

CHAPTER 1

“I hereby sentence you to death, Bulisa!” boomed Ben Butaba, the terrible and fearsome leader of the Butaba Clan and the ruler of the Empire of Manda. Sitting in his throne, he looked a majestic, yet terrible figure in his shiny, metal-plated armour and iron helmet. His cruel red eyes, combined with a thick black beard that covered his cheeks entirely, made people tremble and cower before him.

Yet Bulisa, the small, rat-faced man with piercing, beady eyes, stood firm within the wooden enclosure. The two guards who stood on either side of him were ready and itching to convey him to the death chamber and still his eyes did not waver for an instant.

“You have something to say, dog?” asked Butaba, in a voice that made the whole court tremble with a cold fear, “Or is it that you consider the sentence too mild?”

Bulisa smiled.

“My lord, Butaba!” he began, his voice low, but steady, “You may have sentenced me to death, but listen to what I have to say to you: I hereby sentence YOU to death! Your stinking carcass will be eaten by the vultures before the night is over! That’s all, my lord!”

A deathly silence fell over the entire court. Nobody could quite comprehend the import of these words and Ben Butaba himself sat in shock for a few seconds. The terrible leader’s face became pale and his eyes became redder and narrower.

“WHAT!” he cried, his voice rising further, “You dare say such a thing? Perhaps death is too mild for you, after all! YOU will be taken to the Dark Dungeons and held there till I decide what to do with you! GUARDS!!”

As the guards opened the gate of the wooden enclosure, two dark figures entered the courtroom and stood in front of the mighty warlord’s throne. Even before any of the guards could intervene, they came forward and grabbed Ben Butaba by his shoulders without any effort from his throne and threw him down.

“YOU!! YOU!!” cried Ben Butaba, getting up, his eyes blazing with uncontrollable rage “GUARDS!! Throw these men OUT, now!! YOU STINKING DOG, BULISA! Meet your doom!!”

With these words, Ben Butaba rushed up to the smiling Bulisa with his sword drawn, while several guards rushed towards the two strangers who had handled their leader in a

manner that they would not have even dreamt of. The battle was short, but swift. In a few seconds, the ten guards who had attacked the two strangers were sprawling on the floor, splattered with blood.

Butaba, who had turned round and witnessed the carnage, was dumbstruck. With a horrible yell of rage, he hurled himself on Bulisa. The heavy punch that was aimed at Butaba's nose was easily countered by the smaller man. Catching the fearsome warlord's hands, Bulisa twisted it around and held it in a vice-like grip. Screaming with agony, Butaba tried to break free by kicking Bulisa, but the smaller man was quick and agile and easily dodged Butaba's blows, even without releasing the leader from his grip. Within a few minutes, Butaba's face became red with pain and agony and he kept yelling out for help, writhing in the deadly grip.

By now, several guards had entered the courtroom, carrying spears and swords and tried to reach their leader to help him. But they were all held back by the two men, whose powers seemed superhuman. One of them, closing his eyes and raising his hands, had created a powerful electric field, which prevented the soldiers from reaching Bulisa and Butaba. Those who tried to cross the force-field were either thrown back by a terrific force or burnt to death.

At last, Butaba, screaming and twisting, lost his consciousness and became limp and rigid. His face was redder than ever and his eyes were streaming. Bulisa released his grip and the leader fell to the floor with a heavy thud.

"All right! That's enough!" cried Bulisa, raising his hands. The man who had created the force-field stepped back and dropped his hands. The force-field disappeared.

Several guards who had got hurt by the force-field lay on the ground, groaning with pain and the others, who had been watching the drama from the background, retreated hastily with fearful screams. The courtroom now resembled a battlefield and there were only three victors - Bulisa and the two strangers who had, with their strange entrance, created such havoc within minutes.

CHAPTER 2

"Is he alive, master?" asked one of the men, coming up to Bulisa.

"Yes, he breathes!" said Bulisa, "The wicked one must not die easily! He must face the same tortures that he handed out to his own, innocent subjects. My Gems! You have

done well! I am pleased that my training has paid rich dividends and you are both masters of your respective skills.”

The man bowed before Bulisa with a proud smile.

“Thank you, master!”

“What shall we do with him, master?” asked the other man, joining them, “Shall I begin his punishment?”

Bulisa thought for a while.

“Go and find all the ministers and the officials of Manda, Bhuva!” he said, “They have been relieved of a monster who had held them in his iron grip all these years. Surely now, when they realise that he is no longer their master, will find a sufficient punishment for him! Ask them to assemble in this very court by noon, today, where I shall address them! Go and invite Jho Butaba, Ben’s only nephew, to come here also! He shall find a surprise waiting for him!”

Bhuva saluted Bulisa and left the courtroom.

“Now, Jhola!” said Bulisa, turning to the other man, “We must clean up this courtroom, for we shall be using it in the afternoon for another ceremony. Help those poor fellows lying on the floor to their feet and take them to the nearest hospital. I’ll look after their sick leader.”

After an hour, the courtroom was completely clean. The bloodstains had been washed away and the bodies of the dead guards had been taken away. The injured soldiers had been duly conveyed to the hospital where they received medical attention.

All over the city of Patah, the capital of Manda, there was a buzz of excitement and expectation. The news had spread like wildfire. Most of the people were happy and excited because they were now free from the iron rule of the terrible Butaba. They were also expectant and anxious to know their future, for an Empire without a ruler would soon head towards anarchy.

Thus, in large numbers, they gathered outside the palace of Butaba and waited impatiently for some news.

Inside the courtroom, there was a hushed atmosphere. The officials and ministers of Manda, had gathered in large numbers and were trying to ascertain the exact situation.

