“Do it anyway,” Rothstein told him. “Your brother’s rebelliousness has already taken hold among your people. Demonstrate to them your control. Expunge such notions from your rightful subjects.”

Jogandar nodded to the sound of it. Then, he arose and walked out of the room with a renewed sense of purpose and rage.

He went down the hall to parlor room, the place where he was keeping his family. A platoon had been dispatched to bring them all to *Lala Ghara* for their protection. Four men stood guard outside of the great double doors. They parted at the sight of him.

Jogandar threw open the portal, and stormed inside.

Everyone in the room jumped when the doors flung out, and gasped when they slammed hard against the walls.

Each one of them stared at him; Samreet, his mother, Sajan, and Ganeev, mouths agape and failing for words.

It was Ganeev who found them first.

“You knew. Sanwar was alive. And you knew. You knew!”

She advanced on him with each accusing statement.

When she got too close, Jogandar slapped her down with an open hand.

She hit the floor, landing on her back.

His mother screamed.

Sajan leapt to his feet, and at him.

“How dare you strike my wife!? Your own sister!”

Jogandar closed his fist for him. His blow drove into Sajan’s stomach, knocking all the hot air out of him. The thin man doubled over. Jogandar helped him to the floor by pushing him over with the sole of his boot.

“I only struck her with my hand!” Jogandar shouted down at him. “Father would have used a cane!” He stepped over his

brother-in-law to reach his mother, who was still screaming an ungodly racket. "Enough, woman!"

She silenced, though that did not cease her weeping.

Jogandar turned back to everyone.

Samreet was helping Sajan and Ganeev into some of the armchairs about the room. Ganeev was weeping now too. Once everyone was seated, Jogandar resumed his composure.

"Yes, I knew and I didn't tell you," he said. "Because I was trying to protect you and the legacy of this family. Your brother is a monster. He is a traitor, a deserter, and a murderer. He abandoned this family for a decade, and has only returned to ruin it further!"

"No, no, no, not my Sanwar," his mother moaned.

"Yes. He is, mother. And by running from this family, he killed our father with grief."

That was too much for his mother, who burst into wails and tears all over again. Jogandar did not stop her. His ire was focused solely on Ganeev.

His sister sat on the floor, holding her cheek, yet the lividity had not gone from her face. If anything, the growing bruise was a fitting color for her ill mood.

"Father would have taken him back," she said acidly.

"Father was too kind-hearted!" Jogandar roared. "Father did not go far enough! He thought that he could appease the Brits! There is no appeasing them! There is only joining them, because India is weak! Punjab is weak, which is why we fell! The West is the future that will make us strong! The future that I have built for all of you! Sanwar wants to destroy that, and this family!"

"He's not the one destroying this family, *sabib*."

Jogandar rose his hand to strike again.

"Brother, please!"

Arms outstretched, Samreet threw herself between him and Ganeev. Jogandar checked the blow midswing.

“Please, little brother,” Samreet begged him. “This is family is fraught with grief. We are confused. Our love for the Sanwar we once knew blinds our judgement. We simply do not know what you do. We do not know him as you do now. Please, give us guidance. Tell us what we must do, and we will obey. We swear it.”

“Do you swear it, Ganeev?”

All eyes fell on her.

“I said, ‘do you swear it?’ Or do you want a bruise upon the other cheek!?”

Samreet’s eyes were pleading with her.

Ganeev could only look away.

Softly she replied, barely audible.

“I swear.”

“Good.”

Jogandar lowered his hand.

“This is my command,” he told them. “No one is permitted to leave this house until Sanwar is found, caught, and killed. That is my final word.”

And so, he left the room without another.

For the best part of the day, they traveled through the forest. They put miles behind them, marching hard through hillock, bog, and thicket. They moved in circles, doubled back, and did everything they could to cover their tracks. That would slow pursuers if there were any.

Sanwar knew the wood. He led them to a high hill where they could shelter with wide visibility over the valley. He had gone to this place many times as a boy to explore, and knew it better than anyone, for few believed it to exist at all.

Sanwar had insisted of it to his parents and any adults who would listen, but none dared venture out to see it and warned young Sanwar of doing so.

Dusk was settling by the time they grew close. They were moving through a clearing filled with tall grass. Sanwar had assured Jack it was not much farther.

Yet, suddenly he stopped dead in his tracks.

“What is it?” Asked Jack, yet Sanwar did not answer right away. He rubbed a clutch of blades between his thumb and forefinger instead.

“Dried blood,” he answered at long last.

Dark brown splotches stained the greenery. A patch of grass had flattened around them, formed in the impression of a large shape.

Sanwar surveyed the area a moment, then reached down, and retrieved something shiny from the forest floor.

“Would you reckon it is fifty-calibre?” Sanwar asked. He turned the spent casing in his fingers so that it would better catch the waning light.

“Aye,” said Jack, looking closer at the brass. “Made for a custom rifle no doubt. A Saxon rifle, perhaps.”

“He was hunting near here-”

“-Which means the forge is near here too,” Jack finished for him. “But where...?”

“We will not find it tonight,” Sanwar declared. Even the light of long summer days came to an end, and this one was fading fast. They needed shelter for the night.

Sanwar led them out of the clearing and towards the hills. They journeyed through the mist slopes a time, with Sanwar sure to keep Jack close behind him all the while.

Atop one of the hills was a crumbling ruin, long overgrown. The creep of vines had turned its greying walls to green, and

trees had split the stones of its foundation and sprouted toward the sky. Corinthian style columns and archways carved with floral patterns suggested it had been some kind of palace in ages past. Perhaps there had been a temple here as well, for there were countless idols of animal-headed gods eroded beyond all recognition. Some statues were only of a head, taller than a man and wider than his wingspan. One, Sanwar knew as Agni the Vedic fire god, from his three faces and his four arms. The others perhaps time had forgotten altogether.

Discarded bits of bronze were strewn about the place; helmets, shields, arrowheads, spear tips, swords, and pieces of armor. All of it had gone green.

A shallow rectangular pool lay in the center of the complex. Sanwar could imagine that it had once been a water garden adorned with lotuses and lilies. Now it was a sickly shade of green, overgrown with weeds and reeds, and overrun with flies and frogs. There were fresh streams elsewhere, he knew, where they could gather water to drink. Instead, he did so while Jack began the fire by striking stone off the spine of *Cadarama*. His own sword had been left behind in Randeep's house, so re-armed himself with an abandoned *kopis* once the fire was going.

Sanwar shot them some rabbits for dinner. So far from town, he was confident that no one would hear the shots, and if they did, he and Jack could run away again. Besides, they needed sustenance. It had been almost a full day since either of them had eaten anything, and they would need all the strength that they could get now in order to face tomorrow.

"Jogandar will doubtless send troops after us," Sanwar said once they had a moment's respite beside the fire. It was

hardly dignified, but they passed the sword between them to shave off chunks of meats.

“My father brought Gurkhas with him. He’ll send them for certain. Regulars don’t know how to track their enemies. And knowing my father, he’ll be leading the men himself.”

“How many would you estimate?”

“Fifty?”

Sanwar sighed.

“He won’t send cavalry at least,” Jack said cheerfully. “The forest’s too dense for them at least, and they’re useless uphill.”

To that, Sanwar raised an eyebrow. Then, he could not help but laugh.

“So, it will be you and I and fifty Gurkhas,” he gasped. “And all we have got to bloody fight with is a single rifle and some swords!”

Jack was laughing too.

“Makes it a fair fight.”

“We have one advantage, though.”

“Aye? What is it?”

So, Sanwar told him.

“Let’s hope it’s enough,” said Jack. “We’ll need to do some preparations on the morrow then. I have a few ideas.”

“What are they?”

So, Jack told him.

When they had eaten, Sanwar took them somewhere to refresh themselves. Nearby was another hilltop thick with trees and steaming from a natural hot spring. There, at his behest, they undressed and entered the pool. The water was warm and the night air was cool. They sat on opposite ends of the pool, leaning against the basin with their bodies soaking in the cleansing vapors.

The moonlight hung full above them, its reflection glinting silver white against the sable waters. Sanwar washed his uncovered hair. He combed its dark cascade with his wooden *kanga*. Jack cleaned away the dye from his hair and beard, restoring them to their natural auburn color. He had not shaved in months, and so they were as wild and bushy as the forest all around him.

The two men cleansed their bodies, then lay back, arms resting on the surrounding stones. They looked out at the stars, at the streaky blue serpent of the Milky Way above them.

“I imagine we may die tomorrow,” Sanwar said at long last.

“Aye, it’s likely,” Jack agreed.

“It would hardly be a satisfactory end to this grand journey, to die before the Stone was in our hands.”

“You held it once. That is more than almost any man who’s ever lived.”

“Yes,” said Sanwar. “But...”

“But?”

“The result is more important than the pursuit. Would it not be devastating to have sacrificed so much to save my people, only just to fail? At least I could have spent the time actually helping them in that regards, rather than eight years of wasting my life.”

“It wasn’t a waste to me.”

Sanwar paused.

He reconsidered.

“Yes, I suppose you are correct. I am sorry, Jack.”

“Save it. You’ve got nothing to apologize for. It’s your brother who does. It’s Saxon. It’s my father. And all the rest of them.”

“You can make them answer tomorrow.”

“Aye, we will.”

“I know that I should not,” Sanwar said. “But every night, I imagine killing Jogandar. I wish that maybe I had strangled him as a babe or that he had died somehow during the War. I would have done anything for him to not be here.”

“You’re looking at it all wrong,” said Jack. “No one can answer for their crimes until they’ve committed them.”

“I suppose that you are correct,” Sanwar acquiesced again. “And I suppose that I wish my brother were still the boy who I once knew.”

“What happened to him?”

“He became my father and so much worse. As to how, I cannot say.”

The night was cold despite the steam. The stars were likewise, pale and distant in the early summer sky. They watched them for a little while longer.

“We need rest,” Jack urged at long last. “Tomorrow’s going to be a damn bloody day. At least now, we’re clean.”

“Jack?”

“Yes?”

“I trust that you know how much I love you.”

“If we die tomorrow or live forever, I’m with you, *mera bhra*. Remember that. Always.”

“Always, *mo bhrathair*.”

They dressed themselves, returned to the temple and the dying fireside, and tried to sleep.

The Gurkhas moved through the mist, bunched into a narrow wedge. An artillery shell or volley of riflery would have found them a gratifying target, yet Donald MacGregor knew they hunted only two men who were lightly armed at most.

Besides, there was simply no way around it. The mist dictated that they march in close proximity and maintain visual contact, for as soon as that was lost, the unit would become scattered and in disarray. That made them even more vulnerable than being bunched together.

Only the lead scouts traveled out of sight, as they were the best men by far and could find their way back to company in any conditions.

Donald trusted his *subedar's* instincts, even if he far outranked the man. The Gurkhas had been given to him as a favor from an old friend, Colonel Ashburn, who had fought with him and Conall when each had commanded but a company themselves. Now Ashburn was commander-in-chief of every unit inside of Punjab. He would have assigned a unit like the Gurkhas to this task with confidence, even if their reputation had not so greatly proceeded them.

Yet, Donald could see that they were fulfilling it. The company weaved between the dense trees and foliage as one. They stepped almost noiselessly across the forest floor in total unison, rifles trained at the front, rear, flanks, and even the canopy.

As the commanding officer, Donald traveled in the center of their wedge formation. He had not led from the front in nearly thirty years. That was the duty of captains with their companies, not generals with brigades who delegated from the rear. Yet, even Donald had led some charges as a young colonel, much to the ire of his superiors. The exhilaration of being with his men was back in him again. With a Webley on one hip and *Lann Dhearg* on the other, he felt like that same young officer marching on to meet the enemy face-to-face.

They had found the latter when they had searched the smith's house. There had been no sign of the missing guns,

but they had found the broadsword stashed beneath some linens inside a chest. Donald had felt tremendous weight reclaiming the blade. At long last, it had returned to the hands of someone it deserved. He would wield it against Jack, and show him what it truly meant to carry such a weapon.

What was more; he would show his son once and for all what was right and what was wrong.

The *subedar* called the company to a halt. The scouts had returned from point, and their findings were reported back to Donald.

“Tracks go round, but we find them,” Rohit the *subedar* reported after speaking with them. His English was imperfect, but his intonation was so punctual that there was never any ambiguity as to his meaning.

“Which way?” Donald asked.

The scouts pointed eastwards. Following that way, the company came into the shadow of the hills. The mist obscured all but the bases of them, and there was no telling how high they climbed. Again, the scouts reported that this was indeed the way. The tracks continued up the slopes.

“Subedar, take one platoon around to find the far side of the hill,” Donald ordered. “I’ll lead another up this way. We want to surround this place so that there’s no escape. And remember, only suppressive fire until you’ve identified your target. Make sure you’re always aiming uphill. If either of us needs help, light a flare so that we can find each other.”

The Subedar nodded and saluted. The company then broke off at his command.

Donald then began his ascent. He liked this none at all. There had never been any mists in the Sudan. There was always the smoke of gunshots and the chaos of battle, but a

soldier could move elsewhere and escape it. Here in the jungles, the veil of mist was all encompassing. Donald knew he could not escape this trap, obvious though it was. So, the best he could do was try and overwhelm with his numbers and his well-trained troops.

However, he could not help but groan in front them.

Jack had chosen his ground well.

The Gurkhas moved at a crawl, quite literally. Flat against the ground, they practically were climbing up the hill. Donald did not do the same. Not only was it unbecoming of a British officer to slither in the grass like some base serpent, he did not believe that his old knees would allow for it. No, he remained standing, slowing his pace as he followed his men from the rear.

A man-shaped shadow appeared atop the hill.

The Gurkhas stopped. Several in the front ranks opened fire.

“Cease fire! Cease fire!” Donald hissed, fearing they shot Jack outright.

The shadow on the hilltop was still standing though, so Donald brought a few men forward to investigate.

When they reached the figure, they found that it was little more than a suit of armor on a cross of sticks, all tied together with twines of young bark. Several holes were in its maned bronze helm and breastplate, but otherwise the false sentry had held together quite well.

One of the Gurkhas tapped the metal with his rifle barrel.

As if to answer, something whistled out of the fog.

The man fell back a second later. To the shock of his fellows, a spear was buried in his chest. It was a crude weapon, just a bronze tip tied to a stout branch, but it was

effective enough to kill. The wounded Gurkha gurgled on his blood while the others fired at the mist.

Donald tried to get them in order again, when another spear came flying from the other direction. This hit another man in the back, and sent him to the ground.

“Retreat!” Donald ordered instead.

They dragged the wounded men downhill, and rejoined the others in the safety of the hillside’s cover. Regrouped, the Gurkhas lay awaiting orders.

Donald drew his pistol, and scanned the mist.

His choices were either to press the attack or call it off altogether.

Clearly, Jack was relying on the mist to conceal his ambush. If Donald’s men advanced, then they would be walking headlong into the trap.

Yet, if he did not capture them now, they would flee deeper into the jungle. Sure, he could send the Gurkhas on a long-range patrol after them, but that would take time. More time meant that the situation could change. Jack and the Zamindar’s brother could find an even stronger position or escape into foreign territory. Punjab was not so far from the edges of Tibet, or perhaps the pair might abscond to Afghanistan for a second time.

Perhaps, this whole ambush was a double bluff. Perhaps his son wanted him to retreat so that Jack could escape. Perhaps he wanted Donald to think that he was at a disadvantage when clearly, he was not.

No, they were too close now. Donald had his enemy outgunned, outnumbered, and outmatched.

They needed to attack.

Donald signaled to his sergeant. They would leave the wounded behind (one was dead now anyways), and travel along the hillside to attack its crest from another avenue.

The men inched sideways through the grass around to the right side of the hill. Donald grunted while he moved. It was degrading enough that a general should be dragging himself through the dirt, but his old bones were starting to protest the labor. He did his best to keep his aggravations quiet. Men needed to have faith that in their leader, and see that he was just as strong and willing as the rest of them.

The platoon had made it perhaps twenty or thirty yards away when he finally relented and called a halt. He rested for only the briefest moment, then ordered the Gurkhas forward. They got to their feet, and rushed to swarm the hilltop. Donald was just behind them as they found cover among various ruins and boulders. He took refuge behind a crumbling wall, and peered out through its window port at his surroundings.

The place was eerily quiet.

Nothing showed through the mist, save for the shadows of walls and ruins of some long-forgotten structure and more of those uncanny man-shaped figures. The men were sure to hold their fire this time.

Donald ordered a slower advance. As the skirmish line moved forward, some of the shadows came through, revealing themselves to be ancient walls adorned in ornaments and lichen patches. Some of those shapes were but gruesome statues of bestial Hindu figures, half-decaying from the strain of centuries.

Then, one of the shapes moved.

A Gurkha fell, another spear run through his thigh.

The others opened fire, but the attacker had run off into the cover of a doorway and vanished completely from their sight.

Moments later, a second spear came flying out from nowhere.

Then, rocks came raining down on them.

In seconds, the hilltop was a flurry of bullets and projectiles. Muzzle flares burst in the mist, even if man or weapon could scarce be seen. Donald watched several men fall down around him, either killed or wounded. It was in this confusion that he found the sergeant, pulled the flare gun off of him, and aimed it straight into the air.

A stream of light soared into the clouds, and burst with scarlet brilliance. It hovered for a moment, then slowly wafted down to earth.

Then, everything went quiet again.

The shooting stopped. Spears no longer whistled. Rocks no longer fell. The only sounds were of groaning, injured men or of the dying.

The sergeant took a headcount. Four were dead and six were injured. Already, the platoon was down to almost half its number.

“Must retreat,” the sergeant urged in rugged English.

“Wait for the *subedar* to reinforce,” Donald urged instead. They were in a bad position for certain, but any movement now could elicit another attack. With twenty-five more men around them, they would have enough forces to fully overwhelm the hilltop. His men just had to hold their ground until the second platoon arrived.

Then, gunshots rang out in the distance.

Donald groaned.

His second platoon was under attack.

Sanwar scanned the fog.

He was not looking, he was listening. In these conditions, a soldier had to rely on other senses besides his sight. To a good soldier, fog could be a friend. Sanwar could remember how he had used the morning mists of Flanders to conceal his movements in No-Man's-Land or how smoke shells had hidden his company's assaults in Anatolia.

Yet, a clever enemy could use fog just the same. He knew that the Gurkhas would utilize the mist to disguise their advancement. He knew that they would be wary of an ambush, and would try to encircle the hillside.

That was why he and Jack had spread bits of bronze and stone around the entire perimeter of the ruin. They had rigged triplines of dangling bronze armor to fall away and clattered out an alarm when they were broken. They had scattered loose pieces of rock or bronze arrow heads to crunch and snap if they were stepped on.

The flare shot off had alerted them to the presence of a second group of Gurkhas creeping about somewhere. So when Jack and Sanwar had given one platoon of them enough trouble, they had run off, and heard their alarms being triggered on the far side of the hill.

They had taken positions atop the palace walls right as they heard the second platoon quick marching towards them, and then attacked.

Sanwar could judge just based on sound how close they were, and threw his spears accordingly. The first one did not need to be accurate. It just needed to force the Gurkhas to return fire, and reveal themselves. Then, Sanwar would change positions, and hurl another.

The Gurkhas had taken several casualties; he could hear them crying out somewhere in distance. Then, they had broken off, giving Jack and Sanwar a chance to steal away elsewhere.

He and Jack had scattered stashes of their crude spears all over the complex. Now, Sanwar crouched beside a bundle of them while tucked into the shoulder of a turret wall. He was looking down at where the hill slopes should be, and waiting for his next attack.

Sure enough, he heard the sound of marching men, though fewer this time, perhaps just two or three. He threw a spear in that direction all the same, but was not met with any retaliatory shots. In fact, he even heard the metal scrape against the stones below.

Sanwar grabbed another spear, but held his second throw.

Something was obviously amiss, yet he dared not move, for fear that he might walking into a trap himself.

His rifle was slung around his shoulder, but he dared not reach for it either, as at any second, an enemy could attack and he would need a weapon close at hand.

Something crunched below him.

Carefully, Sanwar leaned forward, ready to throw.

A Gurkha screamed right in front of him.

The man appeared in the turret window, having climbed up from the walls beneath. He had a *kukri* in his hand, and swung it right at Sanwar.

Sanwar leapt back while thrusting his spear forward. It was a crude thing, just made of twine and branch. It snapped in half when the spearhead pierced the Gurkha's chest, but that did not slow the man.

He continued climbing into the turret, so Sanwar side kicked him off his perch. The man went screaming to the bottom, and landed with a thud.

However, two more were climbing in from Sanwar's left and right.

Sanwar drew *Cadarama*, and drove its point into the left one. He fell too, and joined his fellow on the temple floor.

The other one got through.

He came in swinging the *kukri* with expert cuts, keeping his elbows close to his body. Sanwar parried the knife as best he could. The shorter weapon had the advantage in such confined quarters as up here in the turret. One blow even connected with beard, and shaved a clump of trimmings off the end of it.

Sanwar simply dropped his sword then, opting to close in for the grapple instead. He put one huge hand on the Gurkha's face, and another around his wrist to block his weapon.

The Gurkha bit and kicked at him, even sinking his teeth into Sanwar's palm. He did not draw blood, but the force and pressure of it was painful to behold. Yet Sanwar was the bigger man and stronger, and suffered through the pain to push the third man to the edge.

He too, went out the window, and the fight was over.

Yet, the desired effect had been achieved.

Shots cracked from the mist, tearing chunks of stone off of the turret walls and windows. Sanwar ducked down, grabbed his sword, and crawled away, abandoning the high ground for the escape of some nearby stairs.

He had reached the landing when he heard boots and voices echoing off a passage to one side. He took the other, and came out into the courtyard with the pool.

This had never been one of his original redoubts, but it seemed like he would need it now.

Sanwar shut his eyes, pulled loose a reed, and stuck the thing into his mouth. Then, he fully submerged himself in the pool. The water was not deep enough for him to go down vertically, so he lay flat against the bottom, just a few inches from the surface.

Moments later, the sound of heavy boot heels scraping against stone echoed in the pool. Watery, muffled voices reverberated in Sanwar's ears. Yet, he lay still.

He could not say how long he waited, only that it felt like an eternity. Eventually though, the boots began to scrape away, and the sound grew fainter and fainter until it disappeared.

That was when Sanwar emerged. He tilted the water of his rifle barrel, and cleared the chamber. He then followed where the sound of boots and voices had gone.

He found two of the Gurkhas in the mist, and shot them from behind. He stole a rifle and some ammunition from them before running off again.

And somewhere in the mist, the sound of boots came running after.

It now seemed that the original plan had gone to shite.

Jack and Sanwar had ambushed two platoons of enemies, and were about to attack again when Jack had heard more frantic action somewhere on his flank. There had been screams, sporadic, uncoordinated gunshots, and a lot of running about.

He had lost track of Sanwar in such confusion, and so had decided to hold position for a time. However, the battlefield

had gone quiet for too long, and his intuition was sending ever more warning signals the longer that he waited.

They had lost the element of surprise. The Gurkhas were adapting. From the scattered noises, he reckoned that at least one of the platoons had split into sections, forgoing cohesion for autonomy and maneuverability. When he did hear rifles cracking, it was only a few at a time. Eventually, one of those sections would find him.

Jack had to go straight for the killing blow then, it seemed.

He peered out from his hiding space, an alcove behind one of the many statues, then ducked back in as a team of Gurkhas came running by.

Jack emerged once they had gone, and went the other way.

He had to find his father. God knew how he was going to do that in all this bloody mist, but that was his objective. He knew at least that Donald MacGregor was not a man to lead fully from the rear. He wanted to be near his men, to have a sense of what was happening, and to throw himself into the action if need be. He was not reckless with his life in the way that Jack was by any means, but he was certainly no coward.

That meant that he had to be close.

Jack ducked behind a boulder as voices sounded near him. When they began to fade away, he followed them, tiptoeing across the stone, careful to avoid the litter that he and Sanwar had previously discarded there.

If he followed someone, he surmised, they would lead him to either Sanwar or a commander eventually. Maybe, he was even following the commander now.

Regardless of who it was, he only had a *kopis* tucked into his sash and pair of spears in hand; a pitiful armament against anyone who he encountered.

Sure enough, he encountered someone quite soon after.

Rather, it was two people.

Two Gurkhas were standing over several fallen bodies of their comrades when Jack stumbled headlong into them. They raised their guns at him, so he just ran at them, spear first.

He skewered one of them, the crude weapon breaking upon impact.

The other wheeled to try and get a shot off, but Jack was simply too close to get off a clean shot. He slung the gun, and went for the *kukri* instead.

Jack turned on him, and kicked the weapon out his hand.

Weaponless, the Gurkha jumped on him, and took him to the floor. The two rolled about the stone, each trying to get a hold around the other's throat. However, it was the wounded man who did.

In the scuffle, Jack and his opponent had accidentally onto his body, and although he was impaled, he had strength enough to grab Jack from behind. It was not enough to choke him, but he had one arm around Jack's neck holding him in place.

It was then that his companion abandoned the grapple to retrieve his blade and finish Jack.

Jack, seeing his impending doom, reached down, and ripped the *kukri* off of his subduer's belt.

He stuck the point into his attacker's ribs so that the man released him, then sat forward and chucked the knife in one swift move.

The banana-shaped blade whirled forward, and planted itself into the other Gurkha's back.

He died.

Jack coughed, dusted himself off, sighed at the inevitable bloodstains on him, then reached down to take the impaled man's rifle.

"Seems I've floored you with that performance," he said to him. "No encores for you though, mate. But are these nice flowers for me?"

He took the weapon as the man lay bleeding out.

When he stood, however, Jack could only sigh again.

