

Afghanistan

July 1880

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It was the seventh raiding party in a row to accost the caravans of pilgrims making their way west toward Mecca, and at the head of it was a murderous fellow named Ali Mustafa ibn Mohammed. All of them called themselves sons of Mohammed, though they appeared quite ignorant to the flowery verses of the Quran calling for tolerance, moderation and peace. These were pirates of the desert, pure and simple, who delighted in nothing but their own brand of Islam; which included murder, torture, and the enslavement of anyone who came into their tribal territory. They considered the whites and others who traveled into their lands the infidel, even though they were not faithful themselves.

Now dressed in dark Afghan clothes, Captain Robert St. John steadied his rifle against the rock and took careful aim as the horsemen came clattering around the bend and down the course of the Khyber Pass below. The moon was full, but even without its pale light he could still clearly see the face of the man he was aiming for.

He shifted closer to the edge of the precipice, waited patiently for the miscreants to come into range, took a calm slow breath, and squeezed the trigger. The shot echoed and rebounded in the canyon like thunder.

A second later, ibn Mohammed jerked back in his saddle and tumbled from his horse as it galloped out from under him, landing unceremoniously in a boneless heap on the trail. His startled companions scattered about in confusion looking for the author of his death.

A swarm of British soldiers came flooding out of the darkness and surrounded them. One of the raiders had time to draw a large sword before it was shot from his hand. Thus disarmed, he quietly resigned and joined his brothers kneeling on the ground, to be systematically stripped of their weapons and chained together for the long march to prison.

By the time the sun turned the dawn golden, the chain gang entered the stone walls of the fort overlooking the most treacherous part of the pass. They were flanked by the soldiers, with Robert mounted on an Arabian horse at the head of the file like a visiting calif.

The parade attracted every enlisted man's attention, and they erupted into cheers and whistles as the parade passed by going toward the holding stockade, where the prisoners would be processed, inspected for lice, and then incarcerated to await trial and summary execution.

There were few among them that could be judged innocent in Robert's eyes. He reasoned that they willingly cast their lot with the wrong crowd and would be judged according to their deeds in heaven. "Let God sort them out," he was often heard to say.

The young soldiers escorting the prisoners into the fort were hand picked by Robert for their proberty, efficiency, and self discipline. Robert had little patience with dawdling or lack of initiative. Any man not keeping up his end was transferred out with a minimum of fuss. It kept the unit cohesive and their loyalty to each other attested to that. They were a band of brothers, ever protecting each other's back.

But Robert kept to himself. He wanted to associate more freely with them but both his class and his rank prevented that, and far too much familiarity bred contempt. Something else stopped him besides: that beastly thirst for blood that never went away. He forced himself to find blood among the sheep and goats that inhabited the pass, while his need for human blood pressed him to hunt for larger prey. It was like being at war with himself.

As the unit broke up and went to do their daily chores, Robert walked up to the station house to deliver his report. As he entered the common room some of the commissioned officers stood up at his entrance and saluted, some stayed seated but stared like cattle as he passed, and still others snorted with distaste and resumed reading their newspapers as if he was a native invading their private sanctum.

There were some things that just did not change about the British, and a gentleman's club was one of them. They endured through thick or thin no matter where the English were. Robert did not care how these men felt about him either way, but did return the salutes as he passed with a dash of his fly whisk.

When Robert was out on patrol he preferred to dress like a native, spoke the regional dialect fluently and had a thorough knowledge of their habits and customs, learned through experience within the short time he was stationed

there. He made sure to learn which tribe could be trusted and which could not, where the bad ones made their camps, and who among them was the worst and therefore most worthy of a bullet.

What he could not learn from the natives directly with bribery or by stealth he learned from their blood when he took a random cup or two from a sleeping shepherd or a wayward youth, or when he used his power to convince the unsavory ones to give up their secrets. Torture was simply not necessary when they caught sight of the red light in his eyes. Those men who attracted his special attention knew him only as the son of Shaitan.

Robert's commanders did not ask how he accomplished his goals. They only knew that whatever he did got results, so they gave him free rein. In the two years he had served, he distinguished himself to be a legend, and that reputation earned him some autonomy.

He walked into the main office and drew himself to hopping attention in front of the seated commandant, saluting rigidly as protocol demanded. "Captain Robert Saint John reporting, sir!"

Major Arnold Mansley glanced up from the report he was reading and said in a sedentary tone, "at ease, Captain. No need to stand on ceremony this early in the morning. Besides, I have a dreadful headache and I don't need all that noise just now." He had been drinking heavily again, and nursed a hangover.

Robert disapproved but could do nothing but watch the man waste himself. "Yes, sir," he said more softly, and stood at parade rest.

"I take it you were successful?" Mansley asked, more as a formality than anything else. He already knew what had happened when he watched the procession of chained prisoners enter the fortress gates, surrounded by uniforms and every man jack of them still alive, from his office window.

"Yes, sir. Ibn Mohammed is dead, and his men have been captured. They are awaiting the justice of the court at your convenience, sir."

"Very good, Captain." He paused as he appraised the young stalwart standing before him, and paused before saying, "you look like you could do with some sleep. Go get it now, will you, and take the day off? I'll send word to you if you need to go out again. That will be all, you're dismissed."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Robert saluted again, but Mansley was already focused on the report in front of him. Robert could never tell if Mansley liked him or not, though his habit of addressing Robert less formally seemed to indicate a general affability.

Quietly, Robert eased himself away, left the station house and strode across the compound to his private cabin, where his Ghurka manservant Kublai would be waiting for him with a pot of that sweet Afghan tea he had grown fond of.

