

PROLOGUE

It was still dark when I left my village, carrying only what I needed to travel. My family were fast asleep, and I did not wake them. I was running away, desperate to find my fortune, desperate to follow in my grandfather's footsteps. My decision was swift, but the planning took some months. Now, I was finally ready to leave. And even though my heart ached at the thought of my mother's distress and the tears of my younger sisters, I did not waver. My grandfather had taught me to believe in myself, and to be sure in my actions. Now that I was going, and he was no longer with me, I wondered what he might think. Whether he was looking down on me as I sneaked away.

I stopped a mile from the village, which would soon be consumed by the city of Rawalpindi and become another of its many districts. I stood by a grove of trees, under which my grandfather, my *baba*, had often sat.

There, he would take shade from the sun, chatting with his friend Mr Singh, playing cards. There, he taught me many lessons about life and told stories of his time in Europe, fighting in what they had called the Great War.

Now, as I stood and thought of him awhile, I was leaving to have my own adventures, hoping to follow Baba's example and become a man. I had no idea what awaited me, and I will admit to some fear. Mostly, however, I was excited. Baba had no gravestone to mark his passing. Instead, I touched his favourite wooden seat, under his favourite tree, and asked for his blessing.

Then, without another rearward glance, I set off on my journey. . .

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We disembarked in 1939, during the coldest winter for a hundred years, many thousands of miles from home. As Company 32, of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps, we had been ordered to Europe alongside three other units. They called us Force K-6 and we were sixteen hundred men and close to two thousand mules strong, with a few horses in addition. Our British rulers had made a terrible mistake when the war began, ignoring animal corps, and relying solely on vehicles for transport. Only, when the British Expeditionary Force reached France, they found themselves bogged down by muddy and then frozen roads and lanes and fields, unable to get supplies to the front lines quickly enough. That became our job.

On our arrival, everything was covered in snow and ice – the houses, the streets, the fields. The locals shivered as they passed us by, hidden under thick

layers of clothing, with moth-eaten blankets wrapped around them. The rivers and streams were frozen, and the boughs of every tree weighed down by ice and snow. Every scene seemed leeches of colour and joy and warmth, as though the whole country lay under some great depression beyond the war. I came from Rawalpindi, in the far north of India, and was used to the cold, but this was something else. It chilled my bones, and set my teeth chattering. Occasionally, the biting winds even made conversation difficult, so badly did my jaws vibrate. But at least I had a voice to find.

Our mules were silent. Always silent. They had been gagged; their vocal cords surgically altered before we embarked on the long journey from India to Marseille, in France.

“That should stop them alerting the enemy,” a fellow soldier had said.

Yet, I could not bring myself to approve of such barbarism. I was very young and had little experience of cruelty. But, when we reached France, I witnessed the horror and savagery of war firsthand. Cruelty lingered everywhere in conflict. A nasty business and no mistake.

When we docked at Marseille, I had grown excited by the prospect of a foreign land. Barely eighteen

according to my forged documents, in reality I was just past my fifteenth birthday. I had lied to enlist and run away from home, desperate to emulate my late grandfather, who had fought during the Great War and told tales of bravery and camaraderie, honour and duty. I looked older than my years, but at heart I was still a boy. A boy who wanted to become a man.

I knew my actions would hurt my family and cause them sorrow, but I enlisted regardless. The pull of my dreams was much too strong. I did not even stop to think. Looking back, I was immature and selfish, and yet I felt great pride too. I joined many others from my city, as we trained under the British some distance from my home. We were attached to an animal unit, specifically mules, and taught to care for our charges. To understand our vital role in supplying combat units with ammunition and food, and whatever else they required during battle. In India, we saw little action. Then, very quickly after I enlisted, the call came to join the war in Europe. Soon everything changed.

The French people were not particularly welcoming, but they did not trouble us either. Most were too busy trying to keep warm and too frightened of what lay ahead. The same lack of cordiality was true of our British comrades, which I found harder to take. Surely, we were all brothers in arms, fighting the same fight?