For in that moment, a whiff of mist drifted away just ahead of him, and behind that whiff stood the figure of a man.

The markings on the Gurkha's epaulettes denoted him as some kind of officer. While he carried a long gun, there was also a pistol holster on his hip. The weapon itself was in his hand, a stout Webley revolver, and he had aimed it right at Jack.

The man was almost a foot shorter than Jack, but shouted with the deep, bellowing roar of some great beast. He waved the pistol downwards, no doubt demanding that Jack surrender.

Jack obliged him by slowly lowering the rifle towards the ground.

However, about halfway down, he chucked it barrel first at the officer.

"Here, catch!"

The Gurkha dodged, and charged straight on at Jack.

The small man collided with his midriff, and knocked him right onto the ground. Before Jack knew it, the officer was pummeling him with his pistol butt, and Jack was pitifully throwing his arms in the way to block the blows.

Bruises amassed on his arms. No bones were broken thankfully, as Jack took the beatings firmly on the muscle, but that did not make them any less painful.

The ferocity continued until Jack somehow threw out his hand, and managed to catch the Gurkha's elbow.

Then in an instant, he drew out the his ancient *kopis*, and slashed.

The officer's hand flew off, pistol and all.

The man did not cry out, he only groaned and clutched the stump. Jack used the distraction to toss him aside, and regain his footing. He took a stance, the machete-like *kopis* tight in his hand. The weapon was a short sword, forward-curved and heavy in the chop, not dissimilar to a *kukri*.

The Gurkha drew his own weapon out as well. Only, his *kukri* was not a knife like the others, but a full-on sword like Jack's. Its blade was long and slender, and now swinging right at Jack.

The two swords clashed together.

Jack's weapon was far shorter than his opponent's, but more top-heavy, and so managed to swat his attacks away. That and the fact Jack's arms were longer were the only things that saved him from these savage ripostes, for the officer had forgone the pretenses of capture and instead wanted nothing more than vengeance now.

All Jack could do was pedal backwards to avoid these blows, and try to keep that vicious blade away. Yet, Jack knew that if he could not attack himself, one of the Gurkha's strikes eventually would land.

Then suddenly, one the Gurkha's strikes did land, and savagely. The blow was not to Jack himself, but to the flat side of his *kopis*. The old bronze sword bent inwards, and was nearly folded over.

Jack threw the useless sword away, and jumped straight back, anticipating a second strike instinctively.

As he did, something slammed hard into his back...

...or rather, he had slammed hard into *it*.

Rough bark dug into his back, scraping the skin off through his shirt. The wind blew out of his lungs, and he nearly fell down to his knees. He doubled over, and that misfortune saved his life.

Seconds later, the Gurkha's sword came swinging for his head.

The blade stuck fast into the tree trunk right as Jack had crouched in pain. Splinters struck his face and cut his cheek, yet Jack had found his footing and struck back.

He thrust forward while his enemy's weapon was still trapped, jamming his fist into the Gurkha's guts.

That was not enough to stop him, though.

The little man abandoned his sword, and rammed his own fist into Jack's chest instead.

The blow sent Jack reeling backwards. He stumbled, tripped, then rolled, and landed firmly on his arse. He scuttled backwards on all fours as the Gurkha retrieved his sword from the tree trunk, and came on stolidly, hefting the weapon despite his grievous, leaking wound.

Jack accidentally crawled right over his salvation. He felt the lump beneath him, and instantly knew what it was.

He grabbed the Gurkha's fallen hand, fingers clutched around the pistol grip. Its pointer was still inside the trigger guard, so Jack aimed the weapon, and squeezed the digit with his own.

The round went right into the Gurkha's chest. Blood squirted from the aorta in an arc as the man fell over, dead.

Naturally, the blood got all over Jack.

"Aw fuck," he said, wiping gore and powder burns off his face. "Brilliant showstopper, that one. Bravo."

Jack removed the pistol so that he could applaud himself with the dead man's hand. Next, he looted the holster and a belt of ammunition from the man, and replaced his *kopis* with the *kukri* sword.

There was something else the he found on the body as well, something that gave him a suddenly devious idea.

Around him, Donald heard only chaos.

There was shooting from every direction. Unseen men were shouting out cries of pain or orders in the fog. At one point, several loud thuds sounded out somewhere, accompanied by the crack of stone.

Even if his vision was obscured, what was clear to Donald was that he had lost command of the battle.

"Must retreat," his sergeant urged him for the umpteenth time.

"You're right," Donald conceded. "Take the dead and wounded, and pull everybody back down the hill."

The sergeant relayed the orders in Nepalese. He may not have fully understood his commander's words, but Donald's tone was unmistakable. They were defeated. He had gambled on this attack, and it had failed.

However, it did not quite mean that he had lost.

As the men assembled to withdraw, the sergeant returned to him, and asked Donald if he was coming.

Yet, Donald refused him.

"We go," the sergeant insisted.

"You go," said Donald. "I'm staying. I've waited eight long years to get here. I'm not waiting any longer."

Ever loyal, the men withdrew. Vanishing into the mist, they took off towards the slopes and left Donald behind.

He drew his pistol, and went the other way.

He followed the sounds of battle, going carefully, and using the ruin for cover all the while. Once or twice, he came across the bodies of his men. Not all had died from gunshots. Most had been killed hand-to-hand. If Jack had been responsible for even one of them, then Donald had a renewed fear and respect for the lad. Donald himself had killed a few men by the sword in his time, but never with this level of ferocity. From the looks of their wounds, several men had died fighting inches from their killers. There were claw marks on one man's face. Another had knife wounds in his guts.

There was no sign of Jack anywhere, so against all military convention, Donald called out for him.

"Jack! Jack! I'm here!" He cried. Normally, it was foolish to give away one's position like this, but Donald wanted his son to find him. He wanted to settle this man to man, and end it altogether. He knew that Jack would not be able to resist the bait.

"Jack!" Donald cried out one last time.

For a moment later, a red flare went up into the sky. From its brightness, he could determine that it was not far away, and so he ran to it.

He may not have found Jack, but at least the *subedar* had heard his cry. They could regroup, re-assess the battle, and even re-assault the position if necessary.

The shot had come from a cluster of statues amid the crumbling ruins of some shrine. The walls were half their former height, and the roof was non-existent. Non-existent also was the *subedar*. The only sign of him was his discarded flare gun and the burnt out ashes of the missile on the ground.

Donald reached for it, then stopped when he heard a hammer's click from right behind him.

Slowly, he turned around.

His son had stepped out from behind a statue with a pistol in his hand, a rifle slung around his shoulder, and *kukri* tucked into his sash. Covered in blood and grime from head to foot, Jack was already almost unrecognizable, but the feature of his that Donald knew least were his eyes. They were amber like his own, yet a feral gleam was in them. They were a killer's eyes, unburdened by the weight of death. They were completely unrecognizable, and yet totally familiar.

In this moment, Donald paused.

"So, you've come to kill me, have you?" He said after a heavy sigh.

"I will if you don't cooperate."

"Then let me be the last," he said. "You've killed enough of my men, Jack. Kill me to spare the others if you must. But if you keep fighting like this, both they and you are going to die here in this mist. And I never wanted any of that."

"Then call off the attack, Father."

The sound of boots clattered on the stone. Several Gurkhas appeared from out of the mist then, likely drawn to this spot by the flare. Jack paid no heed of them, even as they trained their guns on him. Donald held out a hand to stay them, though.

"Call off the attack," Jack said again. His pistol remained unwavering.

Donald sighed.

He had a whistle corded to his epaulettes, and blew it.

"Sound retreat," he told the Gurkhas. "We go."

They lowered their weapons. Donald untied the whistle, and gave it to one of them, so that he might sound it for any

others. The Gurkhas then departed, blowing it incessantly for all their fellows to hear.

Jack and Donald remained where they were, however. Only when they were alone, did Jack finally holster the pistol.

“It’s done now,” said Donald. “Are you satisfied?”

“Not quite,” said Jack as he extended a hand. “I want *Lann Dhearg*.”

Donald reddened.

“Leave our family this honor at least,” he trembled.

“You’ve done enough damage to us already.”

“And what about the damage done to me?” Asked Jack.

“This is what the world has made me. Are you proud of what I’ve become? You had a hand in shaping it.”

“That I shaped. No, you’re nothing but a killer.”

“I am a killer,” Jack told him. “A great one even. But I’m also far more than that. You’ve never known all of what I could do.”

“I never thought you’d be capable of such violence. Such cowardice.”

“I knew you were the day you found out about me and Morag.”

“Who?”

“Morag. The serving girl. My wife.”

“So this is what this is about?” Scoffed Donald. “A peasant girl unfit for you to marry? You think that siring her bastard child meant she loved you? God, you’re delusional, Jack! Just look at you!”

Yet, Jack stood there in placid silence. His amber eyes were strangely sad. If anything, there was a kindness to them; a kindness that Donald had not noticed until this moment. His son did not look angry, only tired. This was not the youth he knew before him, but a fearsome man of hardened

years. He was at once both tall and strong, yet haggard and weary. The boy that he once had raised was almost gone. He did not know the mighty man in front of him, and that was all the pity.

Even now, Donald felt his words ring hollow.

“You see the world as weak and strong,” Jack said at long last. “But the world is only give and take. Equivalent exchange. Men like Saxon and Jogandar only take. They take land. They take wealth. They take lives. All they give is anguish to others and themselves. That’s the side you’re on.”

“Tell me one thing at least, my lad,” Donald struggled to say. “Tell me why you ran away. Tell me why you did all this. Tell me, please.”

“It was the right thing to do. For me and others.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all there is.”

Donald sighed.

He undid his sword belt.

He offered it to Jack.

His son accepted.

“I will tell the Zamindar what has happened here today, because I must,” Donald said. “But I will tell your mother that you are dead. It will be easier for her that way.”

Jack nodded.

He slung the sword onto his waist, securing into a blood red sash. It fit him well. He was a handsome figure despite his dirtiness.

Burning tears rolled down Donald’s cheeks. He did his best to wipe them all away, but he could not.

“I always loved you, my boy,” he said. “I only wanted to make you strong.”

“A tree grows strong in sunlight,” Jack said to him. “And not if axes cut it down.”

His son then turned, and walked away. He vanished into the mist without another word.

That was the last time Donald ever saw him.

XI

Sire Thy Good Fortune

“You did what?”

“As I told you, *sahib*,” Donald repeated with practiced military dispassion. He stood at ease before the Zamindar, even though he was anything but. “We endured heavy casualties. Twelve dead and as many wounded, including the company officer and several sergeants.”

“I did not ask for the butcher’s bill. I asked for results.”

“Was I to sacrifice the entire company for just two men?”

“If it meant victory, then yes.”

Jogandar Singh Dhamija’s onyx eyes burned into Donald. Although his expression was dull and blank, an icy fury seethed within them. Donald met his gaze, and did not recoil from it. He had seen that look before, and only in the eyes of killers. Most soldiers were simple men who followed orders, fought to live, and killed when it was required. The best ones though, were dedicated to the task. Some of them were born that way. Some of them took the burden of the deed from others. Some of them simply enjoyed it.

Whatever the reason, all killers had that same look in their eyes when it came down to the business of it. Jogandar had that look now, and Donald knew then which type he was.

The Zamindar maintained his unblinking gaze, even as he rose from his desk. The office was stiflingly hot, as the man had refused fans for any room in the entire *haveli*, and yet Jogandar ignored the sweat that poured down his brow and into his eyes. He stepped in front of the desk, an arm’s length away from Donald.

“You failed, General.”

Donald glared back at the Zamindar, his own eyes narrowing. He did not owe this man fear.

“You are no commander,” Donald said to him. “You just want death.”

“This world is chaos,” Jogandar answered. “Righteous violence is required to bring it all in order. The Germans. My brother. My people. Anyone who misbehaves requires a punishment equal or greater to their crime, so that they learn to obey. Is that not why I fought for this Empire and continue to do so? If you do not understand that, then I do not know how they ever made you a general.”

“Because I fought with honor. And don’t forget that I’m twice your age and the twice the man you’ll ever hope to be. And the more I linger here, the more you sound just like my son.”

“He and I have no pretenses about who we are and what we do,” Jogandar replied. “Though he, like you, is deeply wrong in his convictions.”

Donald reddened. His arms fell down to his sides, his fists clenched tight enough to crush hot coal into diamond.

“So I was wrong to save the lives of my men!? I was wrong to call off an attack that failed!”

“Soldiers are meant to be expended. We both knew that when we accepted our commissions. But please remember, it was you who failed, General, not the attack. So, I must adopt a different strategy.”

“And what...would that be?”

“I must force my brother into the offensive,” he said. “Have him attack a position on our terms.”

“And how do you intend to do this?” Donald seethed. Jogandar seemed so self-assured that Donald wanted to smack him across the jaw. “He’s no fool. He’d never attack

Dhamija. He knows it's too well defended, even if he had two hundred men instead of two!"

"He will attack if I burn it down."

"No..."

"Yes," Jogandar said. "Like you, my brother believes in honor. He cares for those of lower castes, and he will seek vengeance if they are harmed. Is that not why he is here? Besides, the traitors must be punished for their misdeeds. I will only burn their houses and anyone who resists me."

"And what...of the traitors themselves...?"

"I will burn them alive inside."

Donald's heart sank into his guts. His fists released, as he could no longer hang onto his anger. Sickness had overcome all other sensation. He would have doubled over then, had he not wished to appear weak in front of the Zamindar.

Still, the man did notice.

"You look ill, General," he said. "Perhaps you lack the necessary constitution for such an act."

"You are the one who lacks," Donald barely managed to say. "You have taken this too far."

"Sufficient cruelty is needed to attract my brother out. Besides, we need a fire big enough for him to see from far away."

"I will have no part in this."

"That does not affect me, as you are dismissed."

"You cannot dismiss me, because you do not command me!"

"Either way, you will be gone," Jogandar said. "And that is the last and only thing that I require of you."

Donald straightened again.

"You, *sahib*, are a monster," he said.

“Monsters belong in the fairy tales that my brother used to read.” Jogandar sighed, and took a seat back at the desk. “No, I am simply the only one brave enough to accomplish what this awful, wretched world demands. It is not good. It is not just. It is not pretty or nice or anything pleasant. It is filled with vile, selfish creatures who are only kept from violence by a firm hand stronger than their own. The world was never good, and it never will be. It just needs to function.”

“And I suppose you are the exception? That you are not as vile and selfish as the rest of us?”

“No, I am. I do what is vile and what is selfish, because it is necessary. And it works. Now good day, General. Close the door on your way out.”

Donald slammed it shut instead.

Samreet watched the General storm from Jogandar’s office. Peering around the corner, she could see by the way the old man hung his head that he had left this battle in defeat. He had seemed so tall and mighty until this moment, but his broad shoulders had sunk low and he slunk away in silence.

She had been listening to the conversation with Jogandar since the General had returned this afternoon, bloody and defeated. Her brother did not believe in any personal security, so she had looked and listened through the keyhole as the two men had quarreled, and fled around the corner when that quarrel had concluded. Even covered in his filthy clothes, the General held himself with far more honor than her brother.

He still wore his soiled, sordid, blood-soaked uniform even as he trudged down the empty hallways. She followed him across the main *chowk* at a safe distance, then up the stairs, and towards his chamber. His door was shut, but the rustle of

clothes into a trunk was audible as were many a deep and heavy sigh.

She gave a gentle knock upon the door.

It flung open almost instantly. The General stood there, towering over her, eyes hard and narrowed. They softened the moment that he recognized her, and she could see then that they were red and glistening.

“Lady Samreet...” He struggled to find the words. “To do what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I would like to explain in private, General. Might I come in?”

She glanced around to confirm that no soldiers or servants were around and listening. General MacGregor beckoned her, and she slipped inside.

Jogandar had given him a suite in the northwest tower with a balcony overlooking the river. The room and its bed were large enough for a family of four, and yet the whole place looked untouched. The sheets were perfect, and the privy was spotless. Only the General’s suitcase disturbed the bed, along with a sparse set of clothes; a spare uniform, nightwear, a few suits and ties, a hat, and the absolute minimum of toiletries and everyday items.

There was a chair on the balcony where he offered her to sit, but Samreet remained standing.

“Lady Samreet, what is the meaning-”

“General, is my brother, Sanwar-?”

The old man paused, and scratched at his grey beard.

“Dead? No.”

“And your son?”

The General drew a long, deep sigh, then he looked at her curiously.

“He lives, for now,” he said after considering her a good, long while. “I didn’t know you knew Jack or even that he was here.”

“I know that Jogandar would see them both dead,” she answered him. “My brother and your son. And that he will burn down his own village to the ground just to do it.”

“So...you were spying on us, were you?”

“Do you want me to warn Jack and Sanwar of what is to happen or shall I let Jogandar raze Dhamija to ash?”

The General recoiled at the sudden harshness of her words, and again, he hesitated. A flicker of regret shone behind his amber eyes, and he hung his head a little lower.

“I cannot aid in abetting criminals,” he warned her.

“Then what about in saving lives?” She returned. “Jogandar is a monster, hellbent on a mission to destroy his own kin. His own people. Yet, he has a mission always. In this case, it is our brother. If I tell Sanwar, he will step forward and give himself over. He cares more about Dhamija than anything. Jogandar will take his life in exchange for sparing the village, if he comes peacefully.”

“And what of my son?”

“He will do whatever Sanwar does.”

General MacGregor sighed.

“You should be speaking to Jogandar about this...”

“He has not confided this information in me, and never will! But I know how both of them will react. Jogandar’s mind will only change if somebody submits to him. Otherwise, he will continue with his plan no matter how passionately you argue.”

Samreet sighed, and finally did accept that seat. She dropped into the plush cushions of the chair, and stared out at the river. The midday sun was burning high, its golden disc

searing a bright reflection on the crystal waters. The soldiers patrolled its banks below. The peasants toiled in the fields beyond.

“I wish to save my family and its reputation, the same as you,” she said at last. “I would save my people, too. Even if it costs me a brother.”

“What is that you would ask of me?” Asked the General.

“Tell me, where did you find Sanwar?” She implored him. “I will find him, warn him of this attack, and convince him to turn himself in.”

“It was difficult to see in the mist,” MacGregor said. “But from what I remember, there were ruins and a hot spring about the place. We traveled due west, towards the hills. We left many of the bodies behind, as we could not find nor carry them all. If you come across any of them, you are close. But you cannot go out there alone. The jungle is no place for a lady.”

“The most delicate flowers grow on the branches of the hardest wood,” Samreet replied with a smile. “Yet, I am more the tree than I am the flower. Besides, duty is more than a worthy reason to forego one’s safety. Would you not agree, General?”

“I confess that I cannot deny it,” he did concede.

“Then I will go alone,” she said. “I will be faster that way.”

“When will you leave? And how with all these guards around?” He asked her. He still had not left the doorway himself.

“Well, when do you depart, General?” Samreet grinned. “I will see you to the train station.”

“Jogandar will not let you accompany me alone.”

“Oh. We won’t be alone...”

“What a pleasantly diverting way to spend an afternoon, Lord Saxon!”

“The pleasure is all mine, Lady Samreet.”

Samreet held her breath as the young lord blew out an oppressive breath of smoke. The big, blond bastard breathed in more cigars than he did air. She did her best to maintain her smile even as a waft of tobacco blew right into her face. By the smell of it, he was smoking the local crop.

She could hardly call it a pleasant afternoon either, and not just because of his presence. The two of them rode surrounded by a troop of Jogandar’s lancers, and were accompanied by a thoroughly soured General MacGregor, who kept throwing anxious glances in her direction. The sun was beating down on all of them, and even Saxon was perspiring profusely beneath his shady white parasol. He did not sweat nearly as much as the poor servant who rode beside him and struggled to keep the shade aloft, however.

“Well, it was kind of you to convince my brother of letting me come along,” Samreet said, continuing her campaign of flattery towards Lord Saxon, regardless of the unrelenting weather. “You must have known exactly what to say to him.”

“What can I say?” Saxon grinned, and shrugged. “Not even Jogandar can refuse his valued backer. Money talks. And I talk for a living.”

Now finally there was an honest statement, Samreet thought.

The big man leaned back in his saddle.

“It was kind of you to ask me for such a favor,” he returned. “No, not a favor. A privilege. An honor! I must know why you had been so insistent.”

“Well, it’s been so horrid being trapped inside the house for days on end,” Samreet began. “I’ve longed to be outside in

the warmth and fresh air for so long, and not languishing indoors.”

“Yes, it does wonders for the constitution,” Saxon said, using his handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his brow.

“And I’ve been so lonely lately,” she continued. “I’ve longed for some new company. Then, I realized that you’ve been here so long and we have not yet had much opportunity to get to know one another, my lord.”

“Yes, it’s such a pity,” he agreed. “A young woman such as you should be free and liberated, not locked away like some sad old maid. But I’m glad we’re remedying that now.”

“Quite. I just wish it were under better circumstances. It is sad to see poor General MacGregor gone so soon. He deserved the honor of at least one member of our family to bid him farewell.”

“Yes, we’re sorry to see you off like this old boy,” Saxon called over to the General, who did not smile. “I’m afraid not even a man such as you can get through to that son of yours. Be glad you made it out alive. Few are so lucky. You’ve done enough, though. It’s time to return home, and enjoy a well-deserved retirement. Now where were we?”

That last remark was to Samreet as he turned back in his saddle to face her with a grin.

“I was lamenting the circumstances,” she resumed. “And how little my brother allows me to be experience freedom. If it weren’t for you, my lord, I would be languishing at home with naught to do...and all alone.”

“He does it to keep you safe,” Saxon assured her with great confidence. “There have been criminals and bandits about. Many of whom would not treat such a sweet young lady like yourself with the kindness she deserves.”

“Do you think...that my brother would do me any harm?” She asked as innocently as she could pretend.

Saxon’s answer was diplomatic.

“All I know of him is what he’s done to me, and that was far from kind,” he said, the pearly grin vanishing from his face. He dragged deeply on his cigar, then leaned in closer to her, and whispered. The scent of tobacco was rampant on his breath. “It’s the General’s son who I’d worry about.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes. Beastly with women that one. Always has been. He’s killed enough of men that I know he’d have no problem adding a woman to the list. They call him ‘Mad Jack’ MacGregor for a reason.”

He gave the General a quick look askance to make sure he had not heard a word of it.

“Well, I’m sure that I am perfectly safe with you, my lord,” she smiled. “And Jogandar must trust you with my safety otherwise he would not have permitted this excursion. Other men might have more lascivious intentions, but surely not you, my lord?”

Saxon inhaled a mouthful of smoke, and accidentally choked on it.

“Certainly not,” he wheezed through a fit of coughing. “I’d never dream of such a thing.”

Samreet smiled even more.

At long last, their destination lay in sight. The long road from *Lala Ghara* finally ended at the train platform. When the dust cleared, the tracks, the passengers, the overhang, and the ticket booth all came into stark reality with waves of hazy heat wobbling off all of them.

A shrill whistle echoed in the distance. The serpentine form of a jet black train and locomotive winded towards

them from the horizon, growing ever nearer with every passing second.

Their escort halted just below the platform steps.

There, General Macgregor dismounted from his horse.

“Lady Samreet, I wish that I could have known you better,” he said, and took her hand and kissed it. To Lord Saxon, he said, “My Lord, although I have known your family all my life, over these past few weeks, I have come to learn your true character.”

He did not offer Lord Saxon his hand with that remark.

No, General MacGregor simply turned on his heels in true military fashion, and with his suitcases in either hand, walked up the stairs to the platform just as the train was nearing. Samreet could see the smoke now, the great black breath of it belching into the air.

Her cavalcade turned itself around, back towards the village.

“Come along, Samreet,” Saxon bade. “It’s bleeding hot, and we’ll have much more pleasant conversation at the *haveli*—”

Yet, Samreet had not turned her horse around to follow.

Instead, Samreet suddenly spurred Kamala forward.

Saxon and the lancers cried out for her to stop, but there was nothing they could do about it. Her horse rode up the stairs with a deftness that few trained cavalymen could match, each hoof landing perfectly in the center of each step. She came out onto the platform, and with a quick thrash of the reins, galloped headlong towards the tracks and directly in the pathway of the oncoming train.

The men dismounted to pursue afoot, and shouted for the General and any civilians to clear the way. They reached the platform in time for Samreet to give them one last one wink

over the shoulder, then go bounding off the platform and across the tracks.

She cleared the distance, and hit the ground at full gallop.

The train blew past mere seconds later.

She used it to cover her rear as she thundered off towards the safety of some tall grass and turned northwards towards the forest. By the time that they could find her trail again, she would be miles from the station.

She gave one look back to ensure she was not followed.

She only saw the General looking out the train window after her. It must have been him, for the sun was glinting off of his bare head. He watched her go for a good long while, until she reached the deep green seas of grass, and vanished into their waves.

“Will you please hold still?”

“I’m bloody trying!”

Jack winced again as Sanwar fussed with the bandages around his back. The scrapes that he received were not deep, but they were plentiful, and needed tending to avoid infection.

After the battle yesterday, they had soaked their clothing and themselves in the hot spring for several hours to clean off any injuries and all the blood and filth they had sustained. Sanwar had then applied some ointment to Jack’s scrapes, and covered them in bandages.

The Gurkhas thankfully had come supplied, and they had looted a fair amount of gauze and medical items from the corpses that had been left behind. There were enough to change Jack’s dressings every few hours, much to his chagrin. The man experienced new sensations of pain whenever Sanwar laid on the Acriflavine.

“If your brother sends another assault, we’re fucked,” Jack groaned, when Sanwar was finished with the latest round.

“He will reassess his strategy before he does,” Sanwar replied. “And if he does, at least he will not have Gurkhas anymore, as you have seen to that.”

