

We continued northwards, via Béthune, and arrived at a town called Cassel two days later. We made for the grounds of a once-grand chateau, now fallen into disrepair, and set up camp. We were great in numbers, and the chateau grounds were not large enough to take us all, so some camped in a field instead. And, once again, we settled and tried to find some kind of normality.

I was hungry and tired but made sure to look after my three mules before taking care of myself. The animals were calm, but seemed sad to me, ridiculous as that may sound. I had learned much about them on our journey, however. Where they might nuzzle and playfully butt each other before, now they were still, their heads drooping. I found a grooming kit and began to remove their blankets and noticed that their coats were dulled and ragged.

"Don't worry, my friends," I whispered. "Fazal will see to you."

One by one, I groomed and cleaned them as best I could. Then I found a hoof pick and checked each of them. The journey had been hard, and I was wary of being kicked by them, so I took my time and found plenty of debris to remove. In India, we had carried field forges with us. These allowed us to re-shoe our mules on the go. But in France, we had not been issued forges, and so their hooves had taken great strain. All three needed shoes, but when I spoke to Sergeant Buckingham, he began to laugh.

"Impossible!" he told me. "Even if we had the shoes, we have no forges, Khan."

"But without the shoes, the mules will suffer," I told him.

"We're all suffering, Khan!" he bellowed. "I haven't the courage to look at my own feet, lest they be riddled with rot. Forget the beasts, man! We've got humans to consider."

When my face fell, he grew annoyed.

"Don't tell me you worship the useless things?" he said. "I had enough of cow-worshipping Hindustanis in Delhi!"

"I am a Muslim, sir," I replied. "We do not worship animals."

'Glad 10 heat' it!" said Sergeant Buckingham.

I walked away in anger and despair. My mules were not desperate for new shoes, but if they didn't get them soon, they would find walking painful. And, like cars without wheels, mules with injured hooves were no good to any of us.

"What is the matter?" asked an older comrade called Sadiq.

He was from Rawalpindi like me, tall and strong, and wearing a regulation *pagri* — a turban — which consisted of cloth wrapped around a quilted cotton cone. When I relayed the Sergeant's words, Sadiq merely shook his head.

"What can you expect of people who steal other's countries?" he asked. "They do not care about us, never mind the animals."

"But the mules are just like us!" I insisted. "We have a duty to them."

"Nonsense!" Sadiq replied, smoothing his oiled moustache. "We have only one duty, Fazal. To stay alive in this hell."

"But. . ."

Sadiq shook his head again.

"Listen, brother," he said. "We are not alone in feeling this way. Do you believe that the white soldiers feel any differently? We came for victory, and we are running from the fight, Don't tell me about duty or honour. There is none to be had."

That night, I rested well. It had been many days since my last real sleep, and when morning came, I was groggy and grumpy. Mush awakened me, and together we walked to the latrines to relieve ourselves. Captain Ashdown was standing nearby, engaged in conversation with Sergeants Buckingham and Davis, and another Captain called Morrow. All four of them wore serious expressions, and their exchange seemed heated.

"I wonder what they are saying?" Mush whispered.

"I can't hear," I replied.

"More bad news, no doubt."

In the mess tent, we were given tea and biscuits, and some bread and jam. I scoffed mine quickly, and took an extra cup of tea, too.

"I am desperate to bathe," said Mush. "I feel dirty."

"Me too," I told him.

"I have not washed for days and my uniform is making me itch."

"Perhaps we will have time later," I suggested.

"If the Germans spot us here," Mush replied, "there will be no later."

With breakfast done, we headed for our tasks, rested and refreshed, and the sun broke through the clouds to further brighten the day. My mules were tethered close to our tent, and once again I began my grooming routine. They seemed happier and more relaxed after a quiet night, and again I could not help but compare our lots.

"Only, you did not choose this life, Baba," I told the pale brown one. "You did not choose anything."

One of the others reared its head and nudged me, and I returned the gesture. To my left, Mush began to laugh.

"They are mules, brother," he said, "not future wives!"

During late afternoon, I took a stroll around the grounds and found that the chateau was deserted. The main house was derelict, with fire damage to the rear, and fallen stonework. Rats scurried from an outhouse when I tried the door, giving me a fright. Further along, through a courtyard, I found Sergeant Buckingham smoking his pipe and reading a letter. He had removed his jacket and tie and unbuttoned his shirt and had his feet up on one chair as he sat on another. A hip flask of whiskey sat on a small table beside him, and his eyes were glazed.

"What are you doing, Khan?" he asked.

"Nothing, sir," I replied. "I was just taking a walk."

"Well, go elsewhere, will you?" he said. "I wanted some peace."

"Yes, sir," I replied, before making a hasty exit.

I wandered towards a small copse which led down to the river that ran behind the grounds. The water was clear and fresh, and I sat on the bank and daydreamed. Tranquillity seemed out of place, given our predicament, but it was very welcome. I must have been there a while before I spotted the boy. He stood on the opposite bank, holding a stick to which he'd tied some string. A fishing expedition. He must have been ten or eleven years old, with dark hair and eyes and a sallow complexion, as though he hadn't eaten enough.

"*Excusez-moi*," the child said when he saw me, "*je ne voulais pas vous déranger*."

The boy looked scared and unsure of himself. I shrugged and gestured to my mouth.

"I do not speak French," I told him.

The boy looked past me, and his eyes lit up. I turned to find Captain Ashdown standing behind me.

"He said he didn't mean to disturb you," the Captain explained, before turning to the boy.

"*Vous ne devriez pas être ici*."

The startled boy turned and fled, and I asked the Captain what he had said.

"I told him he shouldn't be here," he replied. "We can't have civilian children running about. There are live weapons around."

"You speak French?"

"Yes," he said. "Taught at school."

"In England?"

Captain Ashdown shook his head. "No, Khan," he replied. "In India. I was born and raised there."

"I did not know that, sir," I replied. "Please forgive my mistake."

"At ease, Khan," the captain said. "There is no mistake to forgive."

I wondered whether to ask about our situation but decided against it. I was a private, and my orders would come when they were ready. Instead, I asked a more general question.

"How long will we rest here?"

"Not long," said Captain Ashdown. "I'm awaiting further details from England."

"The Germans are gaining ground?" I added.

"Yes," the Captain replied. "The enemy is closing in, Khan, and I think we might be in for a frightful battle."

"We are here to win," I said, remembering what Mush had said.

Captain Ashdown sat and smiled.

"Yes," he said, "but let's enjoy the peace for a while, shall we?"

I smiled in return and spoke again.

"Permission to bathe in the river, sir?"

The Captain nodded.

"You don't need my permission for everything," he told me.

I walked back to fetch Mush and wondered when our next brush with death would occur. We did not have to wait for very long.