However, it was wartime, and there was no use in dwelling on such things. Besides our Captain, John Ashdown, made sure we were looked after.

“We are here to do a job,” he’d tell us. “As important as any other. Remember that.”

After disembarking ourselves and our animals, we were sent to a transit camp outside Marseille, and from there we headed north. Soon each company was sent to different postings. We moved around a great deal, becoming skilled in erecting tents at each new camp. Often, we tethered the mules under trees, or tied them to buildings, covering them in blankets as protection from the cold and retreating to our shelters. Despite the freezing temperatures, we tried to warm ourselves with tea and hardtack biscuits, and some tinned bully beef. It was far from ideal, but it was all we had.

During my first month, I was weary and cold, and uncertain of why I’d chosen to join up. I had dreamt of grand buildings, exotic food and friendly folk, but all I saw of that great country was fields and trees and mud and snow. Rawalpindi was chaotic and haphazard, warm and inviting. The France I first encountered was none of these things. My closest comrade, Mushtaq Ahmad, grew annoyed when I said as much aloud.

“What did you think we would find, brother?” Mush asked me. “We are at war.”

“I just expected more” I replied.

“*More?*” asked Mush. “We are just Indians. These people do not think of us as equals. This is not *our* war, Faz.”

Mush shook his head. He was paler than me, with green eyes and a hooked nose. His jet-black moustache swept around his mouth and was curled at the ends.

“It is our duty, Mush,” I replied. “You know this.”

We Indian soldiers had a motto, a rallying cry for when things were going awry. If anyone in India questioned our loyalty to the British, we would simply say “*Hukum Hai*” – it is our duty. Now, I reminded Mush of that duty.

“*Duty?*” he replied. “I am here because I had nothing, and the British pay us. I was a peasant farmer at home, without even a field to call my own. My duty is to you and the rest of our brothers. I do not care about kings and empires.”

“Look,” I added, picking up a tin cup full of tea. “We are cold and tired, and in a foreign land. But we have a task to perform, and inshallah, we will not shirk it. We do not run from hard work.”

“I know this,” he replied. “But there is nothing more than this, Fazal.”

“I just thought. . .” I began

“You thought you might find a nice French girl to

take home?" he joked. "I'm sure we will meet a few blind ones."

"Idiot," I said with a grin.

"Buffoon," he replied.

Eventually I settled into a routine. Upon waking and washing, and after a breakfast of canned meat, hard bread and tea, I would groom the mules alongside my comrades. This involved checking them for signs of illness or infection and brushing their coats. Then we would check their hooves for stones and other detritus, removing anything we found with spiked hoof picks. Occasionally, the veterinary officers would ask about the mules' welfare, and I would be asked to translate.

"You've a good grasp of the language, Khan," Sergeant Buckingham said one morning.

"Yes, sir," I replied. "My school followed a British curriculum."

"You come from a well-to-do family then?" said Sergeant Buckingham.

"Not so well-to-do," I told him. "But we have decent enough lives. My father works as a court administrator and my grandfather fought during the Great War."

"My father too," he replied, his expression darkening. "Died at The Somme. I never really knew him."

"I am sorry," I said. "My condolences."

“It’s fine, Private Khan,” said Sergeant Buckingham. “Each of us has made sacrifices for the Empire. Now, any problems with the animals?”

“No, sir.”

“Good, good,” he replied. “Saves me a blasted job. I’m off to get a cup of chai. Carry on!”

As he sauntered away, I saluted and got back to my task. The mules stood with their heads bowed, many of them feeding from cloth bags tied around their necks. My next job was to weigh out a serving of oats for their feed, and I called to Mush.

“Scales,” I said.

Mush nodded and brought them across.

“Feeling better today?” I asked.

“Yes, brother,” he replied. “*Hukum Hai...*”