“Aye, you’re welcome, I suppose,” Jack said, and lay flat on his stomach to rest. He had found himself a shady spot beneath the trees, where the forest floor was clear and soft enough. “What do we do in the meantime, though?”

Sanwar considered the thought. He had thought ahead as much. Mostly, he had anticipated dying in the General’s attack, and yesterday he had come quite close to such an end. He had run about the maze of ruins for a long time, having become the mouse instead of the cat. The Gurkhas had hunted him in the mist, with packs of them taking shots at him here and there, and Sanwar doing his best to stay hidden or return fire. Five or six of them had nearly surrounded him inside the temple itself, and he had only survived by the grace of General MacGregor’s forced retreat.

Yet even if the battle now was over, their situation most certainly was not. He and Jack were still on the run, Jogandar and Saxon were still very much in power, and Dhamija still very much in danger.

“We must be close to the Forge,” Sanwar posited after much deliberation. “Why else would Saxon have been hunting here.”

“Aye, but where to look?” Asked Jack. “We could spend a lifetime searching for it, and without the elemental essences, it would all be in vain even if we did find it.”

“Yes, I suppose,” Sanwar sighed, and slumped against a tree.

“Aye, I know,” Jack shared the sentiment, even if he could not share the action without hurting himself. “I want to see it more than anything. If we had that Stone, we could waltz into Dhamija and send the bastards back to the bloody Stone Age.”

“It would certainly be much simpler that way. At present though, I have not the faintest notion of how we can stop Saxon, save Dhamija, and end my brother’s cruelty forever.”

“Well maybe we should eat something first before we decide, and maybe have a nap” suggested Jack. It was about midday, and they had done an exhausting amount of action over the past few weeks. They needed rest. After their bath last night, they had fallen asleep right beside the pool, after all, and even that had not been enough.

“A prudent decision,” Sanwar said, although he did not feel it was. The fires of action still were in him, in spite of his exhaustion.

They spoke no more of the matter after that, though. There was little else to do at that point, but sit beside the steamy pool and eat the pilfered Gurkha rations.

That was when they heard a noise.

“Sanwar! Sanwar!”

Somebody was calling out his name.

Jack instinctively reached for his rifle, and rolled over to cover.

“It is a woman’s voice,” Sanwar told him, listening intently.

“I’ll go investigate,” Jack whispered. Even though he was injured, he knew that Sanwar would be a more likely target for an ambush, especially if someone knew his name. So Jack rose from cover, then stole off into the brush. Sanwar waited behind a tree trunk, rifle trained on Jack’s direction.

His friend returned sometime later with Samreet and her horse in tow.

“Look who I found,” Jack said with a grin.

Sanwar threw down the gun, and ran over to embrace his sister at once.

“Samreet! What in the blazes are you doing here!?”

“I rode as quickly as I could.” Her words came at him in a flurry. “I’ve been scouring the forest for hours calling out your name. The General told me where to find you. I looked for the bodies. The hills. The mist. Jack found me near the ruins.”

“Samreet, speak slowly,” he bade her. “Tell us why you have come.”

“Jogandar is going to burn down Dhamija. Tonight.”

“No...”

“Yes, but Sanwar, this is a trap.” She clutched his arm, and pleaded. “He means to draw you out into an ambush!”

He pulled away from her, but gently.

“I cannot abandon my people to that fate,” he said. “I must stop him.”

“No, but what hope will they have left if you are killed too?” There was pleading in her eyes. “I have thought long about this on the ride. You cannot save the village tonight. Jogandar knows that you will reach Dhamija by morning at the earliest.”

“He could take your horse,” Jack said. “Get back this evening.”

“Kamala could seat two of us at most,” Samreet rebuked. “And I must be one of them. She will have no other rider. That would leave you behind to find your way home, Jack.”

“So, the horse is out,” Jack allowed.

“But I must return,” Sanwar insisted. “Otherwise, he will continue to harm our people as leverage against me!”

“Yes, but you must return in the right way,” his sister urged him. “You cannot act so foolhardy. Jogandar is counting on that.”

“Aye, she’s right,” Jack agreed. “We can’t save Dhamija from burning. But we can save it from your brother. So, we need to be strategic about our attack. Circumvent the ambush if we can. He’ll be expecting us to retaliate. His men will be watching the forest. Waiting for us. So, let’s attack from somewhere else then. Take them by surprise.”

“No!” Samreet implored Jack. “There has to be another way!”

Sanwar was speechless. The two continued to argue, urging him of their own way; Jack wanting to attack; Samreet wanting him to wait and plan for some opportunity. In all honesty, he did not like either solution.

To attack was to play into Jogandar’s hands. Even a surprise attack would be insufficient to thwart him, as he and Jack were but two men against a garrison. Yet, Samreet’s choice would take too long, and there would be nothing or no one left for him to save. He could never forgive himself for that, if he so chose it.

Then finally, he had an answer.

He raised his hands to silence them.

“Jogandar *will* be expecting us,” he said. “So let us do as he expects. Let us spring the trap.”

“You’re mad,” Samreet declared.

“You’re mad, and I like it,” Jack grinned.

“Am I missing something?” His sister asked. “Have you not been listening to me!?”

“I think I he heard us both, lass,” said Jack. “And he’s got his own mad ideas about it.”

“Ride back to Jagmeet at once,” Sanwar told her. “Tell him that I said to bring his cart and all his ‘timber’ into town tomorrow at dawn. Tell him that I will see him and our people then. He will know what I mean.”

“Yes, but I do not!”

“There is no time to explain. Please, sister. Will you do this for me?”

She touched his arm again, and squeezed his hand.

“Yes,” she promised. “I do not how...but I must trust you.”

“Thank you.”

“Aye, good luck, lass,” Jack added, and took her and shook it.

“You’re the ones who need the luck, you crazy boys,” she said, and winked at him.

Sanwar raised an eyebrow.

His sister then jumped on her horse.

“I will see you at dawn,” she said, and spurred Kamala forward off into the trees. If anyone could find her way back in time, Sanwar knew it would be Samreet.

“So, Jagmeet’ll be ready at dawn tomorrow,” Jack said, once she had gone. “I guess that means we should get marching again?”

Sanwar looked at him, and smiled.

“Let’s get marching again.”

Smoke was rising.

They had caught the first glimpses of it in the predawn light. It had floated above the trees in blackish pillars and plumes.

Jack and Sanwar used it as a compass to guide them towards their objective and as motivation to march there faster. They did not stop to rest nor eat. They carried only water, weapons, ammunition, and burning brands to light their journey during the night. When they came within sight of the village, they doused the torches, and took cover in the tree line.

From their concealed position, they surveyed Dhamija.

Some of the houses were still smoking. Mudbrick did not burn easily, but the furniture, doors, and support beams within were wooden. The houses' walls had been smashed down for good measure though, and lay in rubble amidst the ashes. Any gardens or orchards belonging to these houses were little more than scorch marks on the earth.

Sanwar reckoned that one in every eight had been set alight. Among them had been Randeep and Navtej's. He knew where their places should have stood, even if they were gone.

He looked across the shallow valley, past the three small hillocks, to the opposite ridge. There, the workers had filed back into the canals just as they did every morning. A line of soldiers watched them just as they did every morning too.

Sanwar looked beyond them.

Jagmeet's cart was near the workers, covered in a tarpaulin. The old man sat on the cab, sipping water from an earthenware jug.

Sanwar smiled grimly.

He and Jack trained their rifles.

They targeted the officers and NCOs, and fired.

The shots found their marks, and two soldiers fell back dead or wounded.

The others blew their whistles, and fired off a few rounds towards the tree line. They tore at foliage, lodged into trees, or just went wide. Those shots were meant to be suppressive more than accurate though, and Sanwar was less concerned with them.

What he was more concerned with was the cavalry who had sprung forth from the tall grass on his right flank and out into the valley to pursue. Even riding uphill, the horsemen would be faster than any infantry, and would be on their position in mere minutes. The troop had swapped their lances out for carbines, so that they could dismount at the ridgeline and chase Jack and Sanwar into the dense forest unencumbered by their mounts. In that way, they were more like mounted infantry than cavalry. Sanwar almost had to admire his brother's use of tactics.

He and Jack shot at them anyway. A few fell here and there, but there were too many for a few kills to slow their momentum. The cavalry held off any return fire, knowing that their shots would be inaccurate while a horse.

They would have surely overtaken Jack and Sanwar, had not Sanwar's plan gone off exactly when intended. His rifle shots had killed men yes, but they had been a signal more than anything, a signal that he knew Jagmeet would understand.

The tarpaulin of the old man's cart flew back right then.

Samreet, Randeep, and hundreds of rifles appeared from underneath it. The two of them had rifles of their own, and fired them off at the guards upon the ridge while Jagmeet tossed weapons and ammunition into the clamoring crowd of workers. Inspired by the sudden momentum of the attack, the village men took the rifles gladly into their hands and turned them towards their oppressors.

Halfway up the opposite slope, the cavalry lieutenant heard all of the commotion, and turned round in the saddle to witness hundreds of the workmen overwhelm their rear. The mere platoon of guards upon the ridge behind them were being swarmed by ten or twenty times their number. They could not react fast enough before they were shot by rifles or simply struck down with picks and spades. Those who stood and fought were slaughtered where they stood. Those who ran barely escaped.

Though he could not have anticipated the success of this maneuver, it played beautifully into Sanwar's hands.

The cavalry lieutenant meanwhile found his troop in the worst position possible. He was in a valley between two hostile forces, who could simply aim their weapons downwards, and shoot from both sides without risk of hitting one another.

He called off his attack mid-charge, but it was too late.

A ragged volley shot down into him from the eastern ridge. Jack and Sanwar took careful shots from the west. They shot the lieutenant first, then his sergeants, then anyone else who looked like they might have some authority. The cavalry tried to ride off down the valley northwards, and flee that way, but it was no use. Sanwar and the villagers had the numbers and the high ground. The lucky ones made it maybe fifty yards.

The villagers were cheering when Jack and Sanwar emerged from the tree line, intoxicated by their victory. The two men joined them on the far ridge, where they were assailed by hugs and handshakes. Somehow, Sanwar found his way onto the cart beside Randeep and his sister. With one hand, he lifted up his rifle. With the other, he quieted his army.

“Brothers!” He called out to them. “I have returned to you! As once our Gurus bid us to take arms against injustice, let us take arms now. Let us take arms against those who have killed and beaten you, destroyed your homes, made your families destitute, and enslaved you! Let us today take back our land, so that we may raise our own crops to feed ourselves and not the pockets of rich men from England! My family once ruled over you, but no longer shall it be so. Do not all of us carry the name Singh? Our we not all lions when we are free? Our not our women princesses just as worthy as the British monarchy? Are we not all equal!? Shall not we fight to make it so!? *Bole so Nihal!*”

“*Bole so Nihal!*” They called back in answer.

“Grab your weapons, and remove these scourges from our land!”

Sanwar slung his rifle then, and drew his sword instead. He leaped down from the cart, and with his blade in hand, charged straight into the village, crying out for blood and justice.

And Hell followed with him.

At first, Ganeev had thought the gunshots had been another rabble rouser caught and ended. For days, she had been hearing the rifle cracks and the screams of villagers whom Jogandar’s men had killed or captured.

Yet, these shots were different.

They did not stop so quickly, and there was a rhythm to their chaos.

At first, it was just a few shots. Then, others had answered in response. Then, the sporadic gunfire had exploded into full on volleys. With it, came the screaming; the screams of dying

men and wounded, the screams of those victorious, and the screams of those whose lungs were filled with rage.

At first, Ganeev had tried to ignore it. She had never been one to venture out that much already, even before Jogandar had confined them all to quarters. She had been reading her chamber, trying to distract herself from what was going on outside like she had for days.

That was until it came inside.

As pandemonium erupted in the village, so did pandemonium in *Lala Gbara*. When the servants began running about outside her door, shouting out in panic and thundering down the stairs, Ganeev threw down her book and looked outside to see what was the matter.

The entire household was in disorder. The servants on the lower floors were hauling anything they could carry out of their chambers and dragging them down the stairs. Ganeev watched as they stumbled down the atrium, spilling valuables with every step. They shrieked and screamed to get past one another, while down in the main *chowk*, injured soldiers were delivering their frantic reports to a stolid Jogandar. His security detail was all around him, dutifully ignoring the chaos of the scene. Her mother was there as well, frozen in terror with several guards around her.

Ganeev ran for the northwest tower. Even at a waddling, pregnant pace, she made good time. She was a large woman already, but was made more so by her swollen stomach, and pushed past any frightened servants in her path. She was panting by the time she reached the tower's height though, yet she had to see what was happening outside.

Down there across the river, Dhamija was in uprising.

The villagers carried rifles. Hundreds of men and women had come out of the factories or the canal pits, and attacked

in scores. They cut down any soldiers they could find. Small groups of guards shot a few attackers here and there, before they were shot themselves or hacked down with axes and machetes.

Gunsmoke rose above the mud huts, and blood flowed into the Sutlej.

The villagers marched on past the bodies and towards the bridge.

“Ganeev.”

She turned around at the sound of her name.

Sajan stood there on the steps below her, beads of sweat upon his brow and glasses. He was breathing heavily.

“I have been looking everywhere for you,” he panted. “We must hide.”

“Hide where? The villagers will find and kill us here!”

“Not from them. From your brother.”

“What?”

He had no time to explain. A shout came from down the stairs, and a pair of soldiers appeared a moment later to take Sajan away. Another pair came up to escort Ganeev.

The soldiers led them both down into the *chowk*. Her mother was waiting by the fountain. Jogandar was mounted now alongside his beloved lancers. Four horses stood among their ranks with empty saddles. Around the troop, the servants ran about in panic, and yet her brother paid them all no mind.

“The village has been overrun,” he said. “Our people are in open rebellion against us and are marching on as *Lala Ghara* as we speak. We cannot hold it, so we must flee to Amritsar. Get on your horses now.”

Ridhi stepped forward at his command, but stopped when she saw that Ganeev had not moved at all.

“No,” Ganeev refused him.

“Excuse me?” He demanded of her.

Sajan put a hand upon her shoulder as a gentle warning, but she brushed it aside.

“No, Jogandar. I’m not going anywhere.”

Either she would die by his hand or the villagers’, it did not matter to her. If this was to be her last moment, then she would not waste it submitting to his will a minute longer.

Her brother got down off his horse, and closed on her. He was half a foot taller than she and stronger by far, and yet Ganeev refused to flinch as he stopped within arm’s reach.

“I said, ‘get on the horse, and go.’”

“No.”

“Get on or I will throw you on.”

Ganeev made no motion to leave, and neither did Sajan nor her mother. When he looked at them, they simply shook their heads.

Their obstinance made Jogandar snarl. He drew his sword, and turned its point towards Ganeev’s face.

Ganeev instinctively pushed Ridhi behind her.

“SISTER, IT IS TIME TO GO!” Jogandar screamed.

She held her ground.

He raised the blade to strike.

“Jogandar for Christ’s sake, let’s leave already, man!”

It was Lord Saxon who had said it. The man had come out into the *chowk* fully mounted along with that drunken Scotsman and the little German that he always kept in tow. The Scotsman looked deathly sober now with a big-barreled shotgun in his hands.

“Aye, there’s no time, sir,” he urged Jogandar, and pumped a round into the chamber.

Outside, the crowd was growing louder, yet inside, it seemed like silence reigned for half a lifetime.

Her brother glanced over his shoulder, listening to the mob approach. Then, he gave one last glance at Ganeev and the others.

His eyes were filled with hate.

His face was marred by wrath.

“You will burn with Sanwar,” he promised. “All of you.”

He put the sword away, and got onto his horse, and rode on out the gate with Saxon and his retinue.

Ridhi would have fainted after he had gone were Sajan not there to catch her. He and Ganeev lowered her down to the edge of the fountain, and sat her there while they dabbed its water on her face.

“My boy,” she wallowed in a raspy murmur. “My sweet boy hates me. He hates me! I failed him. What have I done?!”

“No, nobody hates you, mother,” Ganeev consoled her. She soaked more water into the fringes of her *sari*, and patted her mother’s clammy brow with it. “He didn’t mean what he said.”

“Where is Sanwar...? Where is my eldest boy? I failed him too...”

“He’s coming, mother.”

“Where is he!?” Ridhi sobbed.

A slam against the gate jolted everyone to their feet. Moments later, another came and then another, and then it kept on coming. Each time, the pounding grew and the space between the heavy slamming shortened. Ganeev and the others flinched with every strike, anticipating when the hardwood bars upon the doors finally would break.

Finally, they did.

A sudden, massive thrust rammed into the gate. The bars, which had held firm until then, snapped in twain and fell away in splinters. Ridhi shrieked as the heavy doors were flung wide open, and the masses poured inside.

They flooded in, men and women alike, moving past a tree trunk ram fitted onto an ox cart. They carried rifles, pitchforks, picks, and axes; any weapon they could gather, and marched inside. They did not heft them as if to strike in anger, but simply held them to one side to show they could.

At their head, tall and righteous with a rifle in one hand, strode Sanwar. He was a boy no longer, but a man of years, stained with blood and dirt and powder soot. He raised his empty hand, and called the column to a halt. His hardened eyes fell upon his family, and looked at each of them in turn.

“Sajan, Mother, Sister,” he said to them. “I am home.”

XII

Mend Thy Broken Bonds

They moved the wounded into the soldiers' quarters, turning *Lala Ghara* from a barracks into a hospital within a few short hours. Any dead were cremated near the abandoned canal, though thankfully, Dhamija's losses had been few. The sheer suddenness and momentum of the uprising had been too much for even a disciplined force to overtake.

Most of the dead had been the garrison, and they were burned alongside the villagers, as was their right as Sikhs. Dilnoor reappeared to perform the rites. She was the only prisoner who had been spared from Jogandar's pyres, as too many of his soldiers had voiced their protestations of burning a *Granthi* inside of a *gurdwara*. He had promised to deal with her in due time, then burned the others. Navtej was among them, as were a dozen others and their families. Dilnoor sang a *shabad* for them too. Sanwar escorted her back to *Lala Ghara* when it was done, and watched her fall apart. He left her to grieve inside the small sideroom that had once been his own chambers.

By then, it was dusk and little more could be done. Someone tended to Jack's bandages at Sanwar's insistence, though Jack had insisted that he be treated last among the wounded.

Randeep in the meantime organized that evening's picquets, and men to patrol the village by torchlight. Kiranjit likewise arranged rotations of nurses for the wounded and an armory for all the captured weapons. The latter had already

existed for the troops in *Lala Ghara*, and only took a few directions from Samreet to locate.

Both Randeep and Kiranjit had been hiding in Mata and Jagmeet's house for three days after their escape from Jogandar's forces, alongside all the captured guns stashed underneath Jagmeet's woodpile. Now the couple was anxious to be out and about as much as possible, even at late hours.

Sanwar was thankful for their vitality. Even after a day like this, he still had one final battle left to face.

Dinner was waiting in the hall. So too were Sanwar's mother and his sisters. They were silent when he entered. They were silent as he sat himself down in what had once been his father's chair.

Samreet's eyes were bright and hopeful. Ganeev's were full of fire. His mother's were lost and watery.

He spooned rice and lentils onto his plate, and poured himself some water. He nearly whimpered at the taste of it, as it was his first hot meal since Mata and Jagmeet's house. He sighed in satisfaction, and drank deeply from his glass.

None of the others had dared to touch the food. He had asked them all to dinner, and yet none of them would eat.

"You are all looking well," he said once the silence had become too uncomfortable, even for him.

"This isn't funny, Sanwar," said Ganeev.

"The remark was not made in jest. It is good to see you all again. Truly."

"Your arrival this morning suggested otherwise."

Ganeev was becoming flush. Her hair was amess as well and sweat was beading down her forehead, as they had shut the windows to avert the smell of burning bodies. Nobody had changed their clothes since morning either, and Ganeev's temperament well-matched her appearance.

“You come back here bringing bloodshed,” she went on. “You drive our brother from his land, and now there are hundreds living inside our home!”

“Would you like for me to bring Jogandar back?”

“I would have peace and my own life back!” She shouted, unable to keep her seat. “I would like my house and servants back! That is what I would like back, *brother*.”

“Many aspects of your lifestyle are about to change, dear sister,” he said. “Many of which you will be unaccustomed to experiencing.”

Ganeev’s eyes narrowed on him.

“Eight years you’ve been gone,” she said, her voice gone hoarse. “Eight years of us thinking you were dead. You let Father die of grief. You break mother’s heart, and now you return by killing men, raising our own people against us, and begging our family!? After all that we have suffered and sacrificed for you!?”

“Again, would you prefer that Jogandar return instead?”

“Jogandar never would have become this way, if you had not abandoned your family!”

“No, he would have been exactly the same way, and maybe I exactly like he. But worse and more likely yet, I would still be completely unlike my brother and still unable to thwart him. For too long, I was subservient to the wills of this family, and that has ever been to my detriment. I obeyed my father and the Empire when they sent me off to war. Perhaps you should blame me for that instead. For that was when I abandoned everything, chief of all myself.”

“You sacrificed for this family, as it is expected!” Ganeev snapped at him. “Just I have done. Just as we all have done!”

“The only thing that Jogandar sacrificed was other people.”

That quieted Ganeev for a moment. Sanwar used the interim to sate his dry mouth with a sip of water. She was testing his composure in every conceivable manner, and the cold glass did wonders to cool his nerves.

Yet, Ganeev could not be quenched so easily. After a breath, she resumed the attack.

“All I hear are the ills that Jogandar has done,” she said, waddling back into her chair again. “And nothing of the good that you have.”

This time, Sanwar did not have to defend himself. At once, Samreet broke her silence, and spoke out against her.

“Good!? Don’t you see what this opportunity affords us!? Without Jogandar, we are one step closer to removing British rule from India. Without the British, we are one step closer to a world free of hatred, free of violence, free of caste! Don’t you see what we are fighting for-?”

“Samreet, stay out of this-”

“No! I will no stay out of this!” Samreet rose to her feet. “There is no staying out of this! There never has been. There has only been ignoring the problem at our doorstep- no, inside our doors! India is in conflict with Britain. And sure as Punjab is part of India, Dhamija is part of Punjab. This fight began centuries ago, not this morning! Jogandar brought this fight upon us, and now we must fight! There is no other choice, for does anybody choose their oppressors? You may have been living in entrapment all these years and feeling sorry for yourself, but even you are allowed great comforts in your imprisonment. I assure you that the rest of our people are not. Some of them have been toiling to afford even a fraction of this satin- cushioned life that you so take for granted.”

Ganeev opened her mouth, then shut it, and groaned before she spoke again.

“It would seem this whole family is against me...”

“No, it is you who is against this family,” said Samreet, and took her place at Sanwar’s side. “This is the way of freedom, sister. In the world ahead, you can choose your life instead of having it chosen for you. You can choose whom to marry, or not to marry at all. Or would you rather that things stay as they were before?”

“I would rather be alone for a little while,” Ganeev replied. With a heavy sigh, she excused herself from the table.

It was not the outcome that Sanwar would have liked, but it was at least one that he could accept.

When she was gone, his mother turned to him, and sobbed.

“Sanwar? What is happening? I don’t understand anymore...”

She rose from her chair, her arms wide open for him. He went to her, and held her close, her face pressed into his chest.

“Tell me, why are you fighting?” She begged him. “Why are you and Ganeev fighting? Why are you and Jogandar fighting? Where is Amar?”

“Father is not at home now,” Sanwar told her. “Ganeev is just upset with me, as usual. And Jogandar...well, call it a rivalry of sorts.”

“Where have you been? I haven’t seen you in so long...”

“I was away, but I am here now. I am here to take care of you until Father comes home. Does that sound alright to you, Mother?”

“Yes,” she smiled. Her grin was slack, but she seemed to understand. “I love you so much, my son. You were always my little boy.”

“I am still, Mother. I love you, too.”

He held her tight, letting her tears soak into his shirt. Eventually, her sobs subsided into gentle sighs. He turned to face his sister then.

“I am going to take Mother to bed,” he said to her. “Then I think that I will require some rest myself.”

“You will. You look terrible.”

Sanwar smiled.

“I missed you, sister.”

“I missed you, Sanwar.”

“Goodnight.”

“Jogandar will return. The Crown will not suffer this defeat.”

Sanwar felt it necessary to voice the words, even if everyone present knew them to be true. His war council consisted of Jack, Randeep, and Samreet. The four of them had gathered in the southwest tower the next morning to survey the village, and prepare for the inevitable reprisal. They were now in open rebellion, and rebellions had to be extinguished before they gained enough momentum to consume an entire nation.

“We are ill-prepared,” said Randeep, looking out at the humble mud huts and wide, open grassland surrounding them for miles. “I desired resistance, yes, but planning also. Dhamija has no defenses.”

“Then we’ll just have to build some,” Jack countered. “And we’ll just have to make do with the time we do have. Aye, it’d be nice to plan for months or years hoping that the timing’ll

be perfect, but this is where we what we have now. We would never have succeeded without Sanwar's surprise attack anyway, so there's no use in wishing it were different."

"Quite so," Sanwar mildly agreed. "So let us then focus our energy instead on strategy."

"That will depend on where Jogandar attacks from," Randeep said.

"I guarantee that it will be from the south."

"How do you know?"

"From the south, he can arrive in Dhamija by rail, then utilize the forest to conceal his advance. His objective is also to recapture the village, not just *Lala Ghara*, as he needs the village in order to irrigate and harvest Dhamija's cropland. Were he to attack from the east, he would need to assault *Lala Ghara* directly, which he knows is an easily defensible position. A *haveli* is an excellent fortification, and the bridge across the Sutlej can quickly be destroyed to cut him off. An attack from the north or west requires him to march well around the village and within our visibility, and that gives us too much time to remobilize. No, Jogandar knows that the south will be the only means to take Dhamija."