They say that vampires never sweat or show discomfort, but in the fierce heat of the summer morning Robert stripped off his cote, caftan and the linen burnoose underneath; removed the porkpie hat that had pasted itself to his damp forehead, pulled off his pointed Turkish boots, and felt grateful to be out of them. He stepped naked into a porcelain free standing tub of cool water scented with lemons imported from Burma and sat down, allowing the bath to wash away the dust and horse scent from his white skin. Sighing, he leaned back, let his head touch the edge of the porcelain, and closed his tortured light-sensitive eyes.

His valet came into the room with the tea service and set it down on the rattan side table. "It is a hot day today, master Robert," he announced, as he drew the dark curtains closed to shut out the harsh glare from outside. Kublai spoke reasonably good English. There was something well bred about him that said he was descended from royalty.

He was also quite aware of Robert's true nature but he had proved his loyalty several times in the last few months, earning Robert's trust and friendship.

"Yes, it does look that way," Robert replied, without moving. "Leave me alone for a while, would you? and after my bath I will read whatever has come in the post."

"Very good, sir," Kublai replied, and promptly disappeared into the back of the house.

Robert listened to the men marching about and shouting orders and the sounds of the horses shifting in the paddock, the steady buzzing of flies and other insects going about their business, sparrows twittering in the thickets, and as he listened his thoughts ever returned to friends and home.

Reginald Hempley had been posted to Lahore, where he took a bullet for Blinky during a Sikh uprising and went home in a coffin, while Bernard Fitzwalter managed to find a command of his own in Jaipur, where he was cornered and strangled by the Thugs after a particularly vicious firefight.

Robert's brother Steven had caught malaria in Khartoum and died after wasting away in agony for three days, making Robert the next in line to be the Earl of Huntingdon. Letters from home said his younger brother Michael was doing well at Cheltenham and apparently was cultivating a talent for the medical arts.

His mother had taken up charity work among the dispossessed, of which there were a growing number of cases, and it made him happy to see she had found a worthy project to keep her from worrying so much about her errant sons.

And Edwina... she had gone and married Lord Berkeley's son, and was working on her third child by now. Her last letter was long and rambling, but sadly final, saying that she could not carry on writing to Robert this way for fear her husband would get the wrong idea.

Robert had cried over it, then torn up the three pages of elegant feminine script and thrown them in the fire. But by the time he had thought better of it the paper was ashes gone up the flue. His anguish and despair could not be uttered in public, so he kept it all to himself.

Of Count Karel Nikolai Arkelin he had heard and felt nothing. He supposed it just as well, for at one time he had the idea of murdering the count. Now he looked back in time and saw that what Karel had given him was a gift, and Robert would never have received it without the count's foolhardy lack of restraint. He felt he could forgive Karel for that. His transformation enabled him to do things other men could not, and had saved his life on more than one occasion thus far.

Alexander never wrote but somehow Robert had the sense that things were going well with him wherever he was.

After two years Robert still could not understand himself or what he had become. Because of that fact alone he didn't dare contemplate the prospect of seeing Edwina again. Alexander was right about the future being ever changing, and time ran at a different rate for Robert now. An hour for the others was like a minute for him. An hour of sleep during the day was as restful as a whole night. And now, he never got tired like he used to.

Sometimes he felt a strange compulsion that made him do or say things at just the right times, ideas and knowledge that came into his mind from somewhere else. But he could not tell if it was because he was different or because he perceived things differently. He had powers he could scarcely understand or control, along with that thirst for blood that never seemed to go away.

After the first few clumsy attempts at hunting for it he had begun to regain some confidence but that could change the moment his commanding officer discovered his secret, and he did not dare think what would happen then.

Even his dreams, which were odd formless rambling adventures he could never hang on to or recall. His eyes would close in sleep and he would be gone elsewhere until the birds woke him. He could hardly imagine these little slices of death could be restful, but somehow they were. At least, the dreams were not nightmares, and for that he was thankful.

After another hour of such dour musing he raised his head again, sponged himself off, then dried off and dressed in his khaki uniform. He was seated in his favorite chair reading a letter from his mother when Kublai led a young soldier into the parlor. He watched the young man draw himself to hopping attention and salute.

"Private second class George Fynchon with a message for you, sir," Kublai said.

Captain St. John leaned back and regarded the young man blandly, then returned the salute. The private silently handed him the folded note, then stood at rigid attention staring at the wall until Robert's warm voice jogged him loose. "Stand at ease and do take some lemonade, won't you?"

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir," the young man replied, his gullet moving up and down. And added with a weak smile, "It is a hot day, sir." He removed his regimental cap and wiped at his forehead with his sleeve.

"Quite." With a small wave of his pale hand Robert signaled Kublai to bring the drink, then focused on the note.

The Ghazis had taken a small group of white travelers in a caravan hostage on the entrance to the Khyber Pass near the village of Kowst. Mansley wanted him to go and "sort out this mess."

He frowned as he guessed the Ghazis were acting in retaliation for the loss of their latest calif, and probably led by his brother. Jan Mustafa ibn Mohammed was a murderous cutthroat himself, who may have been waiting for an excuse to take control of the tribe. Now it looked like his small selfish mind had turned to revenge, and a few whites to leverage its success were all he needed to accomplish that. He was in effect calling the killer of his brother out, and Robert had no choice but to respond.

But Robert hesitated. His men had just returned from a difficult mission, and he did not want to tax them further in this blasted summer heat. It would take them too long to regear and find fresh horses. He had the sudden feeling it would be better to do this alone. One man could slip into the camp and free the hostages, and time was of the essence.

Robert rose quickly and went to his desk to write a response, then thought better of it and said to the young private, "As soon as you can, return to Major Mansley and tell him simply that I am on my way to handle it. After you've had your lemonade."

"Yes, sir," the private said, saluting. "Thank you, sir."

But Robert did not return it this time as he left the parlor and went into his bedroom to dress for travel.