

Chapter One

The patrolling boat drew to a slow humming sound as the wooden dock appeared. Purple fog covered the entire region with clouds hovering near. The dysfunctional machine gun mounted on the front rattled. The boat maneuvered to the right.

Aditya glanced at Raghu as he unsheathed his sword from his back. The Russian soldiers at the back of the boat grinned at each other when one of them flicked a match stick at another.

“I don’t like this.”, Aditya whispered to the sergeant standing in front of him.

The sergeant only sighed. He tightened his grip on the end of his sword and prepared himself as the boat docked on the shore. He made a gesture at the rest to follow his lead. He got down the boat making a small splash on the silent water.

The noise of crickets echoed the waiting woods under the crisp moonshine. The silent footsteps of soldiers melted into the wet grass. Aditya and the rest of the crew followed the sergeant. But the Russian soldiers broke into a different stream.

The village appeared at a distance. It had a tall wooden palisade as a fortification adorned with spikes at the top. It followed a circular path covering the whole village. Aditya could see a watch tower at one corner of the wall. The torch hanging on it brightened its interior. But he could not find out if anyone was inside. The center of the village glowed with light emanating from torches. One could tell anyone living there would be still awake.

The next moment everyone readied themselves for action as someone sounded the alarm.

The crew ran to the wall and climbed it in haste. The soldiers inside were already engaged in battle. The Russians took the lead.

Aditya fought back when someone launched at him. He planted his sword on his enemy's chest and blood spurted out violently. He looked back and neatly avoided a blow on his head. He kicked him and cut his weapon in half. Then he planted his sword neatly on his chest.

After clearing his path, he marched ahead towards the center with Raghu.

The whole village was full of screams of women and children amid violence. Bodies of the villagers dropped to the ground as they helplessly lashed at the soldiers. Men and women alike. Rudimentary weapons were of no comparison to sharpened swords. The villagers surrendered after a while. The sergeant instructed his crew to search the whole place.

The village was smaller than they had assumed it to be. The wooden palisade made a perfect circle. Houses were in the middle keeping a safe

distance from it. They were wattle and daub houses suggesting that only forest dwellers lived there.

Aditya took the lead and the squad broke into groups. Aditya moved to the right corner with Raghu and started searching the houses. They pulled out old men and adolescent children hiding inside. But most of them were already lacking their occupants. Already dead or surrendered at the behest of hope to see the sun dawning again.

Aditya moved to the next house and began searching. At the center there was a small chimney burning to keep the place warm. At first glance the house looked to be empty. It was dark but the chimney provided faint light. The bed on the corner was undone and the clothes were hanging on the wall mount.

Aditya went inside the bedroom. He could not see anyone but he heard heavy breaths coming from the left corner. He went closer to see a young woman holding her child. She looked at him intently. He could tell that she was already in deep shock. Streams of tears rolled down her eyes and her body shivered in fear. Aditya looked behind him to see Raghu waiting for him to respond to the situation.

"I am not going to hurt you.", Aditya said as he tried to show down his breath. "You hide under the bed," he added.

When he gathered that she might not understand what he was saying, he kept the sword on the bed and gestured to her. She nodded. The two came out of the house.

The sergeant had collected all the villagers at the clearing. The chief of the village was begging. The tone and his weak demeanor suggested so. Although Aditya could not understand what he was saying. The Russian soldiers had already found the rebels. They dragged them to the clearing and kneeled them beside the chief and other villagers. The crew had a member who understood their language.

"Who asked you to give shelter to these scumbags?", the sergeant bent his knee to face the chief and asked. He looked at the translator and he followed the command. But the old chief kept crying. He went to one of the rebels.

"Where is your chief hiding?", the sergeant asked in a firm tone. But before he could ask again one Russian soldier, who seemed to be their leader, shot the rebel. The body dropped to the ground making a loud thud.

"Why are you wasting our time?", the sergeant asked with a rugged russian accent as he made a waving gesture with his gun. He shot the other one and laughed.

The sergeant's eyes became red but he kept his calm. The leader counted the villagers and ordered the rest to kneel on the wet soil. It was now partly permeated with dark blood. The lady beside the chief began to wail uncontrollably. Her body shivered. The children's eyes, who were hardly in their puberty, were full of fear. Rest of the men had already died fighting.

Aditya watched in silence. The leader strolled around in a linear fashion, loading bullets into his gun. Aditya's patience was on its brink. He tightened his fist. But He could not do anything for them. Even if he tried to. Should he die defending the villagers but to no avail. They will still die. Petty villagers lost their lives everyday. To war and to hunger.

"Gospodin, (sir), do you really think these gnats deserve bullets?". One of the Russian soldiers said and laughed.

The leader smirked and holstered his gun. He unsheathed his machete and ran his fingers on its edge. As if he was oiling a vehicle before a long ride. The machete had dried blood stains. It had some engravings in russian. He tightened his arms for the blow.

"Please stop it.", Aditya said, interrupting him. The leader looked at him as well as the sergeant. "Why do we need to kill them? These kids don't have to do anything.", he added. He looked at the leader with firm eyes and stood his ground.

"What is up with you people? Can't you stand a little bit of killing?", the leader said and clicked his tongue. Tsk.

A loud gunshot came from amongst the houses. Everyone looked up in that direction. So did Aditya. Another gunshot filled the now silent environment. Aditya's hair stood as he realized it. He walked away from the clearing. He could not stand the massacre. He went to a distance and sat on thick grass overlooking the woods.

He had fought many battles and had taken many hits on himself. He had been killed and was nearly killed. But during his eight years in the mainland's army, he had never seen such barbarity. He looked at the distant mountains covered with fog and thought about how he could be a part of this. No matter how hard he tried to rationalize it, it did not help. He had killed many poorly armed villagers himself. At least seven of them. Many of them are young.

He brought out some cheap alcohol from his bottle and applied on his newly gained scars. The wound on his thighs made him grunt.

The villagers though fought with little iron swords, they were no lesser warriors. They fought knowing they would die. He raised his bottle to the sky and nodded. He took a long sip.

"What are you doing here?", Raghu asked. He was standing behind him. Aditya did not say anything. Raghu then came and sat beside him. "You need to stop behaving this way. One day they will take you as a traitor.", he added.

"Maybe." Aditya paused and looked ahead. The fog was starting to clear up. Sun was slowly coming up from between the distant mountains. It's faint light starting to lighten up the atmosphere. The dew drops collected on the grass blades will be dried under the scorching sun.

"It seems everyday we are sliding down towards the rock bottom.", Aditya said and sighed.

"Don't bother now brother. It's done.", Raghu said. When Aditya did not reply, he got up carefully avoiding not to disturb his superficial

wound on his back and forearm. He patted his shoulder. "Come now. They are leaving.", he added.

He looked back and walked to the clearing with Raghu. The place smelt of blood and raw flesh. The clearing was now decorated with heads mounted on bamboo sticks. Blood dripped from the top forming streams. Faces lifeless. Aditya could not look at them.

"Oye, quick now.", the leader ordered the other soldiers to pour gasoline on the houses. He lit a match stick and flicked it to the ground with precision.

When he was leaving the place, Aditya looked back once again. To see the mayhem they had done. The innocent lives they had taken. The village burnt like thin paper but with vigor.

The picture of the burning village stuck with him. And also a question. And he needed an answer.