Sanwar pointed beyond the village to illustrate. There was the gentle basin with its opposing ridgelines and the hillocks in between them. From even that modest stretch of high ground, a substantial force could stage its battle lines and attack the village from a defensible position. Jogandar would surely use its natural terrain to his advantage.

Seeing the ground from up high, Randeep reconsidered his own position.

"I suppose we could defend the nearest ridgeline," he said. "I can get the men working to backfill sandbags with all that dirt we just dug out of the canal."

“Aye, and we could use all that timber to drive stakes into the hillside,” Jack suggested, scratching his mustache. He was getting that mad gleam in his eye again. “That’ll slow the enemy down.”

“But what will stop him?” Randeep asked. “I did an inspection earlier this morning. We have plenty of captured rifles now, and enough ammunition for every man to carry a hundred rounds. But we have no high explosives, and I fear that a hundred rounds a man may not be enough. Our fighting men number maybe two or three hundred. Many of them are veterans yes, but Jogandar will be bringing veterans of his own, and many more of them. How many men do you think Amritsar can field?”

“I would expect a battalion at minimum,” said Sanwar. “A thousand men would be a conservative amount to assault Dhamija’s current defenses, even without artillery or cavalry, and I suspect that he will have both in his accompaniment.”

Randeep grimaced.

“Sounds like Gallipoli all over again.”

Sanwar could not help but silently agree.

“Have we got any of that stibnite left?” Jack interjected. “Combined with lead, we could forge a few hundred rounds of extra strength high velocity cartridges and more of those handy little grenades of yours.”

“I am afraid it has all been spent,” Sanwar replied. “I used all of it to obtain our arsenal in the first place.”

“Damn,” Jack and Randeep both swore.

“Stibnite, that’s Antimony based, is it not?” Asked Samreet suddenly. She had been silent until now, as she had little military experience, but a great desire to learn and listen. However, Sanwar knew that she could not contain herself in

moments of brilliance either. “That was what you had said when Randeep forged those grenades for you.”

“Yes, that is correct,” said Sanwar.

“The textile factory uses Antimony Trisulfide to dye its fabrics red and orange. The women who work there have told me this before. There’s a great deal of it there.”

Sanwar raised a curious eyebrow.

“We would need Zinc Oxide to separate the sulfur, then Hydrochloric Acid to chlorinate the Antimony and make it explosive,” he mused.

“You know I have both for smelting alloys and pickling steel,” Randeep reminded him.

“Oh, how could I have forgotten? Jack, can you-?”

“I’m already on it,” he said. “I’ll start getting the Antimony over to the forge so Randeep and I can start cooking.”

“The ladies at the factory can help you deliver it,” Samreet offered.

“Very good,” said Sanwar. “And I will lead the men in strengthening our defenses. I have my own ideas about what can be improved. We can also get our veterans leading anyone who is untrained in some basic drills. Once you and Randeep are finished, I would like you to join us, Jack.”

“Aye. We can do that.”

“What about those who do not fight?” Asked Samreet.

“Children, the elderly, and many of the women? All of them want to contribute somehow, I am sure, even if it is not on the frontline.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Anyone older than sixteen should be at the rear to tend the wounded. We can use the *gurdwara* as our field hospital, and Jagmeet can evacuate the more lightly injured to *Lala Gbara* as needed. Any non-combatants can also put out any

fires or carry ammunition or handle any other smaller tasks. Anything to keep our fighters focused strictly on the fighting.”

“That would be a tremendous help,” he said. Then, he grew quieter and solemn. “The three of you have all been a tremendous help so far. It seems that everyone has turned towards me for leadership all of sudden, and I do suppose that it is sensible, not solely because of my social rank, but because of my military one. I have commanded at the highest level out of any of us, and presently, that sort of military leadership is sorely needed; that of a chief commander. Yet, every good commander needs his staff. I know not when Jogandar will attack, but I do know that when he does, I will need you all to act as my deputies. No one can lead this many men alone. So, I would name you all as captains, and assign you each a company to command.”

His three captains bowed their heads to them.

“Randeep,” he said, placing an arm upon his shoulder. “No one doubts your leadership or bravery. You will command the pivotal position of my right flank.”

“Forgive me, sir, but I was only a sergeant,” Randeep protested. “Not a captain in charge of an entire company.”

“Well, now you are promoted,” said Sanwar. “Seeing as you are by far the most experienced enlisted man among this village, I have no doubt that you will prove a most capable officer as well. Now do this, because I order you.”

Randeep saluted him instinctually.

Sanwar then turned to his sister, and smiled sweetly.

“Samreet, you will have my left.”

Although she had no formal military experience, there was no refusing his sister’s leadership. He knew that he would rather have her fighting alongside him than anywhere else.

Besides, the people of Dhamija had always loved her, even before she had aided in their uprising. Few others could inspire them to charge headlong into the fray than she. Few others could inspire Sanwar either.

“And I will watch your back as well, brother,” she said, which broadened his smile even further.

“I know,” he said, and the two saluted one another.

Last of all, he turned to Jack.

“Captain MacGregor,” he said with a stiff salute. “I hereby reactivate your commission. You will act as my executive officer in the center, for I know of no other son of a bitch who can lead and fight as well as you, nor anyone I would be more honored to have standing at my side.”

Jack saluted him. A grim smile was on his face.

“In life or death, I’m with you, *mera bbra.*”

“*Mo bhrathair.*”

They lowered their salutes, and then embraced.

When they came apart, they knew that it was time.

“Very good,” said Sanwar. “Now let’s get to work.”

The days were long and short at once. They were exhausting, grueling, brutally hot days, but they seemingly were over in an instant as there was much to be done and every hour something was accomplished. That was what happened whenever men were motivated and their mission was clear.

In the mornings, they fortified the village’s defenses before the day got too hot. Most of the canal had been dug out already, and could easily be converted into a trench at the top of the hill. Sanwar got the men to turn it from a straight line into a zig-zagging pattern in less than a day, backfilling the necessary areas once it was done. This prevented artillery

from hitting the trench directly and killing droves of men in a line. It also made it more difficult for infantry to charge and clear, as they would have to move around bends and corners where the defenders would be waiting.

Sandbags lined the walls as well to absorb the shock of shrapnel and explosions. Men drove sharpened stakes into the hillside, using any leftover lumber meant for the canal, just as Jack had instructed. Another trench was added to the hillside on the second day straight down its center, similar to how Jogandar had intended to irrigate the valley below. This would be the entry and exit corridor.

In the afternoons when the day was hottest, Sanwar gave briefings in the shade, discussing battle plans. Anyone who was in the Army previously caught on quickly, and helped teach the others. In the evenings, he led the men in drills, instructing them in how to handle the weapons and fire. By then, Randeep had the rhythm of his forge down and several men assisting him, and the spare ammunition was beginning to flow. Therefore, Sanwar felt confident in using some of the existing stockpile as live fire. It got the men used to the sound and smell of gunfire, as well as accustomed to a Saxon rifle's monstrous kick.

The whole village slept very little. They retired late and rose early, for there was much to do and not much need for rest at this time. Within a few days, Dhamija's people were starting to look something like an army.

Sanwar had the most to do. Everyone had questions. His men wanted to know where to dig and how. The women wanted to know where they could keep the young children when the attack began. His captains wanted to know his strategy. His mother wanted to know if she could see him for dinner. Ganeev wanted to know when this would all be over.

Everybody wanted to know when Jogandar would actually attack.

He only had so many answers.

There was but one person who had asked nothing of him, and yet if there was one thing that Sanwar did know, it was that he was the most important person yet to see.

Sajan had gone home to his estate on the very same day that Sanwar had stormed *Lala Ghara*. They had not spoken in that moment, as the wounded were more pressing, and when Sanwar had a moment available, Sajan had already gone.

The next moment came three days later. At this stage, the village had gotten into enough of a rhythm that it could lead itself, and Sanwar could be excused for at least a few hours. That evening, he rode down to *Hara Bhaga*.

Sajan Singh Ahuwalia's house was a *haveli* much like Sanwar's own, laden with towers and archways. However, despite being noticeably smaller, its gardens far exceeded *Lala Ghara's* own. There were arbors of greenery on the outside in addition to the enormous garden within. So many palms and rosewoods lined the walkway to the front gate that one could scarcely view the walls of *Hara Bhaga* behind them.

A butler greeted Sanwar at the door, and had his horse brought to the stables. Sanwar had arrived just after dinner, but was offered food anyway. Sanwar refused it. He had little appetite this eve.

Sajan sat on the veranda, looking out at the garden. A steaming cup of tea was on an accent table at his side. His back was to Sanwar even as he came out into the torchlight.

"Your absence has been noted," Sanwar said.

"An ironic sentiment coming from you," Sajan answered. Still, he had not turned around.

He did not look either when Sanwar took the empty chair beside him.

“The guns won us the day,” Sanwar told him. “It is all thanks to you. I was sure to tell our people of your contribution. You should be with them now. They want to show you their gratitude. You are one of us.”

“It is not their gratitude that I fear,” Sajan replied.

“Then what do you?”

This time, Sajan did turn to face him.

“That I will lose you twice,” he said, tears in his eyes.

“Sajan...”

“War tore us apart, and took you away from me. I thought you were dead. I accepted the life set out for me, because I could not devise another. Then, you return for just a fleeting moment, and war has begun all over again. You know he will return, Sanwar. Jogandar will return to Dhamija with fury, and he will kill you. And I will lose you all over again!”

Sajan began to sob.

Sanwar put a hand upon his shoulder.

“This is the cost of another life,” he said. “A chance to live the trueness of one’s own self, however brief, is worth more than anything compared to the meaningless existence of subjugation. It is no life at all if you cannot choose it for yourself, and if others cannot either.”

Sajan wiped away his tears.

“I want a life that isn’t this,” he said. “And I want to live long enough to enjoy it with you, free of secrecy or separation. We have spent more time hiding and apart than we have together. I only want that to change.”

“And this is the only way to do that,” Sanwar said. “There is nothing now but to stand and fight, as there has always

been. Help me to win, Sajan, so that we may at last walk in the sun together.”

“What if you cannot win?”

“I cannot without you,” he said. “So join me.”

Sajan looked back out into the garden. A waxing moon was rising above the trees, and a warm wind was rustling their branches. The scent of saffron was wafting in on it from the kitchen, its sweetness and its savor gifting mercies on the air.

He had his answer then.

Sunset was late in these summer hours. The village worked as long as there was light, which meant almost three-quarters of the day. Impending invasion left little time for rest, but Jack found a quiet moment after his toils to wander down to the Sutlej and relax awhile.

His energy was still ignited from a day's worth of hefting pick and spade, so he occupied himself with skipping stones as a way of winding down before he retired for the evening. Today, he had assisted the villagers in the trench work, leading them in all of the digging that Sanwar had planned. Jack's help was needed there now more than the forge, as Randeep had fully found his routine by the second day. They had spent the first filling a blast furnace with Antimony Trisulfide and Zinc Oxide. Then, Jack had worked the bellows while Randeep stoked the fire. When the slag had emptied out, the pure and powdered Antimony was collected from the furnace, and after a brief instructional from Jack, Randeep was able to begin pickling it with Hydrochloric Acid. In Alchemists' terms, they had fermented Spirit of Salts with Lupus Metallorum into Butter of Antimony. Now Randeep could smelt the Antimony Trichloride with lead into bullet molds, or electrolyze it into its explosive form.

In any case, Jack's help was no longer needed this day, and so he tore his hot, stuffy boots off of his hot, sweaty feet, rolled back his trousers to the knees, pushed aside the reeds and tall grass, and wandered out into the shallows of the Sutlej. The mud was cool between his toes, and the water washed the day's dust and filth off his skin.

He found a handful of small, flat stones along the bank, which he clipped between his thumb and forefinger, and flicked into the stream. They slapped the water, and bounced along its surface like a jumping fish. A few of them made it as far as halfway across the river.

If he did not idle in this activity for at least a little while, he knew that he was liable to be anxious and awake all night long. Even after all these years, he still got anxious before a battle, because each one was just as likely as the others to be his last.

This fight was different, though.

In all cases before now, his anxiety was not borne out of fear, but out of anticipation. He had expected that each battle from France to Flanders, Greece to Germany, would end with his unceremonious burial in a shallow grave. He had embraced it. It made him fearless. Untouchable. He had expected, and almost hoped, that every time he would die, and so he could not fear what was to him so utterly inevitable.

Yet now, he was anxious out of fear, because now he could not fail. He could die yes, but he could not fail, for the lives of many counted on him. Dhamija was merely the beginning. If it fell, then so too would the world. Saxon would have the Stone, and even men like Jogandar would be little more than festers by comparison then. Everyone and everything that Jack had ever fought for, would be extinguished.

He tossed his last stone into the river.

He had thrown it thoughtlessly, and so it sunk instead of skipped.

He sighed, and turned to leave.

“The stone is cast, it seems,” a voice called out to him, gentle and playful.

He looked up at the bank.

Samreet stood there atop her white horse, *dastaar* on her head and *tulwar* on her hip. Her long indigo cloak rustled in the evening breeze. The faint sunlight glinted off her scabbard and *kara* bracelet, though the moon and stars were quickly coming out in this fastly fading twilight.

Jack smiled at the sight of her, and she returned it.

“Aye, I threw it in,” he answered. “But perhaps I’ve got another shot left in me tonight.”

She slid from the saddle, wading through the tall grass to reach him.

“Are you nervous for battle?”

“Aye. Aren’t you?”

“I’ve never been in a battle before,” she said. “I would think that I would be frightened beyond all belief, and that an experienced soldier like yourself would be stoic in the face of all impending danger.”

“No. I’m afraid. But you look calm, lass.”

“I must be. My people need me to be.”

“But are you really?”

“No,” she admitted. “That’s why I came to find you.”

“For advice?”

“For comfort.”

“Why?”

“Because you interest me a great deal,” she said. She drew closer, and placed a hand upon his chest. “This is not your fight. And yet you stand beside us.”

“It was always my fight,” he said. “Sanwar is my friend.”

“But why should a white man befriend a Sikh? Why should he choose to die for him? Why should anyone die for strangers they do not know?”

“Is that not what soldiers do?” He answered with a smile. “And for that, any fight where those who fight for life shall always be my friend too.”

There was a glimmer in her onyx eyes. Her grin was as big and beaming as the swollen moon that hung above their heads.

“That is why you interest me, Jack MacGregor,” she said, and they kissed.

There, along the riverbank among the reeds and tall grass, they held each other tightly. Whether for the first time or the last, it was all the same. This was for now, and now was all that ever mattered.

Tuesday, May 1st, 1923

Amritsar, Punjab, British India

“The whole village is in rebellion, you say?”

“Every last one of them.”

Colonel Ashburn extinguished his cigarette at the sound of Jogandar’s news. He let the butt sit fuming in the glass tray for a while without saying anything.

Jogandar sat fuming waiting for an answer.

Saxon observed the two men from the corner of the Colonel’s office. He stood there, not only because it was the shadiest and coolest part of the room, but because he had no

patience for this conversation whatsoever. He had no stomach left for Jogandar's failure. Twice the man had let Jack slip through his grasp. Not only that, his own brother had taken the entire village by storm with nothing but a throng of pitch-fork wielding peasants. Now, they were stuck waiting for this aged colonel to do something.

Ashburn was the same old world sort of officer as General MacGregor, Saxon surmised, although he was shorter, paunchier, and made of much less belligerent stuff. The Colonel liked to instill a fatherly attitude to his leadership; a stern and distant attitude, but one that sired disappointment in oneself rather than resentment towards his authority.

"I gave Brigadier MacGregor an elite company of Gurkhas," the Colonel said at last. His thick gray mustache twitched with nearly every word. "Half their number returned. The rest were missing, killed, or wounded. Then, you dismissed MacGregor. Now, you've lost your entire holding, Zamindar. This sort of negligence, I simply cannot abide. Especially from somebody with your record."

Jogandar clenched his hands around his chair's arms. The Colonel's office was furnished with an imported oaken desk and seats, but it looked that not even the hardwood could withstand the Zamindar's grip.

"So, you will let these low-caste farmers defy the Crown with such flagrant impunity?"

"Quite the contrary," Ashburn said, then drew himself another cigarette from out of his coat pocket. He lit it, and leaned back in his creaky oaken chair to open a horse-shoe shaped window behind him and let the smoke out. "No, I'm going to march an entire battalion over there to get the place back in order. Not just infantry either, but artillery and

cavalry too. The only matter on which I'm undecided is the matter of what to do with you."

"Excuse me, sir?"

"You've put me in a quite delicate position, my dear fellow. You see, the Empire's already had something of a public relations nightmare with the massacre four years ago. Slaughtering even more peasants, though justified, is hardly going to improve our image, now is it, *sahib*? Gandhi's got the whole sub-continent's nationalists clamoring for independence, even from behind bars. Attitudes are changing around here, gentlemen. A firm and reassuring hand is needed more than an iron fist to secure the future of a British India, but it seems I have no choice now, do I? You've gone and put us all in quite the quagmire, haven't you? That is why you are temporarily relieved of command. The Army has seen fit to revoke your commission until Dhamija can be recaptured. The size and strength of your garrison will also be under some reconsideration."

The arms of his chair snapped off in Jogandar's grip. He tossed aside the useless hunks of wood as he rose to his feet, and stabbed one long finger at Ashburn.

"You will do no such thing," he threatened. "Not if you wish to live."

"How dare you, sir!?" Ashburn blazed. "I ought to court martial for this!"

"And I ought to skin you where you stand."

Ashburn almost reached for his pistol.

Jogandar almost leaped over the desk to strangle him.

Yet, Saxon threw himself between them, and roared in anger.

"Enough! You damn fools! Enough!"

With one hand, he shoved Ashburn's arm down before it could draw the sidearm. With the other, he shoved Jogandar back into his seat.

The two colonels glowered at this manhandling, but Saxon did not give a damn. He had tolerated their incompetence long enough. If they would not listen to reason, then they would understand the language of force.

"I need the two of you to cooperate if we're going to crush this rebellion," he warned them. "I need the two of you to understand that you can bicker over the minutiae all you want, but I am in charge. And right now, I order you both to shut your fucking mouths and listen."

"Lord Saxon, what is this nonsense!? You don't even hold rank—" Colonel Ashburn began until Saxon silenced him with a massive hand.

"I pay for your army. I supply your army. My weapons give the Crown its land, and make this whole damn world go round. So, you already do exactly what I say. You just don't know it."

Suddenly, Saxon snatched the now cold cigarette butt from out of the ashtray, and clutched it between his fingers.

An instant later, it burst into flames.

Jogandar and Ashburn watched him blow its smoking embers all away, their mouths agape.

"And that's your little world if Sanwar Singh and Jack MacGregor get their way," he said. "If you two imbeciles fight each other, then you've both got three enemies to face; the rebels, the other, and me. Got that, old boy?"

The last words were to Ashburn, who nodded.

"Colonel, you will officiate a joint command of the battalion," Saxon ordered him. "I have business with the Zamindar in Dhamija, and as much as he has disappointed

me, it is in everyone's best interests that he be restored to his previous position when this matter is concluded. And as for you, *sahib*..." Saxon spun around, put himself right in Jogandar's face. "You are going to play nice with the Colonel, and not make this an antagonistic relationship, now aren't you?"

"As long as I get to kill my brother," Jogandar conceded, even if insolence was still in his eyes.

"You can do as you damn well please, as long as we are marching within three days and attacking within four, and that you bring Jack MacGregor to me alive," Saxon said.

Without any more to say, he exited the office, and slammed the door beside him.

He torpedoed down the marble steps to get himself outside as fast as possible. Fury grew inside of him, and he was damn sure that he would not be able to contain it. He was so damn close to the end. He would not let Jack nor Jogandar nor anyone stop him from getting there.

He stepped outside into the crowded streets, released a howling scream, and then punched the mudbrick building's wall. He drew his fist out of the crater that he had made, and shakily put into his breast pocket to search for a smoke. He pulled out the last of his local cigars, and lit it with a finger. He inhaled deeply, allowing the ashen fumes to calm his nerves, and leaned with one arm pressed against the wall of the Colonel's headquarters.

No one in the crowded streets paid him any mind, thankfully. Most knew better than to question a white man's anger. Nobody disturbed him, save for his companions.

Taggart and the Doctor had been waiting in the shade of a pottery store's awning across the street. They only dared to approach Saxon only once his ire had subsided. Both men

were sweating profusely. Rothstein looked as though he might faint. He fanned himself frantically with one of his books.

“Are you unwell, my lord?” He asked.

“What does it bleeding well look like?” Saxon flared, and sucked another mouthful of smoke from his cigar. He was sweating profusely himself inside his suit. The heat was suddenly getting to him.

“How did your meeting transpire? Will the attack happen in time?”

“They will do as I say or else,” he growled.

“Will we reach the forge in time with all the necessary items?”

Saxon straightened, and turned his gaze down at the puny little man.

“We will, Doctor. Damn your eyes.”

Rothstein slunk away from him.

“We will attack Dhamija and destroy them,” he promised. “And the Philosopher’s Stone will be in your hand upon that day. Or I swear to God, I will end all life upon this world.”

“If it’s all the same to you, sir,” Taggart coughed. “I’d like to be fighting on the front. I’ve got me a score to settle with MacGregor.”

“You mean the fact that he’s humiliated you several times already, and you were either too damn stupid or too damn incompetent to stop him?”

The sudden acidity of Saxon’s words took Taggart aback.

“Aye...?”

“Permission granted then. Just don’t bloody kill him, Taggart. I want the man alive.”

“Uh. Er. I’ll try, sir?”

“My Lord, this is an entirely risky and unnecessary endeavor,” Rothstein protested. “MacGregor is a variable well beyond our calculation. Frankly, we have expended too many resources already to attempt his capture when any other would serve as a perfectly adequate sacrifice-”

“Fuck you,” said Saxon, and walked away.

And that was that.

Saturday, May 5th, 1923

Dhamija, Punjab, British India

On the morning of the fourth day, just before dawn, Sanwar awoke in his bed, panting in a cold sweat. Sajan lay motionless beside him, still asleep and undisturbed by Sanwar’s violent upheaval.

He had been having dreams, though he could only remember scant portions of them. There had been a field of fire beneath a blood-soaked sky. He had felt a cold steel blade puncturing his heart. He had seen his own body burning on a funeral pyre. He had seen the canals run red with blood in place of water.

Sanwar rose, and dressed himself. The morn was quiet, save for the gentle chirping of the birds outside his chamber window.

Something called to him. He found himself leaving the room, and walking down the stairs, through *Lala Ghara’s chowk* and to its main gate. He nodded to the two elderly sentries on duty as he wandered out into the day, and they let him pass without question. He traveled alone down to the banks of the Sutlej just outside of *Lala Ghara’s* walls.

In the blue halflight of morning, both sun and moon were risen in the sky. The morn was quiet, yet something called

him there. He waded out into the placid waters until he was chest-deep in them. The morn was already warm and humid, yet the river cooled him. Around him drifted pink lotus flowers. Their sweet and gentle scent was in the air.

A ripple shimmered in the stream, and with it, a faint voice echoed and seemed to call his name.

“Father?” Sanwar called back.

“So, he called you too?”

The answer came not from the river, but from behind him.

Ganeev had come down to the water as well. She did not look at Sanwar, only ahead towards some unknown sight on the other bank. She did not wade into the water, but stayed upon the shore where it was dry.

“We spread Father’s ashes here four years ago today,” his sister said. Her voice was as empty as her gaze. “They flowed downstream until they mixed into the sea, and washed away forever. And you were not here to see it.”

“I would have come home to you a broken man four years ago,” he told her. “Would you not prefer that I returned whole?”

“We had burned a pyre for you too, Sanwar,” she said. “Our parents could not bear it. Sajan was in tears. We poured your ashes in the river too.”

“You think of me as such a selfish man,” he told her, though he was sure she was not listening. “And yet, I went to war as father wanted. I committed my life to the Stone, as my people needed it. They see now what I will do for them, as I have always done for them. Soon, I will face my own brother to free our family from him. All of this, I have sacrificed, and yet you can only see the wrong in me. You judge what you did not live, as if you would have done any better. Yes, you suffered under Jogandar. Yet, you pretend as

though you were the only one who had. Rather than stand with those who suffered just as much, if not more, you stand above us as if you somehow are exempt from making sacrifices. You have suffered, yes, but you have not sacrificed. You have not fought here with the rest of us. You were not beaten by our father. He did not send you to war. He was no perfect parent to any of us, I know, but rather than offering your empathy to those with like experiences, you offer only judgement and animosity at their plight. In that way, you are very much like our father and our brother.”

Ganeev scowled at him.

“No, Sanwar!” She cried. “It is you who is everything that you describe. You think that you are exempt. You think that you are superior. That you can come here so arrogantly, and assume your birthright whenever you please! That you can destroy our home, and throw our parents’ generosity in their faces! That you can spit upon our father’s memory!”

“Should I live to see the day, I will give away our lands,” he said, as calmly as he had said his piece before.

“It is not yours to give.”

“It is not ours to have. Life belongs to everybody. And land is life. You have lived in comfort all your years, and yet you think me arrogant for acting in our faith and helping those in need.”

Ganeev opened her mouth to speak again, and yet was interrupted.

Samreet had come down to the river as well.

She walked into the water, a gentle smile on her lips. She joined Sanwar in the shallows, wading out until she was breast-deep.

“I had a curious dream,” she said. “I thought I heard father’s voice calling from outside my window. He was beckoning me down to the river.”

Samreet cupped her hands beneath the surface, then watched the water pour out between her fingers when she lifted them back out again.

“The river flows out to the sea,” she said. “But will refill again when the monsoons come next season. Such is the way it has always been in Punjab as long as man has dwelt upon it. Yet not even the monsoons would be enough to restore her if the dam were to be built. Father sees that now, though once he would not have.”

“How do you know this?” Ganeev asked, more curious than angry now. “Father is gone.”

“Exactly,” Samreet said, and opened her hands to let the last of the water drain out. “Father is gone. Our brother is here. And Jogandar means to destroy our family forever. As the water comes again, so too do the spirits. But this moment will not. We will see Father again in due time. Then the ways of right and wrong can be justly sorted out.”

Sanwar smiled then. His little sister spoke truthfully and fiercely so. She had come far from the wild young girl whom she had been in her youth. Now, she wielded the flame within her rather than let it burn rampantly. The strength of her bright spirit renewed his own, and he could not help but swell with an immensity of pride.

Ganeev could only sigh.

Heavy and awkward from the child within her, she waded into the river and joined her siblings.

“May we at least remember Father?” She asked them. “And ask him for guidance and support...even if it had been absent before?”

“Yes,” said Sanwar.

The three of them held hands together in a circle, and bowed their heads.

They stood there in the shallows for a time amid the cool waters and the lotus leaves, and let the gentle river’s tide wash against them.

Only did a cry for help break such a moment.

“Sanwar! Sanwar!”

It was one of the sentries. The old man stood above them, rifle unslung and in his hands. His grim expression told Sanwar everything.

The man told him out loud anyway.

“Our scouts in the forest sighted a column marching in from the south. Jogandar will be upon us within an hour.”

Sanwar smiled.

“Then let us throw him a welcome party. Prepare for battle.”

XIII

Dare Thee Seize Victory?

The battalion dismounted at the train station from an enormous freighter, one large enough to carry men, guns, and horses by the hundreds.

They marched upon Dhamija a thousand strong; nine companies of infantry, a troop of lancers, three machine gun teams, and two mortar crews. Jogandar rode at the head of the column, unafraid atop his blood bay horse. His brother had been a sniper, yes, but he knew that Sanwar would not forgo the satisfaction of killing him by doing so from a distance.

Colonel Ashburn rode in the center of the column on a black horse, poised to wheel off and form the right flank when they reached the objective. One of Ashburn's executives was towards the rear, ready to enact the same maneuver on the left. Jogandar had posted Sergeant Major Taggart on that flank as well, in the event that he needed to supersede command on Jogandar's behalf.

Saxon and Rothstein, had surprisingly accompanied the battalion on their mission. They rode at the rear on a white and a dun horse respectively, armed only with the automatic pistol holstered in Saxon's breast pocket. Saxon had claimed that he was there to oversee the protection of his investments, yet Jogandar did know what to think of anything the man said anymore. The Zamindar could have sworn that he performed an act of pure sorcery in front of his own eyes, yet he and Ashburn had assured each other that it had surely been some parlor trick for effect.

Either way, there was no refusing Saxon's presence.

When the column passed the crossroads and then came within sight of the village, it veered towards the forest. With the tree line protecting their rear, the battalion assumed formation along the far ridge. Jogandar took his place at the head of the center, while Ashburn and his deputy commander took their positions on the right and left. Each was evenly assigned the infantry and a machine-gun team, but Jogandar kept his cavalry and mortars in reserve behind his detachment.

However, what truly mattered was the enemy's positioning.

Jogandar drew a pair of binoculars from his saddlebag, and surveyed the village's defenses.

Sharp wooden stakes dotted the opposite slope. Heaps of sandbags lined the crest. A narrow trench ran down the center of the hill, thus creating an easily accessible corridor from top to bottom.

Beyond the sandbags, stood Sanwar's rabble. They were a motley bunch of men and women, young and old, veterans and amateurs, all dressed in a smattering of garish colors. They wielded stolen rifles and knives or sickles or hammers on their belts.

Jogandar grinned. Brightly colored and undisciplined troops would be easily visible and easily routed.

He continued surveying the line, and saw his counterparts.

Randeep held the enemy's right flank. He almost looked like an officer wearing his black *dastaar* while seated on his tall black horse. A sword and pistol even hung at his belt.

Samreet had fully embraced her treachery by assuming her position on the left flank. In contrast to Randeep, she wore a white *dastaar* and rode upon a small white horse, the favorite

of her stables. Like Randeep though, she carried a *tulwar* as well.

Jogandar could only shake his head as well. He had always loved Samreet. She had always been so agreeable, but now, he could not save her. She had chosen the wrong side, and she had sealed her fate.

Of course, his brother had taken command in the center.

Mounted on a roan mare, he sat high above the ranks of his militiamen. A saffron *dastaar* he wore, and a drawn *tulwar* he raised aloft in his firm hand. When he did, the villagers raised one fist together in silence.

Jogandar simply raised an eyebrow, and lowered his binoculars.

It was a defiant gesture for certain, but a useless one. Defiance had only been their downfall.

Then, he heard the music.

A lone figure stood upon a rooftop, and played his tune.

At first, the bass and tenor drones rang out, then were followed by the chanter's mournful wail.

Sergeant Major McCandless, Taggart's predecessor, had left behind quite a great deal of personal belongings at *Lala Ghara* when he died of Yellow Fever. Chief among them was his kilt regalia, a Highland dirk, and a set of ivory and blackwood bagpipes.

Jack MacGregor had donned all of these just for the occasion.

He stood now on the roof dressed in tartan true, with the dirk sheathed into his boot, *Lann Dhearg* at his hip, and the bagpipes nestled in his arm. With a great and mighty bluster, he released its sound into the world.

The reedy, bleating sound echoed throughout the valley. Strident and clear, it clamored over the village, the hilltops, and the trees for all the soldiers there to hear.

He had chosen “Flowers of the Forest”, for he had not touched the pipes since he had learned them in boyhood, and perhaps this might be the last time that he ever would. It had been so many years since he had learned this tune, but he had never forgotten how it went.

He had begun the music alone, yet he did not end that way.

Two more voices joined him on the rooftops. A pair of *alghoza* players took stations above the flanks where they then commenced their sounds. These twin-piped flutes came in for a chorus. Their timbre was brighter and flowery, yet matched the bagpipes in its somber melody. Together, they were a solemn euphony, sad and sweet, sorrowful and powerful.

The village would not refrain from adding to the symphony as well. An orchestra of voices cried out from the ranks as they shook their fists and weapons, and joined in this defiant song.

“Bole so nibal!”

Repeatedly, they shouted this.

They shouted the mantra, not caring that their voices would grow hoarse or that they would tire of it. They had energy enough for a dozen men each, for their lives were worth as many, if not more.

The soldiers stood in stolid silence, just as Jogandar surely desired. They would not give the village the satisfaction of a response, yet to Dhamija, it mattered not. They did not do this to coerce or intimidate, but for themselves and for no other.

And the only thing that stopped them was the sky going dark.

At first, it might have been mistaken for a passing cloud, for the shadow slowly crept across the valley. Yet rather than yielding to the light again, it deepened, covering all Dhamija in its shroud. The summer's morn reddened to the orange haze of evening, then blackened to the dark of night. As the light thus faded, so too did the music. The pipers lowered their instruments at the awe of it. Soldiers on each side cast their eyes up to the heavens and let their jaws fall down to the earth to gaze upon it. Scattered war cries still rang out for a moment, but died away as soon as they were deafened by the silence.

The onyx orb of the moon had passed before the flaming sun, and naught but a fiery slender ring shone through around its rim. The air grew cold. Weird, long shadows stretched upon the earth, often splitting into twos or threes. The whole world shrank beneath the weight of the sky, and with it did anyone who witnessed its enormity. And on the lowly field of battle and in this minute village off in India, there was silence in the ranks for what seemed like half an hour.

And then, as quickly as it had come, the darkness vanished. Light and warmth returned to the valley. The soldiers blinked at the sudden brilliance. They turned away from the scorching sunlight, and when their eyes had readjusted, they saw the enemy opposite them once more and remembered their grim business.

The villagers raised their arms again, and gave out their cry.

“Bole so nibal!”

As if to answer them this time, the assault began.

Jogandar gave orders for one company from each detachment to advance. The villagers, for all of their cheers and saber-rattling, had neglected the forward positions of the valley's three small hillocks. Once those were captured, he could place the machine guns on them, and rain fire onto his enemy's defenses. That would be enough to route them, or at least suppress them long enough for his reserves to come in and sweep the whole rebellion away.

The vanguard marched forward, thus beginning the assault. The captain of each company led the men in the columns so that they would maintain good order when climbing up and down the slopes. The hillocks provided some cover from Sanwar's lines besides, so they did not need to worry as much about becoming a target to enemy fire. In fact, if they remained in tight formation, they would avoid dispersing out into the gaps between the hillocks where they could be.

The men went down the ridge, then up their respective slopes. The hillocks were narrower than the ridges, and therefore, steeper of a climb. Between that and the fact that they were marching uphill, the companies slowed down significantly. They were about halfway up their objectives when the first shots rang out.

Jogandar shoved his binoculars to his face.

Smoke and muzzle flares appeared from those small hilltops. A few key men were lying there in wait, disguised by scrims of grass and foliage. When the three companies had gotten roughly halfway up the hill, they had opened fire.

Jogandar's infantry were so tightly packed together that they were easy targets, nor could many of them get a clean shot at the enemy other than the front rank. The latter went down quickly though, given how close they were to the fire.

Soldiers fell back dead or wounded, then were followed by men from ranks behind.

The captains, seeing that they had walked into an ambush unsupported, called for their companies to retreat.

The marksmen shot them next.

Jogandar watched at least two of the officers fall as their men broke ranks and fled down the hillsides, then several lieutenants who tried to keep the companies in order. He growled at their incompetence, before shouting at his own men on the ridge to open fire.

Left, right, and center gave three rounds each of volley fire. The goal was not for accuracy, but to draw the attention of Sanwar's marksmen away from the retreating companies on the valley floor. The sheer volume of coordinated fire sent the enemy marksmen on the hillocks ducking for cover. They ceased shooting for the safety of keeping their heads down.

Once this had happened, the mortar crews came forward.

Their weapon was essentially a five-foot tube attached to a metal base. A leader indicated targets, while a second man adjusted the mortar's aim and a third dropped in a six-inch shell when the gun was ready. Then, everybody covered their ears.

The shells slid down the tube, struck a firing pin at the end of it, then launched off a second later. They arced over the valley and the cowering men within it, to the hilltops where they exploded upon impact. Bursts of dirt and flame blew into the air, along with pieces of the men whom they had hit.

It only took one barrage for the marksmen there to sound the retreat. They ran out of their hiding spots at once, and down the opposite side for the safety of the main lines. A few undisciplined troops took shots at them, but the officers and sergeants snapped at them to hold their fire. Moving targets

were more difficult to hit, and it would be a waste of ammunition to unleash a volley at so few men.

Jogandar did allow the mortar crews to arc a few more shells over the hills at them, though. The accuracy did not matter. Explosions were enough to induce fear among civilians and unprofessional troops. He smiled as the shouts from Sanwar and his officers went out to quiet their ranks.

Then, he ordered that the vanguard get back onto their feet and continue their advance.

Sanwar knew what was coming next as soon as the artillery hit. Most of his men came back running. They traveled through the central trench back to the safety of the sandbags right as Jogandar's vanguard overtook the hilltops. He sent the worst of the wounded to the *gurdwara*, which was acting as their field hospital. Any of the walking wounded fell back to the rear where the village women would dress them, and return them to the front if they could manage it.

Sanwar and his deputies then dismounted so that they would not be such visible targets, and ordered their ranks to take positions in the trench.

They had only done so just in time, for moments after the artillery had ceased, Jogandar's three assaulting companies assumed their hilltops.

Sanwar then gave out the order for all ranks to fire.

There had been little time to teach Dhamija's people the coordinated precision of volley fire, at least at the company level. So, Sanwar had settled for small sections of about ten troops to volley together. As soon as one group shot, the next one followed, and so on down the line. To help them keep the rhythm, he had sprinkled in experienced men with every section, men who could remind the untrained troops what to

do and when. The fire was ragged and small compared to professional troops, but it was orderly and consistent. They shot over the low sandbag wall down onto the enemy, using cover and the higher ground to their advantage.

It was all Sanwar could do to keep the enemy occupied. If the hillocks were under constant fire, then it would be difficult for Jogandar to bring any support elements forward, like machine guns or artillery.

Jogandar's men on those hillocks answered the barrage with three full-scale volleys of their own. Bullets slapped into the sandbags in thunderous waves, every so often hitting an unfortunate soul whose cover got exposed. The veterans in Sanwar's line yelled for everyone to keep on fighting though, and to let the women and the elderly carry any injured back towards the rear.

The two sides traded volleys for a few minutes before the main assault began. Through the gaps between the hillocks, came four more companies of infantry. They advanced in loose formation while the men on the hilltops supported them with covering fire.

Strangely, these new men glistened in the sunlight, and when Sanwar looked closer, he saw why.

Bayonets had been fixed to the bayonets of the advancing companies, which meant that they were anticipating hand-to-hand combat.

Sanwar called his runners forward, two of the fastest youths in the village. He sent one to Randeep and Samreet, ordering his deputies to keep two squads each firing at the hillocks, but for the rest of the men to redirect their fire at the assaulting companies.

He ordered them also to fire at will.

Moments later, Dhamija turned its rifles on the assault below, and the fire turned from clockwork into chaos. The volleys shrunk down to ragged, sporadic blasts towards the hillside, as the rest of the line fired wildly at the advance. They abandoned coordination for desperate volume, trying to slow the advance as much as possible before it reached them.

Sanwar did his best to choose his targets, searching for any officers or NCOs leading the ranks. However, there was such a wall of men and smoke in front of him that good marks were rare amidst the throng. He shot at them when he could, but kept his focus on his own troops and the field, giving the men around him individual verbal commands whenever they wavered or froze.

The enemy ranks below advanced, and fell. Yet, they were too many and shooting too heavily to be stopped completely. Dhamija's forces could only slow them with their paltry counter-fire, and hope to kill as many as they could before they reached the top.

Some of the enemy made it into the central trench or fell inside, hoping that it would provide them cover from the barrage. However, this pathway to the hilltop was a narrow killing corridor, and any trapped inside were easy targets for the defenders to pick off as they trudged along the slope.

Some used the planted wooden stakes as cover while their fellows bounded forward. The stakes had helped to hamper their maneuverability and the possibility of cavalry coming to their aid, yet did somewhat disguise the outline of a single infantryman. Still, it was poor cover in comparison to the village's sandbags, and many behind their ostensible safety were hit. Others, who had climbed higher and were hit, rolled down on to the spikes and were impaled.

Amid the chaos, Sanwar's company was running short of ammunition. He called for more to be brought over. A young boy was one of the runners carrying a bandolier of it. As he hurried over to Sanwar, a grenade flew over the wall, and exploded midair near him. The boy went down, shrapnel embedded in his calves and back. Sanwar ran to him, screamed for two women to the village to run him back to the hospital, and took the ammo crates himself as they carried him away.

Other grenades were going off across the line. One even exploded on a sand bag, sending a pillar of sandy dust into the air. One flew threw a fallen section of the wall, and hit three men behind it.

Sanwar reloaded, and aimed down the ridge. He killed a man with his initial shot, but also got a closer look at the field again, which was his true purpose.

Gazing down the hill, He confirmed just how close Jogandar's advance was. The troops on the hillocks had stopped firing so that their advancing comrades could get close enough to throw grenades. Now, they were just fifty yards from Dhamija's position.

A few minutes longer, and they would be overrun.

A bullet slapped into the sandbag beside Sanwar's head, and drove him back behind the wall.

"Grenades out!" He shouted to the men, if they had not taken the initiative already. The order went down the line. Close-quarters combat was closing in. First it would be grenades, then it would be knives and bayonets.

He had only just given the order when one of his runners came staggering over to him.

“Randeep’s spotted cavalry on the west side!” The boy shouted above the din. “He’s pulled men off to hold them back!”

“Damn it! Where’s Jack?!”

The boy could only shake his head.

“Have the men hold here!” Sanwar shouted. “And get those grenades out!”

Head down, Sanwar ran off down the trench towards his right flank. If Randeep was not there to hold it then someone would have to be.

So, he scurried off towards the flank, the thunder of friendly and enemy grenades bursting all around him.

“Come on, lads!”

Randeep waved the men on from horseback. He had taken twelve of his best men from the trenches to the western edges of the village. It would not be nearly enough to stop an entire troop of cavalry, but it was all he could muster forth in time to slow them. He was getting the men into cover when he saw them riding out across a poppy field, their lance points gleaming with intent.

Randeep had seen them coming from the ridge just minutes before. They had split off from the main line, and he knew that they were coming to hit Dhamija from the rear. He knew Jogandar did not care if the maneuver was that obvious, because it would pull forces away from the frontline anyway.

Still, his twelve men would have to be enough to face them.

They found cover in houses or the rubble of ones that had been razed just days before. They put rifles through windows, on ledges, or against ruins, and fired immediately. Randeep

unslung the rifle from around his back, and added his own bullets to the blast.

The cavalrymen were just fifty or sixty yards away, and a large target while galloping in a wedge. Several men and horses went down right away from the defenders' fire, but it was not enough to stymie their momentum.

As they neared the outermost buildings, the wedge formation narrowed into a loose file so that the horsemen could fit into the streets. However, the riders in the rear ranks swerved their horses, dropped their lances, and dismounted. They drew out their carbines, and converted to infantrymen firing at the houses.

They lay flat on the ground or found cover where they could, but it mattered little. These dismounted troopers had twice the number of the defenders. Their bullets slapped into the houses' mudbrick walls or splintered the wooden shutters.

The men inside shot at this immediate threat rather than the passing cavalry, who kept on riding down the streets and towards the rear of Dhamija's line. With the other half of their troop distracting Randeep's defenders, they could ignore their gunfire and go right through their line unimpeded.

Randeep had remained a horse and covered behind a low wall all this while. Yet, when the cavalcade rode past him, he spurred his horse forward in pursuit.

The beast leapt over the wall, and thundered down upon their heels.

Randeep was one man alone against a score, but the fear for his people was greater than any fear for himself.

He slung his empty rifle, and fired off his pistol, hitting two men in the rear ranks. He then holstered it to draw his

sword, a *tulwar* that he had forged himself and sharpened a deadly hone. The attackers wheeled their horses round, to point their great, long lances at him, and yet he charged them anyway.

The first man, he caught before the foe could bring his lance to bear, and so slashed him hard across the face. A second lance he hacked aside, then hacked its wielder from the horse. A third lance caught him in the thigh, and a fourth man shot him in the shoulder, yet Randeep kept his saddle.

Then suddenly, a cry went out and a shadow descended from the sky.

A massive kilted figure leaped down from the rooftops, sword and manhood swinging.

Jack MacGregor collided with the man who had stabbed Randeep, and knocked off his seat. The Scotsman then assumed the saddle, and with his broadsword twirling, slashed the fourth man's throat.

Inspired by the sudden rescue, Randeep let loose a bellow and ignored his pain to ride headlong at the rest of them.

The men behind the first four had suddenly halted their horses so as not to crash into their thwarted fellows, yet Randeep had no such reservations. As the men drew back their lance tips in the narrow street, he leapt forward at them, *tulwar* cutting left and right.

He hit two more, and suddenly Jack was next to him, cutting at the others. Blood and fury were in their mouths as they rode like madmen at their foes.

The captain, seeing his momentum slowed and at least a third of his troop destroyed by these two madmen, whistled for retreat. The cavalry gave way to Jack and Randeep's counter-charge, peeling off into the side streets and fleeing back towards the refuge of their lines.

Jack and Randeep did not pursue, for once the lancers had gone, Randeep nearly fell out of the saddle.

Jack caught him, then dismounted to help him to the ground.

“So, you really are mad,” Randeep laughed. Blood was running down his mouth onto his chin.

“You’re madder to follow me,” Jack winked, and set back into a seated position against the wall. The smile vanished as soon as he looked away though, as he searched for any help nearby.

A few of Randeep’s men appeared some moments later, running back from their positions down a nearby street. Jack called them over, and they gasped at the sight of Randeep lying there. Two of the more experienced men among them removed their *dastaars*, and began packing the cloth into his wounds.

“The other lancers ran off,” one of the men told him as he worked. “They saw their friends retreating, so they got back on their horses and ran too. We got ten or twelve of them at least.”

Randeep noticed that five or six of his own were missing too, and several more had wounds themselves.

“They may regroup and attack again,” he tried to say, although his voice was getting hoarse.

“Two of you carry him to the hospital,” Jack ordered two other wounded men in Punjabi. His phrasing was too simplistic, but otherwise understood.

“I’ll walk,” Randeep coughed. “Go on.”

Even as he said the words, the adrenaline was starting to die down inside of him, and a chill ran down his body. When the men lifted him anyway and started to carry him off, he did not protest.

He could only watch and listen as a sudden burst of machine gun fire rattled in the distance, and Jack led his men off back towards the line.

They vanished around a corner, and then Randeep's world went black.

Sanwar pulled a small, silvery globe of Antimony from the bag beside him, and chucked it over the sandbags. His men all followed his example.

The orbs of metal hit with a brilliant flash and a deafening bang. Those that hit the ground blew clouds of dirt into the air, and drove the advancing soldiers near it back towards cover. Those that hit men, burst on impact in with a mist of red and white smoke. The targets fell back with deep craters in their bodies where the "grenades" had struck.

Soon, the field was filled with such smoke and that of gunfire. None of Jogandar's men continued to advance through that haze, and Sanwar could just make out the blow of whistles, the shout of orders, and only sporadic riflery as the din and dust settled on the hill.

This was not a retreat, he knew, but a regrouping. Jogandar would gather and reorganize his men, then assault the hill again. Attacking in waves was the British way. Both brothers had seen it countless times on the fields of France. Yet, Jogandar could afford such losses where Sanwar could not. He had some four or five times the numbers, and a single failed attack would not deter him.

Indeed, the cease in hostilities was brief.

Only moments after the assault had ended, a barrage of machine gun fire began.

Sanwar ordered everyone to keep their heads down as its bursts peppered into the sandbags. Mortar shells

accompanied them. A few arced over the defenses, and landed in the trenches, blowing men apart. Judging from the angle, Sanwar guessed that Jogandar had moved them and the guns onto the hillocks while the villagers had been distracted by the assault. That put them on high ground that was nearly level with Sanwar's own and within effective range.

As the barrage continued, Jack and several other men crawled into the trench on their knees and elbows, and dropped inside. The lot of them were bruised and bloodied, but ready to get back into the fray.

"Where is Randeep!?" Sanwar shouted over the whistle and crash of a flying mortar shell.

"Wounded!" Jack shouted back. "Get back to the center! I'll hold here!"

Sanwar nodded, then made his way back towards his original position. He stayed crouched below the trench line as he moved, traveling slowly on bent knees and stopping whenever a bomb burst near him. Around him, his defenders uttered prayers and covered their ears while the chaos unfolded around them. Some were shaking, some were crying, but all were keeping to their posts. Elders and women from the village were among them, grabbing the dead and wounded, and carrying them off on stretchers.

Whenever Sanwar passed by any of them though, the soldiers, the evacuators, the injured, they straightened and met his gaze. When he returned to his station in the center, the spare ammunition was ready for him, and so too were his men.

When the bombardment stopped, they knew what then came next.

For a long and terrible moment, the battlefield lay silent. Smoke and fire wafted across the hillside. Nothing could be

heard except for the wind's fell gasp over the blood-soaked grass.

Sanwar ordered his men to hold their fire. They would expend it all too quickly firing at illusory targets in the smoke.

The chance to shoot came soon enough.

Muzzle flares alit the haze in rosy-golden crackles. The crunch of boots followed behind, as did the spectral shadows of the advancing host. The attackers were engaging in walking fire, shooting as they advanced.

Dhamija fired back.

Their rifles cracked down the line, but their volley was ragged and pitiful by comparison. These were farmers, not soldiers, and the preceding barrage had weakened both their numbers and their resolve. Meanwhile, younger, fresher men were marching towards them through the smoke. There were more this time, perhaps five hundred. Each one marched forward grim-faced even as his fellows fell around him.

This assault had started closer too, because the smoke had guised its movements. It had begun halfway up the hill, and was rapidly approaching with overwhelming numbers. Sanwar suspected that Jogandar had only intended the first assault to gauge their strength and weaken them, and that the second attack was meant to be the main effort all along. After all, his brother had the bodies to spare.

Sanwar sniped a captain leading his men onwards. The soldiers stepped over his body, and continued unafraid. About fifty yards from the crest, they abandoned attacking in line altogether, and charged. At that point, no officer's command would matter; it was an all-out attack.

Dhamija's fighters shot them point blank range, but it did not matter. There simply were too many to kill that quickly.

Jogandar's men were screaming themselves hoarse as they ran, whether they were already out of breath or not.

Sanwar's men could not reload fast enough.

He had to make the call.

The time had come.

"Retreat!" He cried. "Retreat!"

Dhamija's line then broke, and ran.

The smoke drifted away for a moment, allowing Jogandar to see his men overtake Sanwar's position. He grinned as his troops leapt over the sandbag wall, and disappeared behind it.

He lowered his binoculars, and turned towards his runners.

"We've broken them," he said. "Inform Colonel Ashburn and the Major to send in their reserves and make a full attack on the village. We will quash the resistance once and for all, and raze Dhamija to the ground."

The riders went off.

"Remember our agreement," Saxon rode over to remind him. "MacGregor is mine."

Jogandar said nothing.

Moments later, Ashburn came galloping over, red-faced and flustered.

"An all out attack! Are you mad!? The battle's already won. Do you mean to slaughter your own people?"

"I mean to win," Jogandar answered, and advanced.

His men followed.

What reserves were left came marching through the hillocks or down from them to form a single column. They advanced unimpeded, cavalry and infantry alike. Jogandar was not going to keep them from their fair share of the glory, nor himself. He drew his saber, and assumed his position on the

front. Ashburn relucted, then joined the rear when it became clear that the column was leaving him behind.

The column loosened at the foot of the hill, going slowly to navigate the blood, bodies, and lines of stakes upon its slope. Even the cavalry walked their horses through the obstacles.

The field was full of moaning, wounded men, but Jogandar ordered the advance to leave them. Such fussy tasks would only serve to slow their momentum further, and he was anxious to end this fight for good. So anxious was he that he rode at the head of the column, driving his braying horse uphill towards the final objective. He shouted at his men to follow suit, and shouted more when they could not keep the pace. They trudged and sludged behind him like a load of laggards, tarrying the victory. He could have ordered them around the flanks to assault the village on flatter ground, but that would have taken far too long, especially with the infantry. No, the time was now, and victory was in their grasp! He needed only to reach out and seize it for himself.

About halfway up the slope, gunshots rang out.

They were somewhat muffled though still quite loud, as they had come from over the sandbags. Immediately, the rankers went for cover while the officers and NCOs shouted for discipline.

Jogandar, however, looked to the hillcrest.

A sergeant flopped over the sandbags, fell, rolled, and caught himself a few yards down. He tripped and stumbled towards the column, his khakis doused in crimson. Jogandar spurred forward, dismounted, and caught him before he fell again. The man flopped into his arms, unable to stand.

Jogandar dropped him though, once he saw more bloodied troops scrambling to climb the wall, and heard more

gunshots ringing out. Those who made it over alive either died soon after or crawled downhill on hands and knees, because of wounds or sheer exhaustion.

All the while, the fusillade on the other side continued.

Jogandar ran past the refugees to the edge of the sandbag wall, and dared a glance over the barrier.

In the trench beyond, his men were trapped and shooting for their lives.

They were shooting for their lives, because the village had dug a second trench.

Samreet couched her rifle on a sandbag, and fired into the enemy line. The trenches were just forty yards apart, and the first one had no rearward defenses. Those enemies who could fit into the trench, had jumped inside for cover and were decently protected. However, that trench had only been dug to fit a few hundred at the most.

As the soldiers had piled over the sandbags and fallen into the trenches beyond, they had quickly become congested inside its walls. Four or five hundred men were cramming into a space meant for half as many, and large clusters of men made for easy targets.

The villagers emptied clip after clip into the enemy side from the safety of their own trench. Those who could throw that far hurled Antimony grenades, and killed several men at a time. Any enemy who could not pack into the trench was shot out in the open. Any who fled the trench and scrambled to climb back over the sandbags, met a similar fate.

Soon, the enemy side was filling with bodies, which added further to the congestion and the chaos. Samreet had hardly any training with a rifle at all, but did not need it. The shooting at this range was impossible to miss.

Sanwar had known that it would come to this. He had rallied the entire village to dig a second trench in time, knowing that they would have need of a redoubt, and the village had answered. In just days, they had dug the line, ready to fall back the moment that they were overrun. He had anticipated that Jogandar would overcommit if he believed that their forces were routed, and so had set the trap.

It was here that Dhamija would make its final stand, pouring lead into the entrapped enemy. Jogandar's men had devolved into a chaotic mass. In just a few short minutes, a professional army had become a frantic rabble, clawing to escape while drowning in its own dead.

There was only one salvation for them.

Whistles blew along the line. Officers and sergeants leapt out of the trench into No Man's Land and the storm of gunfire, and waved the soldiers forward. Anyone with sense leapt out after them. To stay inside the trench was to be buried alive, and to flee was to catch a bullet in the back.

The only way out was forward.

Hundreds of men sprung out from the trench in ragged waves to run the forty yards towards the second trench. They charged at full sprint, hoping that sheer numbers would save them and that enough men would reach the trench to take it.

They did not bother to shoot. The only way to reach the other side was to get there before the bullets got them. So they charged head on, trying to be one of the lucky ones.

They fell by the score. Even untrained troops could hit a running target at point blank range. Many perished halfway across.

However, their gamble had been correct.

Though many had fallen, many more had reached the trench line and leapt straight down on the villagers. They were screaming now, abandoning any semblance of professionalism or humanity. They flung themselves into the second trench, not with guns but hand weapons, ready to kill at an arm's distance or even less.

Dhamija's people drew their own weaponry as well. Sickles and sword met knife and bayonet. Hammers and clubs came down upon *dastaars* and skulls. Some of them were even fighting with spades, the same tools they had used to dig these very defenses. Anything that they could use to fight, they did.

Samreet had emptied her rifle in time to draw her *tulwar*, and take a guard to meet the fray. She had practiced swordplay in secret for so long under her brother's and father's rule. Now, it was time for her to put that practice to the test.

Men descended on her like a rain. She fell back to the far wall of the trench to give herself the space to let them come. She swung at them as they did, slicing legs and stomachs open as they lunged at her. Their bodies quickly clogged the trench, and the space began to shorten. Yet, she held her ground, and kept on swinging.

Around her, her people were fighting similar battles. Even though the soldiers were all young men in their prime, they suddenly had lost their numerical advantage. Dhamija's young and old attacked them in threes or fours, and the soldiers could not face them all at once. Though some of her people fell dead or wounded, others filled the gap and brought the soldiers to the dirt. Hacking and stabbing always followed after.

Samreet found herself alone, however, fighting hand-to-hand with no one friendly near in sight. That was when a cry rang out from down the left side of the trench. Several men had come down the line to rush at her, no doubt recognizing her as a commander. They had plucked the bayonets off their rifles, and held them in their hands like great, long knives. She cut with an upward slash, and took the fingers off the nearest man. She stopped her slash at about chest height, so that the point curved forward, ready for a thrust. The next man charged into it by sheer accident, unable to halt his momentum in time. His body buried itself on the blade, then tripped over his fallen, fingerless fellow, and took the whole sword with him. The weapon ran him all the way through, but now left Samreet defenseless.

Two more men leapt over the casualties, screaming with their bayonets held point down. Samreet snatched the nearest object into hand to defend herself. It was a fallen rifle, and she swung it like a club to bash one of them aside. The other though, knocked her to the ground.

He landed on top of her, driving the bayonet towards her throat. With both hands, she clutched the rifle like a bar and pressed with all her strength to hold back his weight. She jammed the stock and barrel into his arms so that he could not bring the blade down all the way. Yet, her attacker had the advantage of gravity and size, and so the point crept ever closer towards her neck. There was blood soaked in his beard, and his acrid breath was hot against her cheeks. His face was twisted in a vile grimace as he drove the knife straight down. Dirt filled Samreet's ears and stained her *dastaar*, as she depressed into the earth, yet she could not sink faster than the blade descended.

In a desperate hope, Samreet got one finger on the trigger and squeezed.

The rifle jolted back as its shot went into the trench wall. The gun's kick dislodged the man on top of her. He lost grip of his weapon, and Samreet whipped her head aside as the knife plunged into the ground where it had just been. As the soldier wobbled to one side, she ripped back the rifle's bolt, ejecting the hot, spent casing into his eye. She wriggled free of him when he rocked back to clutch his face, planted the rifle butt into a corpse, and fired upwards at him. A bloody hole burst through his chest, and he fell over, dead.

Samreet got back to her feet, and retrieved her sword. With it in hand, she glimpsed around the battlefield.

On her flank, the enemy was running.

Somehow, her company were driving the enemy back. Jogandar's soldiers were clambering out of the trenches, and running back towards the first trench. They had abandoned their weapons so that they could run faster. Elsewhere in the line though, the melee continued. Men still battled in the trenches with sword and knife or tooth and nail.

Yet, her flank was free.

A sudden, insane urge came over her. The running men could regroup, gather the weapons of the dead, and attack again, she knew.

The opening was now. She had to stop them. She could stop them.

Wild-eyed, she thrust her bloody sword into the air.

"To me!" She cried. "To me!"

Those around her took heed, and rallied to her side. Yet, Samreet did not even wait for them.

She was already over the top, charging after the fleeing enemy.

Those who saw her, followed.
Those who saw the charge, followed that.
The time was perfect for a counter-attack.

This was no longer some great battle, but a literal gutter brawl.

Men were pressed together, hand to hand, fighting in the gutter-like trenches. Sanwar had seen it dozens of times. He had done it dozens of times himself. He had watered the furrows of France and Anatolia with blood. He had led attacks like these and repelled them.

Yet, those battles had been in distant lands. He had never thought he would be fighting them in his home country against men who had likely once served beside him.

Cadarama was drenched in their gore. Many men had tried their hand at him, hoping to slay the enemy commander and eke out a victory from this sore day. He had slain them all instead.

Another man grabbed at him, attempting to wrestle him to the dirt. Sanwar had his pistol in his off-hand, however, and put a round in the attacker's face.

Around him, his people did likewise. They shot, stabbed, and bludgeoned whomever they could find. The soldiers could only attack and the villagers would not flee, and so both sides had turned feral. Trained or untrained, they had been reduced to animalistic savagery.

Jogandar's men had the training, but nowhere near the numbers now or even the resolve. Somewhere in the melee, too many men fell dead and the bloodlust of the survivors curdled in their veins. They would not win this attack, and would not make some great last stand. As they looked around at all their dying fellows, they knew that it was over.

So, they ran.

Clambering out of the trench, they retreated to their previous position. Sanwar's troops were about to start shooting after them, only one of them cried out.

"Samreet! Look! Samreet!"

Sanwar peered over the top.

Samreet was running towards the enemy line with her *tulwar* drawn and the whole left flank behind her. When they reached the trench, they leapt inside, and began retributing the same ferocity upon the enemy.

He watched for several moments from the distance. His sister's attack did not slow down, but continued plowing down the line from left to right, clearing any enemy in the way.

Samreet had broken through.

The time was now.

"To me!" He cried, and pulled himself out of the trench so that all could see him. He thrust his sword towards the enemy line, and cried out again. "To me! To me! *Bole so nibal!!!*"

"Bole so nibal!!!"

The bloody, dirty faces of his people in the trenches shifted from fear into absolute resolve. The nearest ranks wrenched themselves out of the trench, and started running. Friends helped friends out of the trench, and urged them on. Sanwar joined in the charge, as well, running with his sword raised high.

The attack launched forward with such speed that the forty yards might as well have been just forty feet. Sanwar glanced over to his side. Jack was leading the right flank out of the trenches in attack, and was close behind.

The enemy in the trench ahead turned to see the charge. Those who were not fighting Samreet's forces from the left, climbed out and ran. There was no point in trying to fight back the sudden tide.

The fleeing soldiers flung themselves onto the sandbags, trying to escape. Yet as they did, sections of the sandbags fell away as Jogandar's reserves tore through. These men were formed in good order, and pulled back the barrier so that they could fire volleys into the trench below.

Sanwar simply started shooting at them as he ran, pistol still in hand. The men around him followed suit. They all halted at the edge of the trench, unslung their rifles, and fired, not in volleys, but in wild bursts. Jogandar's men fell away, spilling sand and guts upon the wall.

The feeble rescue attempt had failed, and the reserve troops ducked back to flee the gap. The soldiers trapped down in the first trench, tried to climb out and crawl through the hole. Some escaped. Many were shot down.

Yet, now the enemy was running from the field. Their attempt to take the second trench and hold the first had failed. They were fleeing downhill back towards the forest, the refugees crashing headlong into the reserves.

Sanwar saw the moment.

Down in the trench, Samreet had cleared away the last of the defenders.

"We're through!" She cried. "We're through!"

"Let's send them home then!" Sanwar shouted back, and spurred the village on.

They leapt out from the trenches or leapt over them, then poured through the sandbags as the enemy fled.

Someone had brought forth the horses. Sanwar jumped on his, then jumped the trench. The beast smashed through the sandbags, and trampled down the hillside.

The battle had become a rout.

Taggart had been on the left flank when everything had gone to shite. He had been leading men forward from the rear, motivating them to march faster and get the sandbags down. Yet as soon as they were through, the defenders had laid waste to them. The Major and several officers had died in the process. More died when the ranks broke completely.

There was no more order. It was every man for himself.

Taggart had split first. He knew he was a target. Not only was he the sergeant major, but MacGregor would be looking for him on the field.

The Indians were pouring over the hill like wildfire. They swarmed down the slopes, shooting as they went. Captured grenades flew from their mass, and exploded among the fleeing soldiers. One lobbed into the machine gun nest on the leftmost hillock, and destroyed its crew completely.

An explosion went off near Taggart, knocking him to the ground. The shrapnel dug into his back, but he pulled himself to his feet, and kept on stumbling forward.

Shouts rang out behind him.

A throng of Indians was descending on him, men and women alike, with knives, clubs, and hatchets in hand. Taggart spun around to meet them. He skewered one with the bayonet on the end of his shotgun, and blew away their body with a slug. Then, he shot the others as they tried to close.

As they fell, a great pale horse came thundering down after him. A red-haired man was seated on its back, a Highland

broadsword twirling in his hands. It could only be MacGregor.

Taggart aimed the shotgun at him, and pulled the trigger.

The hammer clicked an empty chamber.

Jack roared and leaped off his horse and straight onto Taggart.

The Scotsmen collided in midair, tumbled, rolled, and somersaulted down the hillside until they spilled out into the valley. Dizzied by their descent, they staggered to their feet. Both had lost their main arms in the confusion; Jack, his broadsword, and Taggart, his shotgun. They fumbled about their persons for another, and found it.

Taggart wrenched the trench spike from his belt.

Jack crouched, and pulled a dirk from out of his boot.

They ran towards each other, swaying ponderously as they had not yet reoriented, and smashed together once again.

The two of them slid on the soggy valley floor, their bootheels digging into the earth as they tried to gain the grapple. Jack wrapped a hand around Taggart's upper arm, then lost his grip, because the limb was slick with running blood.

The misstep was enough for Taggart to wrest him to the ground. He threw Jack down, and got a pin on top of him.

With Jack immobilized, Taggart pressed the long knife down towards his throat. Jack slipped his hands free, and jammed them into Taggart's wrist. Taggart slapped a second hand against the pommel. The combined strength of both his hands and gravity plunged the knife ever closer towards its prey.

"Come on, MacGregor," Taggart whispered. "Don't struggle. Just be nice and still like a good little lass while I

slide right into you. You'll love the way me blade feels...I promise you will..."

"Aye? And how does this feel?"

Jack shot one hand free, and went right for Taggart's testicles.

He grabbed, and squeezed.

Taggart let out a blood-curdling shriek, and lost his grip. The trench spike fell to one side, and buried itself in the dirt.

Jack seized the moment, and buried his knife in Taggart's heart.

The force of it drove Taggart backwards. As he fell, Jack rolled on top of him, and drove the weapon deeper.

"*Pòg mo thòin, a Mhic Griogair,*" Taggart gurgled through a mouthful of bloody spittle.

"*Pòg seo,*" Jack answered him with repeated stabs into the chest.

Taggart only felt the first few blows, and then his body shuddering.

Then, his eyes rolled back towards the sun, and did not shut again.

Samreet did not remember getting out of the trench and onto her horse. She suddenly found herself charging down the hillside, weaving between the wooden stakes with all her people all around her, and chasing down the fleeing enemy.

The fleeing soldiers had stumbled, fell, and smashed into the reserves who were waiting on the slope. The whole scene erupted into a panic, as the two masses of men collided, and then were struck again by Dhamija's army. Some men were trampled underfoot. Others tried to stand and fight, and were quickly overwhelmed. Most simply turned their tails, and ran.

The village just kept chasing them down the hillside and into the valley. As long as they were mixed in with the enemy, the mortars and machine guns on the hillocks would not fire into them, and cause a slaughter.

Samreet hewed down any man whom she could reach. At first it was the infantry, but soon enough, she had run across the cavalry as well. Some of their number had been unhorsed amid the chaos and trampled, but those who had maintained good order, fled. They easily could have turned round and overwhelmed her, but they had lost all resolve watching the rest of the army break apart.

Indeed, Jogandar's men still outnumbered them, but the counter-attack had taken them by such surprise that they were now off balance. What was more, Dhamija's villagers were killing any officers, sergeants, or corporals who they could find, further sending Jogandar's troops into disarray. With the leadership eliminated, it was almost impossible for anyone to re-mount a defense.

However, there was one who tried.

Samreet searched for her brother amidst the field, but could not find him in the confusion. However, her attention turned towards her right when she heard a voice in English calling out for order in the face of this utter pandemonium.

A colonel was down in the valley waving his sword about, attempting to rally any soldiers to his horse. He was an older man, mustachioed and a bit heavy-set. His voice was thin against the din of screaming, gunfire, and explosions, even though he was ruddy from all his screaming. No doubt, his troops were less likely to respond to English, if they could hear him at all. Somewhere in the chaos though, he saw Samreet.

She locked eyes with him from across the field at once, and charged, *tulwar* pointed downwards like a spear.

The colonel assumed the same guard with his sword, and rode forth to meet her. The reins thrashed in his hands, and his boots kicked into the horse to get that extra bit of speed.

The two were closing distance.

Just ahead, Samreet spied a fallen lance embedded in the ground.

Switching her sword into her off-hand, she plucked it from the earth, and flicked its point on line.

The colonel went wide-eyed as he saw the lance so fast approaching, and tried to wheel away in time. He only succeeded in turning sideways, and the point went through him width-wise. The force of the collision whipped him from the saddle, and took the weapon from Samreet's hand. The Colonel fell to the ground, the long shaft snapping upon impact.

With his death went any hope of regrouping or resistance. Samreet watched the surviving soldiers abandon the hillocks, and sprint towards the forest. A thousand men had assumed the field this morning, and now five hundred men were fleeing from it this eve. The other half lay on the field, a quarter dead, a quarter dying.

Samreet only realized it was over when she heard the cheers behind her. She wheeled about, and smiled.

The whole village had come out, even the non-combatants, to cheer. They raised their fists into the air. They threw stones at anyone retreating. They lay down their bloody rifles, and sank onto the grass to rest.

Jogandar was beaten. The day was won.

Sanwar had searched for his brother during the sortie.

Even in the chaos of battle, he knew how to find his mark. He had seen his brother's blood bay go down somewhere in the center of the hill, struck by a rifle shot, and had ridden towards it. He had watched Jogandar crawl from the saddle, hack down several man with his great, curved sword, and flee towards the tall grass down in the valley floor.

Jogandar had met his gaze just before he had made his escape into its cover.

Even as the battle subsided and the cheers arose around him, Sanwar rode after him. He dismounted at the edge of the grass, and pursued on foot. Ahorse, he would be too tall a target and easily seen.

A trail of trampled foliage betrayed his brother's tracks. Some of the grass blades had been slashed away, halved diagonally where a sword had struck to clear the way. Wading through the great green stalks, Sanwar stepped only where his brother would have, so as not to betray his own position or make a rustle as he approached.

Eventually, the grass gave way to a clearing, a patch where the foliage had once burned away in a lightning storm and not yet grown back completely.

Jogandar stood there at the far side, waiting with his saber stuck into the soft earth. Above him, the light was fading from a golden into a saffron sky. Evening was fast upon them, yet none of Jogandar's strength had left him.

He drew out his sword at the sight of Sanwar, and assumed a fighting stance. Sanwar did the same with *Cadarama*, stopping at the far end of the clearing and holding there.

"I'm glad you followed me here, brother," said Jogandar. "Now we can settle this. Just the two of us."

"It is over, Jogandar," Sanwar said. "You can no longer win."

“No. But I can kill you.”

He took step forward.

Sanwar did not move.

“Why is there so much hatred in you when once you were so loved?” He asked his brother.

“Loved?” Jogandar sneered. “I did everything to show my love, and was met with scorn. Just look at what you’ve done to me!? You abandoned your family. You resented your duty as a soldier, as a subject to the Crown, while I embraced it! I tried to improve this family. To create a future after Father died. And yet, all of them sided with you! I was the better son. I was the better brother. I was the better leader. The better soldier and man! And to think that if you had not been gone, none of this would have belonged to me! You never even wanted to rule! You played at fantasies of a magic rock, and called it science. You dreamed that things could somehow be different from the way they really are. There is caste. There is family. There is rule. There is law and there is order. Father knew that, but not well enough. I knew long before you ever did. I knew that we are born unequal. That life is not fair, and that is simply how it works. Some are born to fight and lead, and so they should. Most are born to serve. You pretend like this reality does not exist. That somehow you could just imagine it all away.”

“No, I always knew that all of us are born unequal,” Sanwar said sadly. “Just as I know now that I am not the one pretending.”

Jogandar scowled at that, and advanced again.

Sanwar sighed, and did not move.

In the distance, rifles crackled as the last of the invaders were chased off. Faints shouts of victory sounded in the field, yet Jogandar seemed not to hear them.

“I grow weary of this,” his brother said. “Have at me, and finish this!”

“You are no Sikh,” Sanwar told him. “You are no ruler.”

“You are no Sikh!” Jogandar snarled. “You are no ruler! You chose to follow a white man over your own brother and kin!”

“So did you.”

Jogandar roared, and swung at him.

Sanwar threw his sword overhead, and parried just in time. He turned Jogandar’s blade aside, yet his brother turned the displaced cut into a thrust and lunged his point forward. Again, Sanwar parried it aside.

This time though, he reposted with a cut of his own in a backhand swing. Jogandar ducked to void the blow, and raised his sword to block its follow-through. He caught *Cadarama* on his bowl-guard as it turned and came back down front-handed, then used the cut to power one of his own.

His slash came strongly at Sanwar, who Sanwar danced away several steps. Jogandar chased after him with a second cut, and in doing so, overextended himself. Sanwar threw a counter strike, hoping to catch his brother off balance. Jogandar recovered in time, leaning back to let the sword swing past his face. The dodge was narrow though, and he came away with a cut upon his cheek.

That did not deter him from retaliating, though.

If anything, it incited greater rage.

Jogandar growled, and swung at Sanwar, who dodged as well.

The two cut back and forth, each time voiding one another’s attack.

Finally, the two broke off, and stepped back safely out of each other’s measure.

The two men panted, furious at themselves and their opponent because neither had yet scored a substantial hit. They circled the small clearing, swords down at their sides as they reassessed the other.

Both men froze once they had completed four whole circles, and waited.

It seemed like an eternity that they stood there then, waiting for the other to strike first.

Neither did, however. Both were content to remain fixed. Each hoped that their opponent would strike first, and reveal an opening.

Yet, as the minutes wore on, this tactic became obvious to the other, and then it seemed that striking first would be more unexpected.

Jogandar swung.

So did Sanwar.

Their swords met.

Sparks flew off the edges.

Both men closed the distance, and cut at each other again. Blades locked, each struggled to win the bind. Yet, the brothers were of equal size, stature, and strength, and thus neither had a definitive advantage. Whenever one tried to disengage and riposte, the other felt the change in pressure on his blade, and countered it accordingly.

Back and forth it went for seconds, until Jogandar growled and threw a grievous strike at Sanwar's head.

Sanwar parried hard, and shoved his knuckle bow into Jogandar's flat.

Their swords went high above their heads. Both men released from the bind, and grabbed their opponent's sword hand.

Hands locked, arms raised, they pushed against each other, struggling once more not to win the bind this time, but now the grapple.

Once more, they had reached an impasse, with either man shoving, pushing, failing, and countering the other. Their faces were inches from each other. Jogandar's eyes burned with searing hate. Snarls rippled from his lips. He growled in the hopes that it would give him strength to wrest his way through Sanwar's hold, and yet Sanwar held firm.

So Jogandar roared instead, and gained unnatural strength, and with it, slowly began to overtake his brother.

Sanwar's hold began to fail.

So, Jogandar pressed down with his might.

Then, Sanwar dropped his sword.

The sudden release of tension caused Jogandar to stumble forward. He caught himself from falling, but let his sword do so towards Sanwar.

Yet, Sanwar had stumbled forward himself, and allowed himself to fall.

He did so into Jogandar.

Their bodies collided, and although Jogandar's hilt connected hard with Sanwar's shoulder, the blade went harmlessly past him.

He stepped back to regain his measure, yet could not. It was then he realized that Sanwar had not fallen into him at all, but had grabbed him fully around the torso.

He tried to wrestle free, but it was too late.

Sanwar had drawn his *kirpan*, and thrust.

The dagger plunged into his brother's heart. Jogandar sighed as he was struck, and stiffened. He tried to lift his sword to hew Sanwar, but Sanwar had wrapped his free arm around Jogandar's.

Sanwar squeezed his body into Jogandar, pressing the *kirpan* deeper all the while. Jogandar struggled and spasmed in his arms, yet Sanwar did not let him go. For several eternal minutes, they were locked together.

Jogandar squirmed and struggled, clawed and kicked, punched and pounded to escape his brother's hold.

Yet, Sanwar would not let go.

"I hate you..." Jogandar rasped. Bloody foam was frothing at his lips.

"I don't," Sanwar said, and pulled the dagger free.

Jogandar sighed again as it came out of him. His wrathful visage shifted to one of hurt, not at the wound, but at Sanwar's words. The saber fell away from his hand, and he clutched at Sanwar's sleeve instead. Pitiably sorrow filled his onyx eyes. Then, the light began to fade from them.

He leaned forward as if to he were about to whisper into Sanwar's ear, but then he teetered backwards instead. Sanwar was there to catch his fall, and lower him to the ground.

He lay his brother's body in the grass just as the last few breaths escaped his lips. They withered from his mouth in almost noiseless whispers.

Then, at last, Jogandar lay still.

When he moved no more, Sanwar cradled his brother's body in his arms, let out a scream that no man should give nor hear, and wept.

XIV

Core of the Immortal

There was much left to be done once the battle was over.

Those who had survived and were well enough to work gathered the bodies, friend and enemy alike, and carried them to the valley floor. There, Dhamija's non-combatants stacked sheaths of wood into funeral pyres.

Sanwar carried Jogandar down himself. The village watched on as he laid his brother upon the pyre. Ganeev and his mother had come out to witness the ceremony. They broke down and wept at the sight of their brother and son so slain. Sanwar let them grieve. He alone doused his brother's body and set the mound ablaze.

As it burned, he climbed the hill back to the *gurdwara* where the wounded were being tended. At least a hundred had been injured in the fighting, some worse off than others. Forty had died, and Sanwar was thankful that the number was so low.

Sajan was there, directing triage and traffic. The worst of the wounded were sent to the village doctor while more minor injuries were handled by the many of the village women. Some in fact had been nurses during the War, but others had learned the rudiments of trauma care quickly enough. Fresh supplies of medicine and bandages were constantly being brought in, and sometimes, bodies were brought out. Sajan was there to tell everyone where to go.

When he saw Sanwar though, he stopped everything to run over and embrace him. The two held each other for a time, never letting go.

“You’ve done this to me twice now,” Sajan said between teary bursts. “No more, please. No more.”

“No more,” Sanwar promised. “It’s over.”

They went to visit Randeep together. He had regained consciousness about an hour earlier, and had insisted on trying to get back to the front. Only the battle ending had ceased his protestations.

Kiranjit was with him, tending to his wounds as he lay there on the floor. Sanwar knelt beside him, and took Randeep’s hand in his.

“You, sir, have saved us all,” he said. “I heard that you defended our rear almost single-handedly. For that, I salute you, Captain.”

“Well, nobody told me heroics would ever hurt so damn much,” Randeep groaned.

They all laughed. Even Randeep smiled through a grimace.

The doctor told Sajan a few minutes later that the situation was finally under control. He could leave if wanted. Sanwar insisted that he did.

The two of them went out to the village streets. They shook hands with soldiers. They received blessings and garlands from the casualty evacuators, and cups of chai from the old folk. They found Samreet watering the horses, and she hugged and kissed them both.

Only Jack was missing. The three of them had not seen him since the counter-charge. They asked anyone they passed if they had seen the tall white man, and were pointed back towards the ridgeline.

As the rest of the village carried away the weapons, the defenses, and the dead, they spied his figure on the crest, staring out towards the distance. The fight was long since

over, yet Jack still stood there surveying the field of battle with a rifle in his hand.

“What is it, Jack?” Sanwar came over and asked him.

“What seems to be amiss?”

“Something’s not right here,” he said, never once taking his eyes away.

Sanwar followed his gaze, and noticed that Jack was not looking at the field, but beyond it at the forest.

Then suddenly, it hit him.

“Saxon,” Sanwar gasped.

They had all seen him amid the enemy lines when the battle began, yet had lost sight of him during the confusion. No one had counted him among the dead, so had he run with what remained of the battalion?

“Aye, he was keeping us busy here.” Jack said aloud the answer to what Sanwar had been thinking. “He and Rothstein’ve gone off to the forge while we were distracted. I should have known. Now, it’s too bloody late. We’ll never find them.”

“Not quite,” countered Sanwar. “I know where they might be! Now get on your horse! Come on!”

He was already running off to where they had hitched their horses nearby.

He leaped into his saddle, and took off towards the forest.

“Aw fuck,” said Jack, and jumped onto his horse as well.

“I’m coming too!” Samreet cheered, and mounted Kamala.

“Stop! No! Wait for me!” Sajan called after them, and grabbed the nearest horse that he could find.

Together, the four riders went charging off together down the hill, towards the forest, and into almost certain danger once again.

Twilight had fallen on the forest when at last they had reached the forge's entrance. They had fled quickly from the field into the wood, yet slowed down to a crawl amid the ghostly mist. The Doctor knew his way though, even in the half-light, and led them true.

Now, only the final stretch awaited them.

Saxon had to help Rothstein off his horse, for he was an awkward rider and burdened with a satchel containing both their precious elements and the weighty Emerald Tablet.

Saxon himself carried with him only his rifle, ammunition, and a canteen. He chambered a round before slinging the long gun over his shoulder. He had hidden the weapon in his saddle blankets, not wanting to alert Jogandar to his intentions in any way before the battle. Win or lose, Saxon had always intended to cut and run.

He had perhaps put too much faith in the Zamindar, though not enough to leave everything in his hands. Saxon had known once Jogandar had committed his reserves to the attack, the fight was lost. He and Rothstein had ridden from the field right as the counter-charge began, and were smart to have done so. Something told Saxon that Jogandar was already dead. The only thing he cared about though, was ensuring that Jack MacGregor was in capture by the end of the assault, and that simply had not happened.

So, Saxon would have to switch over to his alternative plan.

He tied their horses to some trees, then checked the pistol holstered underneath his jacket. There had been no time to change into his hunting gear, so he still wore his white suit and was dreading seeing it get ruined. However, the reward ahead would be more than worth the stains. He just hoped that a rifle and pistol would be enough to face whatever challenge lay ahead of them.

Without further ado, Saxon went to base of the hill and heaved the entrance open. At once, a heat blast buffeted him, but he steeled himself and led the way down the stairs with his rifle in hand. Rothstein carried a lantern behind him to illuminate their path along the narrow steps, yet the light proved unnecessary as they traveled deeper. Eventually, the faint glow along the walls brightened into a full orange radiance.

The staircase opened into a wider chamber at the bottom. Intricate design work covered every tile of the stone floor. Mandala-like motifs were inlaid into them with bronze. Heat haze rippled off of the metal, just as it did from the great bronze doors on the far end of the room. The portals were ornamented with studs and swirling patterns, and a statue stood in the center of the room, it too of bronze. Its image was of a four-armed, three-faced figure with a fiery crown. He wore a great, thick beard, and wielded a fan, a torch, a necklace, and an ax in his stout hands. A fierce expression was on his face, as if hungering for battle.

Rothstein passed him, and went to the door. He wiped his brow, and began to read something inscribed upon it, then removed the Emerald Tablet to cross-reference it. Saxon peered over his shoulder at the glyphs that he was reading, unable to see them as anything more than just weird lines scratched into the metal.

“It is Sanskrit,” Rothstein said with glee.

“Just tell me what it says.”

“*Three trials await beyond*,” Rothstein translated, his voice already hoarse. “*Theirs is the final test before the Great Work’s transmutation.*”

“You’d better be damn well ready to face them,” Saxon warned. “Because I’ve waited too damns long for this.”

“We have come this far,” the Doctor assured him. “We are almost to the end, my lord, I promise.”

Saxon grabbed the handles of the door. The hot bronze was painful to the touch, but not enough to be intolerable. He faced the pain, and forced them open.

The room beyond was a great, big cavern with red stone walls. Rothstein’s eyes alit when he saw that this cave contained an extensive laboratory with all the toys and tools he could wish for.

Saxon was more concerned with a second set of bronze doors across the room, which looked heavier than the previous ones and were sealed shut with a sort of golden lock. There did not appear to be a key around, nor any other means to open them.

“How do we get through!?” Saxon bristled. Already the heat was getting to him, and he was sweating through his finest jacket.

“Have patience, my lord,” said Rothstein as he put down the Tablet, and hurriedly examined the room. “The answer will come to me.”

Saxon growled and sat there in the heat while the Doctor scurried about. Finally, the small man fiddled with some contraptions, and produced some sort of queer substance in a vial. He brought it over to the seal, and seconds later, the doors were open.

“As promised,” Rothstein bowed.

“Just get moving,” Saxon growled. He shoved the doors open, and muscled the Doctor through them. He immediately regretted his sense of haste. “Christ! It’s unbearable in here!”

A stinging heat assailed their eyes, and then their nostrils when they tried to breathe. Rothstein desperately rubbed at

his glasses, trying to clear away the steam. Through teary eyes, Saxon made out not another chamber, but rather a natural cavern in the earth. Wafts of heat escaped from deep rifts in the rocky, uneven floor, as did flashes of yellow-orange light. The only thing of human construction was yet another set of great bronze doors on the far side of the cavern.

Saxon almost wanted to retreat from the place, the heat was intolerable, but the last set of doors had suddenly slammed shut behind him, and would not open again. He slammed his rifle against them, which only succeeded in bending its brass butt.

Rothstein, meanwhile, was more concerned with what lay ahead of them rather than behind.

“My Lord,” he murmured, and Saxon turned in time to see what had suddenly petrified him.

Shapes were crawling out of the rifts and onto the rocky floor. Six-legged they were, though lumbering in speed. Their ignic bodies dripped and flowed with swirling streaks of citrine and carnelian hues. Each of them was draconian in shape and larger than a rhinoceros, with long, thick tails dragging at their rear. Whenever the creatures hissed, molten fluid gurgled from their toothless maws and spilled upon the floor. When their luminous eyes set upon Saxon and Rothstein, they ambled forward, leaving glowing trails of boiling ooze upon the stone.

Saxon fired at them.

Though his aim was true, the bullet slowed the creature little. The round punched through its breast and spurted out a tiny trickle of smoking yellow blood, yet melted shortly after impact. Its flowing hide covered over the hole mere moments later, as if the wound had never been inflicted.

“Damn it, run!” Saxon shouted. He then threw down his rifle, and took off sprinting across the room.

The creatures gained a sudden speed to give pursuit. Their bent out legs made for awkward turns, but they only needed to scuttle close enough to be in range. Those that were, spewed forth a brilliant vomitus, which steamed and splattered on the rocky floor.

Saxon danced and dodged around the flaming discharge, even once leaping over a pool of it entirely to avoid contact. The splash of impact got some on him though, and burned a hole clean through the collar of his suit, although his skin was mercifully left untouched.

Rothstein could not keep pace with him. The Doctor had been running with the Emerald Tablet hugged against his chest, slowing him even further. He had only made it to the room’s center before he found the creatures closing in around him. His frail limbs could not maneuver their way around them, and the old man fell in an attempt to dash away.

The Emerald Tablet slid away, then tumbled down into a rift, vanishing forever.

The Doctor’s satchel spilled upon the floor, and all the elements in their containers with it. They thankfully did not break, but had fallen just beyond his feeble reach.

Saxon was nearly to the door when he heard the clink of glass vials on stone. He wheeled around to the sight of Rothstein struggling to regain his feet, hand out-stretched as the strange serpents drew near.

“My Lord...” He begged.

Saxon ran to him.

He jumped and dodged his way back towards the old man, voiding blasts of burning liquid as he did before. In seconds,

he was there, and in one swift motion, he threw out a hand, and snatched the fallen vials off the ground. With the containers firmly pressed against his chest, he ran back towards the door, leaving Rothstein far behind.

“My Lord!” The Doctor cried out to him, and it was the last thing that he ever did.

One of the fiery beasts had reached the old man before he could find the strength to rise. Fully prone, Rothstein spent his last few moments alive to turn and face the creature. So weak was he that he could not even will himself to scream.

Liquid fire belched forth from its maw. A single spray was enough to fully drench the Rothstein from head to toe. He finally let out a high pitched shriek, for he did not so much burn as he did melt from it. His body writhed, and sank into a pool collecting about his base. His eyeballs popped and sizzled. His thinning hair caught flame. He only struggled for a second before he ceased moving altogether, and seeped into the molten puddle. A pair of gnarled hands were last to go before they too liquified into the mass.

Saxon hurriedly shoved the elements in his pockets, and thrust the doors wide open. He was sure to close them firmly behind.

The forest was alive tonight.

Darkness was near at hand, and the night was all a chatter. Birds and bats were yammering before the sun had even fully gone down. Insects buzzed and bantered. Something had the whole place agitated.

Even the horses were restless after hours of hard riding. They ruffled their manes as Sanwar and the others slowed to approach the clearing. He had remembered the area well

enough to find this place again. He knew it even in the mist, and luckily had made it there before it was fully dark.

Through its spectral veil, they came upon the hillside.

Sure enough, a pair of horses were hitched nearby. The beasts were rearing to break free of their bonds. Their own horses did the same as they tied them to a tree, even Samreet's Kamala, who was usually such a gentle creature.

Once dismounted, everyone could feel the crackling on the air. All the trees seemed to be standing on end. Summer nights in Punjab could be a swelter, and yet the air seemed almost oppressively hot and cold at once. The leaves were rustling, and yet no wind was blowing. The foliage around them was almost pulsing with a rhythmic beat.

"I don't like the looks of this," said Jack. "Nor the feel of it."

He was the only who dared speak.

Sanwar responded by chambering a round into his rifle. All of them were armed with rifle, sword, and pistol, save for Sajan who was weaponless. Yet somehow, Sanwar felt their armaments would be insufficient for whatever awaited them.

There was faint light glowing from an opening in the hillside. The four of them crept towards it, passing through its defile, and then down its winding stairs. The heat was rising as they descended. A sulfurous scent arose with each hot breath. Hellish orange light glimmered off the walls.

The stairs opened into a wide chamber. A statue of Agni, the Vedic fire god, stood in its center, his three faces menacing them as they entered. A set of bronze doors stood like sentinels at the far end of the room.

Sajan and Samreet's mouths dropped at the sight of it. By no means was it the most grandiose setting they had seen, Hindu or otherwise, but it was profoundly the strangest.

Never had they witnessed a hidden ancient shrine buried deep within the earth before, Sanwar had to remember. They balked at the very sight of everything around them, and did not venture far into the room, so Sanwar whistled to refocus their attention. They had entered his and Jack's world now, so he and Jack led them to the door.

They were about to open it, when they paused at an inscription on its faces. Sanwar recognized it as the Devangari script, which Hindi used, although this location was far too ancient for it to be that language.

"It appears to be Sanskrit," he surmised. "I confess that know little of the tongue. I could estimate an imperfect translation at best."

"I might be able to help," Sajan offered.

Sanwar raised an eyebrow.

"Since when have you known Sanskrit?"

"Since I have had much solitude in Dhamija for the past few years," Sajan returned with a sly smile. "And since my involvement in political activities, I have deemed it useful to study our nation's mother tongue. I cannot much speak it, but I can read it with some degree of fluency."

"By all means," Sanwar grinned.

Sajan approached the doors, and scanned the text.

"*Three trials await beyond,*" he read. "*The last one is your final test before achieving Enlightenment.*"

"So the Stone must be real..." Samreet uttered.

"Now I trust that you believe me," Sanwar told her and Sajan. "And now Saxon is meters from obtaining its unspeakable power."

"Then so are we," said Samreet. "So let's end this and end him."

"Shall we then?" Jack said as he gripped the door handle.

“We shall,” Sanwar answered, and helped him pull it open. A familiar sight was waiting for them on the other side; a laboratory.

There were the usual accoutrements; beakers, flasks, mortars, pestles, and vials of substances laid out upon a workbench. Yet there were furnaces as well, hammers and anvils, and the stuff of smithies. Curiously, the only Alchemical instrument was a glass retort atop a circular stone furnace with a pair of long iron tubes sticking out of from the sides of it.

Curiouser still, the entire chamber looked to be a cavernous hollow of glittering red stone. The furnace was placed against its wall, so that its tubes drove right into the stone itself.

A set of doors similar to the first chamber were at the far end of this one. However, these had a circular golden seal in the middle of the bronze. Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be a locking mechanism barring the portal shut, and also bore a curious motif.

A sun and serpent symbol ran along the surface of the seal, with the serpent encircling the flaming disc. Both were engraved deeply in the metal, and on either side of the seal itself was a sparkling ruby inlaid into the door.

Beyond that, it was bare of inscriptions or device.

Jack and Sanwar had no inkling of where to begin. At this point, they were accustomed to the riddles of Alchemists. However, usually there was some sort of indication of which substance to use. When the seal proved fruitless for any clues, they wandered over to the workbench for inspiration.

Multitudes of chemicals lay out before them, which only made for too many choices. Sanwar looked for any that might interact with gold in some way, and found dozens.

“Flowers of Antimony?” Jack mused, picking out a vial of white powder.

“I am sick of bloody Antimony,” Sanwar groaned. “Besides, it will be of no use against gold.”

“Eh, guess I’ll save it as a keepsake,” he said, and pocketed the thing before he kept on looking.

Something crunched behind them, and everyone wheeled round.

“Sorry,” Samreet apologized. She had stepped upon a fallen chunk of the red stone, and the gaping cavern had only serviced to accentuate the sound. She did little to help herself by kicking off the dust. However, she redeemed herself a moment later by calling out.

“There’s some writing over here!”

The others gathered round. Sure enough, Samreet had found another inscription in Sanskrit., this time on the base of the stone furnace.

“*Rasa*,” Sanwar uttered. “Sajan, what does ‘*rasa*’ mean?”

“Juice,” he answered. “But I hardly see how that is relevant.”

“Perhaps that means a liquid and not actually a juice,” offered Samreet. “Although I don’t see any sorts of liquids around...”

“Well, I spy a wee retort here,” said Jack. “Which means that some sort of liquid’s got to be distilled. And I see a vent, which means it’s likely got to be something with hazardous fumes.”

“That could be any number of possibilities,” Sanwar sighed, looking out at the collection of vials.

“More bloody Alchemical riddles,” Jack groaned. “You’d think at this point, we’d finally be done with them.”

“The inscription read that this is indeed the final set of tests,” Sanwar reminded him.

In doing so however, he reminded himself of something else as well.

“If these are the final tests, then perhaps we are looking for something in its final form!” His mind was suddenly alight with possibilities. He ran over to the seal again, and pointed to it. “The goal of many Alchemists was to transmute base metals into ‘enlightened’ ones such as gold, as we see here. So, perhaps we need something to unmake it. *Aqua Regia*, perhaps? Have we got Spirits of Salt and Spirit of Niter at present?”

“No,” Jack replied.

“Damn it! Then what?”

Jack grinned.

“How about Mercury?”

“Mercury?”

“Well, there’s cinnabar all over the place, isn’t there?”

Sanwar looked around at the red stones in the wall.

Sanwar started grinning too.

“You have done it Jack MacGregor! You have bloody well done it!” He ran over, and started shaking his friend like a mad man.

“What’s he done?” Asked Sajan and Samreet, both equally confused.

“He’s solved it!” Sanwar exclaimed.

“I have! I have! Just bloody let me go! We’ve got no time!” Jack laughed.

Sanwar released him, and they ran over to the smithy where he grabbed himself a hammer and chisel. Jack then joined him by the cavern walls with a pestle. He undid his sash to cover his hands and arms while he held it out beneath

Sanwar's chisel. Mercury was a toxin, and even the smallest touch could have lasting consequences to the health.

So with the gentlest touch, Sanwar chipped away a small amount of it for Jack to collect in his bowl. They brought the pestle over to the workbench, ground it finely with a mortar, then emptied the fine powder into the retort. Finally, they lit a fire in the stack beneath it with some flint and steel.

Silvery liquid rapidly collected on the roof of the glass, then dripped down the neck of the retort into the alembic. After only minutes, a pool of it formed down at the bottom.

Sanwar brought the vessel over to the seal. There was a small catch at the top of it, in which he poured the quivering, shining metal. It drained into the engravings of the symbols, where it lingered for mere seconds. Then, the gold began to crumple inwards. The symbols folded and lost their shape before vanishing completely into the silver puddle.

When at last all the seal was gone, the mercury fell away, and landed with a solid thud upon the floor. No longer was it silvery or even liquid, but an amalgam lump of grayish-gold.

The four of them stood there before the doors, hesitant to open them.

"So that's one test," said Jack. "Now what's the next?"

"Only one way to find out," Samreet shrugged, and held her rifle close.

They opened the doors, and were buffeted by a blast of stinging heat. The cavern beyond might as well have been a furnace. Even a spacious cave like this one was nigh unbreathable. Worse yet, something smelled burnt and charred here. The scent was so strong it brought on headaches from Sanwar.

Still, he and the others soldiered on into the cavern. Deep gashes were all over the ground, and made the footing

treacherous. They had only made it a few steps inside when the doors slammed shut behind them, and would not open again. Their only exit now was a set of great bronze doors ahead.

However, strange forms began emerging from the rifts and crevices; urodelian creatures of sulfur and flame. They scrambled forward on six legs, undulating as they moved in a serpentine fashion. They were ponderous in their movements, but their malintent was clear. Their glowing hollow eyes were fixed upon the four intruders, and a roaring heat bellowed from their maws as they closed in.

Sanwar, Jack, and Samreet instinctively fired off in different directions. Even so, their riflery yielded the same results; bullets splashing harmlessly into their targets' molten bodies.

"Aw fuck," cursed Jack, and turned his rifle towards the ceiling.

The others did the same, and fired.

The shots dislodged jagged pieces of the cavern ceiling right above the nearest creatures. The slabs crashed down, and splattered three of them, sending burning orange flecks across the room.

This volley had taken an entire clip from each shooter though, and now their rifles were left empty.

The creatures returned fire moments later, quite literally. Fountains of flaming liquid gushed forth from their lips.

Sanwar leaped aside to dodge a blast from one of them. Jack dropped his weapon as he did the same, and watched the burning stock and melting barrel of it sink into a pool of lava. Samreet simply threw hers away, and went for her pistol instead. She put six rounds into the cavern ceiling again, and took out another serpent, but had no other tricks to follow.

“This way! Run!” Urged Sajan, and starting sprinting for the doors. He led them through a narrowing gap in the creature’s line.

“Spread out!” Sanwar yelled as they followed him.

The creatures proved awkward runners, but did not need speed when they had such spitting range. Bunching would mean that any of them could be hit from a single creature’s blast or even just its splash.

Sajan was by far the lightest on his feet, and with his head start, had gotten to the doors the soonest. He did not stop when he got there though, but instead began to run back and forth in a zig-zag manner while shouting out as loudly as he could.

At first it seemed like madness, until Sanwar realized that many of the flaming serpents had turned towards him. However, their lumbering frames could not mimic his agility, and so they shuffled awkwardly back and forth in attempt to catch him in their sights. Oftentimes, they blasted one another in the face with their vomitus accidentally.

What this created was an opening. Many of the creatures had veered away, leaving an open path towards the door.

Sanwar was almost there.

Sweat was pouring out of him and beating down his back, but he was almost there. A few more yards, and he would be in safety.

Then suddenly, a yelp and thud sounded behind him.

He looked back.

Jack had caught his foot in a rift, and had tripped. He now lay prone with a serpent closing in from his flank.

Sanwar tossed aside his rifle, and drew his pistol. He fired into the air, and sent more of the roof down on the creature, ending it.

However, another was swiftly gaining from the other side.

Samreet was near to Jack, and ran to him. She helped to pull him free and then onto his feet.

Yet, she had nearly slipped herself in the process.

The glass vial of Flowers of Antimony had fallen onto the floor, and had nearly taken her feet out from under her. In anger, she grabbed the thing, and chucked it at the oncoming serpent.

Before the beast could eject its vomitus, the powder exploded in its face. In an instant, its searing fires went cold, and its flame red color turned to charcoal black. The light extinguished from its hollow eyes, and then it crumbled into pieces.

“Bloody hell,” said Jack.

“Come on!” She yelled to him, and yanked him forward by the arm.

They sprinted through the gap together.

Sajan and Sanwar were already opening the door.

Then, the four of them were through, and on the other side.

XV

Fire and Blood's Reward

With a shove from all four of them, the companions shut the massive metal doors behind themselves.

Now, they were fully trapped with a barrage of heat. It had assailed them upon entry, the scent of soot and smoke so thick upon its buffeting air that burned their throats and nostrils whenever they inhaled.

Sight too, was inhibited. At first, the dim of the room was blinding, until their eyes adjusted to the faintness of the light. No torch nor candle burned here. Any illumination came from orange veins of magma seeping down a rock face on the far wall. Those veins then trickled into a forge upon a high platform, smoldering a hearth of red-hot coals.

This forge had not been wrought of mortal hands. A great anvil was in its center, taller and wider than a table. Bellows strong enough to blow a hurricane were to one side. Chains of adamant hung down from the ceiling, and hooked into a crucible large enough to hold the Beas. Casting molds as long as the forge's double doors lined the platform. There was no artistry within this room, as this chamber had been hewn from living rock with the savage hammer of a vengeful god.

A lone figure stood upon this dais, cloaked in the shadow of the smoking coals. However, his booming, smoke-burnished voice was nigh unmistakable even in the din.

“So good of you to finally join me, Jack old boy.”

Samreet, Jack, and Sanwar drew their swords instinctively.

Saxon leaned forward over one of the molds, a curiously small one. A strange red glow shined upon his face from the embers within it. His once immaculate white suit had greyed

with sweat and creased, and his slick blond hair was all a mess. His bright blue eyes were filled with wildness and his pearly smile glimmered giddily with rancor.

He strode down from the platform, a pistol suddenly appearing in his hand. Something else was kept hidden in his other.

“Not one step further, any of you,” he ordered. “I’ve come too far to spoil the fun now. So go on, then. Sheath your swords, and on your knees, the four of you.”

They had no choice but to obey.

Their bullets were spent, and it was too far a gap to rush him, even all at once. It would not take a marksman to land at least one shot on each of them before they were even close, especially with an automatic pistol.

Saxon kept the barrel trained on Jack, however, his arm unwavering as he held it out at full extension. The floor scorched into Jack’s knees as he lowered himself, yet he stayed motionless beneath his subjugator’s gaze.

“Finally, we get to see each other again,” Saxon said. A strange inflection had assumed his voice. “Finally, we have a chance to speak.”

“You’re not here to speak.”

“Oh no, Jack, I am. I think our conversation was never finished.”

“What happened to Rothstein?” Jack asked out of turn. The little German was conspicuously absent from this moment.

“I’m afraid the Good Doctor will not be joining us,” Saxon grinned. “Couldn’t stand the heat, you see... But that’s no matter. I know enough from both him and you to know what this is.”

It was then that Saxon revealed his hand.

Crimson light consumed the room as fear and awe consumed their hearts.

Saxon held the Philosopher's Stone.

It was at once dripping, smoking, pulsing, and crystalline. It was not so much a stone as an amorphous mass, constantly shifting and shaping itself anew. Saxon did not so much hold it as contain it in his hands. At times, it liquified and seeped through his fingers, only to curl back around them and reform within his palm. The very air around them crackled. The room itself became stifling, then chill, then switched back and forth between the two. Jack wanted nothing more than to weep at the sight of it, but a deep black rage staved him from that sensation.

"I have to admit that I didn't want to believe you at first, Jack old boy," Saxon said, lovingly hypnotized by the sight of it himself. "Something this...incredible...surely could not exist. It was only when I saw it for myself that I actually did.

"I was on safari in Uganda after the War, hunting at the headwaters of the Nile. At first, I thought I'd found a rare pink diamond in a muddy stream bed. But when I held it in my hand...I knew it was something more. It was just a tiny pebble of a thing, not much bigger than my fingertip. But I knew then that you weren't lying...and that I had to have the full Stone myself."

"Why...?" Was all Jack could say. The breath had left his voice. His heart was thudding in his chest. "Why...? What do you want with gold and immortality? You have everything already! More than everything!"

"No, not everything!" Saxon snapped.

Jack hardly felt the back-handed pistol whip as Saxon rushed forth to reprimand him. He spat out blood, then straightened himself as the lord resumed his distance.

“What good is everything if you have to give it all away?” He continued, his tone settling down into a low rumble again. “I can have the world, but I can’t keep it, can I? And even then, what good is that? Other men have had it all before. But I want what no man’s had...the power of God. Endless gold and immortal life are just the prerequisites, Jack old boy.”

“You can never be a god, Saxon.”

“Not *a* god. Not *the* God. *Greater than any God*. If you don’t think I can be, then just fucking watch me.”

Without looking, he held out his arm to one side. The Stone shimmered, and hummed. On the platform behind Saxon, the great anvil turned from cold, dull black to bright and shining gold. Then in an instant, the whole thing liquified and cascaded down the steps in golden rivulets. In another, the liquid gold rolled back up the steps, where it collected in a puddle. From this pool arose a human shape, writhing and twisting, crying out in wordless agony as it assumed a fleshy countenance.

Jack and the others watched on in horror as the gold slid off its body and became muscle and skin. Its toothless mouth opened and closed, and its eyeless sockets searched for understanding. Its rubbery arms groped for a hold of anything, but only clawed at empty air. It was a crude, malformed approximation of human life, but even that was enough.

With a yawn, Saxon brought the Stone back to bear. When he did the anvil flashed back into existence as it was before, a plain, dull hunk of metal. A queasy feeling churned inside of Jack.

Saxon went right back to his diatribe.

“Do any of you even know what this is?” He asked, shaking the Stone at them. It gelled then hardened in his grasp whenever he did. “You know what it does, but do you actually know what it actually is? No, even with all your knowledge in the sciences, you don’t.

“This is the chemical formula to create life, Jack. The molecular mixture that turns non-living atoms into living cells and organisms. The ancients knew the answer long before we ever did. Water for healing. Air to breath it life. Earth to shape it. And fire to fuel its great powers. But it’s incomplete without a fifth ingredient to keep it stable...And do you know what that is?”

No one spoke, but that made no difference to Saxon.

“A human soul,” he said.

Nausea wriggled in Jack’s gut. The very words of it were sickening, not because of shock, but because he had suspected this truth for so long.

“Yes,” Saxon confirmed, as if hearing his very thoughts. “That is the price. Few are brave enough to pay it. God knows your beloved ancient masters weren’t. Which is why I’m glad you’ve come, Jack.

“At first, I was going to take your soul...but you’ve proved so damn...uncooperative. When I knew the battle was lost, I thought I would sacrifice Rothstein instead, but as we know now, there’s not much left of him. Yet now, you’re here! And that presents me with options.”

“So this is what you’ve always wanted?” Jack growled. “To rub my bloody nose in it? So go on, then. Take my soul, if you’re going to. Just your damn mouth while you do it. I’m sick and bloody tired of hearing you.”

“Oh no, Jack,” Saxon chided. “I don’t want your soul anymore. I want you *to choose* whose soul I’m going to take.”

“No...”

“Yes,” Saxon said soberly, and aimed his gun at each of his friends in turn. “Choose one of them. Or I’ll kill two at random and take the last. Choose one, and I’ll spare the rest. Choose, Jack.”

Jack looked to the others.

They were all knelt in a line beside him.

Sajan had his head bowed in prayer. Though he was shaking, his words were clear, and he paid no glances to the gun.

Samreet had her eyes on Jack’s. There were no tears in them, only gentleness. A thin, sad smile was on her lips.

Last was Sanwar, who was staring down the barrel. He only looked at Jack to give the slightest nod, before turning back to face it.

Saxon paraded over all of them.

“Who are you going to choose, Jack? Your best friend? His lovely sister? You seem quite found of her, but are you? Maybe getting rid of her brother would give you an easier time of winning her? Maybe it’ll just make things worse. What about this one with the glasses? You don’t really know him, do you? No great loss there. So tell me who. Tell me now.”

“If you want a soul,” Jack said at last. “Then, take mine.”

He then stood to look Saxon in the eyes.

For a moment, the wildness was overcome with confusion, almost fearfully so.

That was until, hatred took them over.

“How endlessly gallant of you,” Saxon scoffed at him, his voice dripping with acid. “But I already said I’m not going to waste you, Jack. At first, I wanted yours, but then I realized that I really want someone to share in my immortality. After

all, it will get so lonely. So, I want you to join me in the game. Make you immortal, and watch you suffer for all eternity as I do everything you've tried to stop. No, Jack. You're not getting out of this so easily. Last chance. Choose."

"No. I can't."

Saxon sighed.

"Then I will for you."

He aimed the Stone at Sanwar.

"Him."

"NO!"

A surge of crimson light shot forth from the Stone, and struck his friend deep in the chest. Sanwar cried out in shock at first, before the air caught in his throat, and his body crinkled. Then, all the light fled from his eyes. All the color drained from his skin. All that was left of him was an ash white husk, doubled over in a heap.

The light pulled back into the Stone.

Once it did, its mass rippled with renewed power. Saxon's muscles pulsed from the shockwave, and he laughed in triumph. The Stone had solidified in his grip. The transformation was complete.

The power of God was now in Saxon's hand.

And Jack did not care.

He cut off Saxon's laugh with one long scream.

The cry was deep and guttural, filled with rage yet unknown to the world of men and stained by sorrows too familiar.

He leapt then to his feet, and flew headlong across the room into Saxon. His fists slammed into him one after another, pounding his handsome, perfect face squarely in the chin. Jack cried out with every blow, the strength of his screams nor his strikes never waning.

Saxon could only stagger back from the onslaught. Each punch sent him several feet until he was pressed against the rock wall, and cornered. Jack did not relent, pummeling him into the wall with all abandon. The pistol flung from Saxon's grip and clattered somewhere on the floor, yet Jack saw only the man in front of him whom he needed to destroy.

Then suddenly, Saxon reached out, and caught Jack's fist.

His massive hand cupped Jack's, turned it downwards, and drove him back. He twisted Jack's arm as he did, taking him off balance. Then, with the Stone clutched in his other hand, he rammed his own fist into Jack's stomach.

The blow knocked the war cry out of him. Jack hunched over, then was flung back as Saxon hit him again. He was an even bigger man than Jack. His blows hit harder, and came quicker. Every one of them took more air out of him, and pretty soon Jack was asphyxiating as Saxon smashed him in the chin, chest, and guts.

There was only one hope.

With a final wind, Jack leapt forward at his opponent. This time, he aimed to grapple, groping at Saxon's fists to catch them. His hands found purchase on the bigger man's fingers, clawing desperately at them for a hold.

Saxon lazily turned Jack's grip aside, and pushed a knee into his chest. When Jack doubled over, Saxon simply kicked him away. When he hit the ground, Saxon raised the Stone in hand, and a sudden force slid Jack across the room until he collided with the opposite wall.

"Fucking pathetic," Saxon groaned. He spat out blood, then retrieved his fallen pistol from the floor.

Sajan and Samreet had been frozen in shock until this point, yet when they moved to help Jack, Saxon swung the pistol in their direction without even looking.

“Not another step,” he warned them, and continued towards his quarry.

Jack meanwhile, had picked himself from off the ground, and staggered to his feet. Swaying, he had resumed a fighting stance.

Saxon only laughed.

“You bloody idiot,” he said. “You know what, Jack? I underestimated just how fucking annoying you are. Fuck eternity. I’m just going to fucking kill you now the old fashioned way.”

With the gun leveled at him, Saxon pulled the trigger.

Light flashed.

Molten yellow liquid spewed out the barrel, and not a bullet.

Saxon screamed and dropped the weapon, the texture of its grip branded into his palm. Nursing his hand, he stooped over, hateful eyes glaring into Jack, who looked down and grinned at him.

In between his fingers was Saxon’s ring, the little silver band with an inset ruby shining in the firelight.

“Don’t you remember the purpose of Alchemy, Saxon?” He said between coughs of blood. “Lead into gold.”

Saxon growled as Jack slid it onto his outstretched middle finger. In his rage, Saxon forgot the Stone still in his hand, and instead threw down his gun to charge full on at Jack.

Jack was ready for him.

The jewel glowed, and suddenly a curb of rock rose from the earth to trip Saxon in his path. The big man fell hard, as did the Stone from his grip.

It clattered, then slid, and landed at Jack’s feet.

He snatched it into hand just as Saxon had regained his feet. Immediately, Jack felt his body quiver. Electricity sizzled in the air around him.

He felt stronger, no longer fazed by his injuries; yet weaker, as if he were so insignificant before the very thing which he possessed.

Saxon merely watched as Jack held out the Stone before him. In this moment, there was no fear in his eyes, only contempt.

“Go on then, Jack, old boy,” he said. “Finish it. You’re the alpha male now. You’ve proved it. End me, just like you’ve always wanted.”

Light burst forth from the Stone, and Saxon reared in pain.

Rock flowed up from the ground, covering his legs and waist at first, then traveling up along his body.

Jack stopped once he was buried to the shoulders. When, Saxon saw that his head and chest still remained exposed, he roared in fury.

“What are you doing!?” He cried. “End me! Go on, kill me! Kill you fucking coward!”

“You never understood,” Jack told him, laughing between his pants for breath. “You never understood that people could think differently than you. That some of us are just motivated by what is right. But who knows, Saxon? Maybe in a thousand years, even you can change. In the meantime, enjoy eternity.”

Jack plucked the tiny jewel from the silver ring, and pressed it into Saxon’s chest. It sank into his skin without leaving a mark.

Saxon looked down in horror.

“Jack! Jack you bast-”

The stone cut off his cries as it molded over him. In his place was now a man-sized slab of rock, solidly thick and totally unremarkable.

Jack turned away from it, and back to his friends.

Sajan and Samreet were cradling Sanwar's soulless body, their tears running down onto his cheeks at beard. His vacant eyes stared out at Jack, frozen in a questioning gaze.

Jack looked at him, then at the Stone within his hand.

He had wanted to see this day more than anything, but he had always imagined Sanwar being there to see it too. All his life, he had lived for this moment, and now it made no difference. Jack supposed that he had never made a difference, for all that he had wrought had turned to ashes in his hands. All that he dreamed had turned to nightmares. All that he had strived for had failed in blazing wreckages. Life had taken everything from him, everything until he had nothing left except for one true friend.

Without Sanwar, he had less than nothing now.

So, Jack went to him.

His body was cold.

Jack took his hand in his, and uttered a prayer in Gaelic.

"Please, just please," he begged. "Just give me my brother back."

XVI

Lend Thee a Hand

At first, there was darkness.

Then slowly, Sanwar saw the light coming towards him.

It began as a sliver, then widened until it became a bloody, swollen sphere burning in a hazy, smoke-filled sky. Daylight looked like sunset here for the air was so thick with ash, yet at last, he saw the land before him.

This Earth was little more than jagged, blackened rock. Seas of tarry gray boiled in the cauldrons of their stony pits. Lava leaked from rifts into the waters to further stir the poultice. Smog belched out from the bottlenecks of chthonic vents in toxic clouds of gloom. These palls gathered over the dismal sea, and thence rain down a storm of venom into their waves.

Yet, soon theirs was not the only rain upon the Earth, for a flaming tear hurled down from heaven.

From the shadows high above, a searing crimson shard crashed into the sea, and broke upon its waves.

The waters frothed and roiled. Molecules excited, and clumped together. The crimson light was in them. They took shape in the ooze, and formed something greater than they had before.

Then, suddenly these specks were moving, not just by magnetic bond, but willfully. They grew, and split, then split again. They multiplied, and consumed. Clusters of them eventually formed together, but did not break apart. They began to act as one. They began to be as one.

No longer did the seas boil below. No more was the air above so ridden with ash.

The waters calmed, and the smog diminished.

Under these clear seas and skies, creatures spawned. These were simple things at first, near formless blobs, but swiftly, they assumed more monstrous countenances with elephantine mouths and eye stalks.

Fish came after. Puny, worm-like ones swam the waters until they grew larger, stronger, and armed with jaws and teeth. Some grew legs, and left the water altogether. By then, the air was fresh enough to breathe. The land was not simple rock anymore, but soil filled with low-growing greens.

Plant and animal alike sprouted into every shape on this new world. Moss and algae sprouted into tree and flower. Slithering creatures from the sea became great beasts on four, then two legs. Insects flew the skies, then birds would join them. Little hairy beasts scurried about the forest floor until they thundered over it as giants. There was life, then death by flame and famine, then life again.

And from this, man was born.

He arose upright, and traveled across rough and frozen lands to the peaceful rivers. He built his cities and his wonders there about them, grew his crops and raised his houses besides the shores where they thus flowed. He built from stone, then steel. He wielded fire as a weapon, for the fire was in his blood stronger than in other beings'. He did not kill for merely food or safety, but for grand purpose. Sometimes that meant to spread his fire all across the world.

Sanwar witnessed all his weal and all his war. Nations rose and fell. Bodies mounted, decayed away, and vanished into the earth. There were unsung victories and famous defeats.

He saw his own small part in them, in the cold and bloody trenches of France and Anatolia. He watched himself kill and kill, over and over again. And he also saw beyond, to battles greater in their horror than he had ever seen. Machines of war covered the seas and skies and land. A great fire cloud erupted, sending smoke and shadow back into the heavens. In its wake, came strange contrivances, new devices and world that he did understand. There were births and deaths in countless trillions, not just of humans but of all things that ever lived, be it plant or animal or otherwise. He lived and died those countless times for each and every one of them until all their souls assumed his own. He watched the Earth go on for eons, and then extinguish as all the heat escaped it. The galaxy soon followed, then the universe, then every universe beyond.

In the end, only the void remained.

There at last, he saw the Stone.

Alone, it was in the darkness, a great red ember beating and throbbing against the black.

Entranced by its glow, he reached for it.

All his life, he had searched for this one thing. He could not even comprehend the touch of it. Would it gel between his fingers or hold firm? Could one even catch it in their grip? He wanted to know the feel of it, to know if had weight. He wanted to know the power. He wanted everything. He wanted nothing.

His hand reached out.

And the Philosopher's Stone withered in his grip.

Its ashes scattered to the wind, and vanished in the darkness.

Then, the light hit Sanwar.

He blinked.

Firelight blared in his eyes. Hot stone burned his skin. Sweat beads scurried off his brow. Heat was stinging in his nostrils. All Sanwar felt was sudden pain.

Eventually, the blindness subsided, and the image of a man took shape above him. His once bronze hair had now gone gray with ash. Soot smeared his clothes and face. Tears ran down that sooty face, leaving pale thin lines along his cheeks, and yet, he smiled.

Sanwar watched him clench a fist around something in his grip. When he released it, dust poured out between his fingers.

“Jack?”

“Aye, I’m here.” His voice was so familiar; that deep, rich brogue so full of mirth to hide the sorrow. “We’re all here, Sanwar.”

Other tearful faces appeared, looking down on him.

They were of his sister and the man he loved. They were older now, fully adults, but he could only see the children that he once knew.

“Samreet? Sajan?”

“We’re here,” they said.

Each took his hand, and helped him to his feet.

Sanwar looked about the place.

This chamber that they were in was full of horrid smoke and awful fire. Crucibles and bellows were about as if it were some sort of forge, so Sanwar wondered what in the blazes they were even doing here.

Looking about however, something struck him.

“Saxon...” He remembered. “Where is he...?”

“Gone,” said Jack, and that was all.

“And the Stone?”

“Gone,” said Jack again, and blew the dust out from his fingers.

Sanwar understood now. He smiled wanly, and laughed weakly.

“Well, there’s no bloody use in lingering about here anymore, is there?”

“Aye, I suppose not,” Jack grinned. “Let’s find a way out of here, shall we?”

“With due haste.”

They searched the smithy high and low. Sanwar could only sit and watch, as he was still getting reacquainted with his body. After some time, perhaps a full half hour, they found a passage leading upwards to a metal hatch secured upon the ceiling. It took all of Jack, Sajan, and Samreet’s remaining strength to get it about, but once they undid the one-way entrance, they discovered that it opened out from underneath a rock and out into a forest clearing.

Jack slid his arm under his friend’s, and helped carry him out. When finally they escaped that dreadful place, it was nightfall. The air was fresh, and moonbeams glistened on the treetops. They shut the door, and never opened it again.

Their horses were waiting patiently where they had left them. Everyone lifted Sanwar into the saddle. Jack stayed by his side as they rode off into the dark, so that he would not fall from it.

Sanwar did not remember the ride.

He must have fallen asleep, for the next thing he knew, it was light again. The four of them emerged from the forest, out onto the ridgeline.

Dhamija lay below them. All the smoke and fire had settled, and the village had awakened to meet the day. There were houses to be rebuilt, crops to be harvested or resown.

Everyone was busy at their work, whether lifting heavy bricks or drawing water from the wells. Ganeev was seeding with the womenfolk, heavy with her child and yet tireless in her work. Kiranjit kissed Randeep while they rested with the wounded beneath a shady canopy of trees. Jagmeet, Mata, and all the others were down there with them, working and helping in any way they could.

For a while the four riders watched in silence.

“Our people need us,” Samreet said at length. “We had better join them.”

“You go on ahead,” Sanwar told his sister. “I just want to stay a moment longer.”

It was all starting to come back to him. He remembered Saxon, the gun, and everything long, long before them both.

Samreet nodded, and rode off down the hill.

Sajan lingered a moment to hold his hand.

“I will see you down there.”

“You will. I’m not going anywhere this time.”

His love smiled at him, then rode down after Samreet.

Jack stayed behind with Sanwar for a time, however. They lingered as the sun rose, its color changing from ruby to citrine as the hour greatened.

“I’m glad you’re still with us,” his friend said after a time.

“As am I.”

“I have to know though...” Jack began, then paused to weigh his words. “When you were gone...what did you see?”

“Everything.”

“Everything?”

“War, death, destruction,” Sanwar told him. “A great war lies ahead of us. Greater even than the one we fought.”

Jack sighed.

“But there was also life,” Sanwar continued, and that seemed to lift his friend’s spirits. “Life beyond measure. Life so great that all of those other things might damn well be forgotten one day.”

This time, Jack laughed bitterly.

“So, what’s changed, really?”

“We’ve changed, Jack.”

“Aye, I suppose you’re right.”

“I did say that I saw everything...”

“I would have liked to use it just one time, truly,” Jack said, tightening his hand into a fist. “The power to create life...that’s something that no man has ever seen.”

Sanwar looked out across the village, at all the faces that he had known, at the fields and flowers, the rivers and trees, the land and animals.

“We have that power already,” he said at last. “We always have.”

“Well, maybe just a little immortality would have been nice,” Jack sighed.

“We already are immortal,” Sanwar replied.

The two exchanged a look.

Then, they exchanged a laugh.

“Aye, I suppose you’re right about that,” Jack could admit.

“Ride down with me, my brother,” Sanwar bid him.

“Everyone is waiting for us.”

“Aye. Let’s.”

Sanwar smiled.

He had lost one brother, but in doing so, had gained another. This one, he knew would never break his bond of fellowship, for theirs was bound in fire, not in blood. So together, they rode down towards their home. Cheers rang out as the village saw them coming.

A tear ran down Sanwar's cheek at the sound of it.

The wars ahead of him were yet to come, but the one inside of him was over.

A golden sun was rising over top his head, bathing his saffron *dastaar* in all its warmth.

It was going to be a beautiful day.

Historical Reference & Author's Note

Too vast and great is India's history, let alone Punjab's, to do it justice in so short a work as this. I will do my best to summarize only a piece of it here.

The Indus Valley Civilization (3300-1300 B.C.) is perhaps the best known period to a Western audience. This ancient civilization was founded in the land that is now divided between the modern states of India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. It was a society on par with the more famous likes of Egypt and Greece, and had achieved many technological advancements, particularly in the field of metallurgy. It was also the birthplace of a mythology what would later go to become part of the basis for Hinduism.

Roughly a millennia later, India would come into contact with the Hellenic world, as Alexander's conquests led him to the region. It remains uncertain if this contact helped transfer Hellenic knowledge of Alchemy to India or vice versa. What we do know is that by c. 300 B.C., Indian smiths were renowned for their production of a high crucible steel called "Wootz", and their craft was highly sought after.

Alchemy appeared in later works as a synthesis of Tantric practices and medicinal ones. Two practices, the *Rasayana* and *Rasashastra* utilized various metals as part of their teachings, although much of it has been proven unsafe by modern methods. Future influence on Indian Alchemy would come from Persian and Arab scholars during the Islamic Golden Age of the Medieval Era. Otherwise, the history of Alchemy on the sub-continent is currently steeped in mystery, as much of the Sanskrit literature has yet to be fully incorporated into the Alchemical canon. In the opinion of this author, it is a field of study both ripe for speculation and fantastic possibility.

What is much more recorded and understood are the lasting effects of India's colonization. While many are aware of the broader narrative of Britain's steady encroachment from the 18th century onwards, less known is the unique history of Southeast Asia's varied and diverse regions.

In the case of India's northwest corners, Punjab remained one of the last bastions against British Imperialism, yet finally succumbed to its designs during the Anglo-Sikh Wars (1845-1849). Thus, when India's movement of civil disobedience gained traction in the early twentieth century, Punjab's subjugation was still within living memory, and naturally the region was one of the most ardent opponents of British rule. Many acts of resistance, both violent and non- occurred here, although perhaps the most infamous episode was the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre.

By 1919, civil unrest had reached such a fever pitch that the British feared any large gathering of Indians was to be the makings of an insurrection. On April 13th in the regional capital of Amritsar, such a crowd had gathered at the local park of Jallianwala Bagh for a religious festival. Many were from outside the city and were unaware of the strict curfews that the government had imposed. Brigadier General Reginald Edward Harry Dyer arrived on the scene with fifty men, and opened fire on the crowd, unprovoked. His forces killed or injured unknown hundreds of people, either by gunfire, the ensuing stampede, or by the victims falling in a nearby well and drowning. The upper estimates number the casualties at around 1,500.

Such was the cost of India's modernization under British oppression. After WWI, the Crown was taking forcible measures to develop the country into a modern agrarian power, and any resistance to that was met with violent reprisal.

A considerable amount of damage was being done through economic means especially. In order to meet export demands, the British built massive dams along Punjab's many rivers and tributaries. The result was that certain regions were inundated and crops flourished, while others suffered severely from drought. Although most of these dams were built in the 1930s, I placed the ruthless Saxon ahead of the curve by starting construction a few years earlier. The environmental damage of these dams continues to be an issue in the modern day. To make matters worse, the Brits then exported most of its massive crop yield to feed its soldiers during WWII, leaving India to starve.

Punjab continued to suffer even after Independence, as the British partitioned a portion of its historic area into Pakistan while also expanding its boundaries on the Indian side. The process both separated Muslims and Sikhs further while also creating new tensions with other groups. This was perhaps by design, as the British were notorious for stoking divisions between India's diverse populations, many of which resided within Punjab. The result was to disunify any opposition to its rule, even after it had ceased to directly govern the nation.

Yet over a hundred years later, Punjab continues to be a center of resistance for India. From 2020-2021, 250 million Indians mounted what is perhaps the largest general strike in history. Many of the participants were Punjabi. The issue at hand were laws that would change the prices and storage amounts of various staple crops. In the simplest terms, the new laws would allow large businesses to buy crops at low prices, store them indefinitely, and thus artificially increase the cost of said crops for average consumers. This move was lucrative for large businesses, and lethal for small farmers. A host of farmers' unions and affinity groups rose in protest

against the unjust system. They marched on Delhi and occupied the city, all while enduring violent attacks from the police and misrepresentations on Indian mass media. Eventually, the government submitted to their demands, and agreed to reform the laws in question.

However, a year after the agreement, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has revoked these reforms, and has not kept his promises. Thus, what led to superficial changes has now restarted in Punjab and other states as of 2024. Farmers and workers there continue to protest their subjugation and the vestiges of India's colonial specter as carried out by its Hindu nationalist government.

Let it be said here that India, as with much of the world, has always been multi-ethnic, pluralist, and religiously diverse, and is better for it. Divisions based on caste or creed have ever been imposed by those who have interest in keeping its peoples disorganized and subdued.

Yet, if the past is any indication, then those divisions are doomed to fail.

May we live to see it done in this life, and if not, another.

Bole so nibal, saat sri akal.

Zozimos,
January 1st, 2025