Bulisa had not yet entered the courtroom and the fate of Butaba was still uncertain. At last, at the stroke of noon, the usher announced Bulisa.

From an inner chamber, Bulisa walked out, flanked by his two, trusted men, Bhuvu and Jhola. The courtroom fell into complete silence at his entry. One or two of the ministers stepped forward when he sat down on the same throne that Butaba had been seated earlier.

The little man, the tiny rat-like man who had been an insignificant officer in Butaba's vast army, was now looked at with awe. The same man who had been dismissed from service by Butaba for alleged spying and condemned to death, was now seated on Butaba's own throne and commanded the same respect that Butaba had done.

Bhuvu and Jhola took their positions below Bulisa and stood firm and still.

"Now!" began Bulisa, in a slow and steady voice, "I have had the privilege of freeing this great Empire from the monstrous grip of that vile fellow, Butaba. I have imprisoned the beast in the same Dark Dungeons that he sent so many innocent people to their doom. Now I shall bring him before you and decide his punishment! Rest assured, gentlemen, that justice will be done!"

One of the ministers sitting in the front row got up from his seat and bowed.

"My lord, Bulisa!" he began, his voice shaking with emotion, "May I suggest that Butaba be fried in boiling hot oil? He did the same to my poor innocent son! My son, who had committed no wrong! Please, I beg you!"

"I am not your Emperor, Prime Minister Chabbar!" said Bulisa, in a kindly voice to the bearded, old man who had risen, "I am here merely as the judge! You may address me by my name! Your suggestion shall certainly be considered. However, before we begin our discussions, let us bring in the accused!"

The sound of chains clinking preceded the entrance of the accused man. Butaba entered the courtroom, his head sunk low and his hands and legs chained loosely. His face was still red and one of his eyes was black and puffy. No longer did he wear his magnificent armour and helmet, but was wearing the dirty white outfit of a convict. As he was dragged into the wooden enclosure by two guards, a huge roar of delight rose from the courtroom. Every man and woman cheered and whistled at the sight of their terrible leader, now as helpless and as hopeless as one of his own victims.

Bulisa did not attempt to calm down the crowd, but waited patiently for the noisy cheers to subside. After a few minutes, when the noise had died down to a low murmur, he smiled at Butaba, who made no attempt to meet his eyes.

“Butaba! Butaba!” began Bulisa, “Look at those people! Look at their delight at your plight! You poor man! Not one man, not one woman has been your friend all these years! You had held them in your iron grip and not one of them could even speak out their minds. Fear held them dumb! Now that fear is forever released and they are free! Look at their joy! Your wicked regime has ended today, Butaba!”

CHAPTER 3

Butaba, completely deflated and utterly crushed, looked up with hate at the man who had been responsible for such a state of affairs. The fire in his red eyes had been doused and no longer did he inspire awe and fear in the eyes of his former subjects. He surveyed the courtroom and saw that there was a smile of happiness in the face of every man and woman and not a single tinge of regret in their eyes. He knew that he could expect no mercy from them when it came to his punishment and he gritted his teeth at the thought of spending the rest of his days in the Dark Dungeons. He also shuddered at the thought of facing the torture chamber where he had sent hundreds of innocent prisoners. Yet, not for a moment did he regret his own ways, his own wicked, tyrannical ways. No, Ben Butaba was not a repentant soul.

“No! Ben Butaba!” said Bulisa, shaking his head, “I see from your eyes that you are not a repentant man! Your animal instincts are still loose and you would be a public danger if you were free of your chains. This Empire has suffered enough through you. Let that not continue.”

“Fry him! Poke his eyes out! Have him Bastinadoed!! THE FIEND!” cried someone from behind.

Butaba roared like a lion and tried to break his chains free, but could not do so. Seeing this, the common people who had come to witness the trial began to jeer and boo.

“SILENCE!” cried Jhola, at a nod from Bulisa, “SILENCE!”

“All right!” said Bulisa, “I grow weary of this! Let this animal not be allowed to roam free in this city or anywhere else! I hereby sentence Ben Butaba to death! He shall be executed before the sun sets tonight and his body will be thrown in the rubbish heap

where the vultures will have him. Before his death, however, let him face the torture chamber at least once and find out the pain and suffering that he has inflicted on others! Court dismissed!”

With this, Bulisa got up from the throne and the whole court rose. Ben Butaba, spitting and cursing viciously like a savage, was conveyed safely out of the courtroom and taken into the depths and darkness of the Dark Dungeons. The common people were dispersed, but the ministers and officials remained behind at Bulisa’s request.

“I have another important announcement to make!” said Bulisa, to his smaller audience, “Since this Empire is now left without a ruler, may I make a suggestion? I suggest that the young Jho Butaba, Ben Butaba’s nephew, be crowned the new Emperor. What do you think?”

All the ministers raised their hands in assent and clapped loudly. Jho Butaba, a tall, well-built, pleasant-faced young man, who had been watching his uncle’s trial with not a tinge of emotion on his face, now got up from his seat and lowered his head in respect.

“Well, Jho, what do you think?” asked Bulisa, smiling.

“I thank you, sire, for your recommendation. You shall find that I am still young and inexperienced at this...”

“No, no, Jho!” said the old Prime Minister, Chabbar, getting up, “You are our new Emperor! Bulisa has indeed made a fantastic suggestion and I am happy to say that I fully agree with his suggestion.”

All the other ministers began making similar appeals simultaneously and drowned all protestations from the young man.

Finally, Bulisa himself raised his hand and calmed everybody down.

“Young Jho Butaba is immensely suited for the job of ruling this Empire! He will be a kind and courageous ruler. So, Jho! Will you do it?”

Jho Butaba shrugged his shoulders in comic resignation.

“All right! But don’t expect me to be all rigid pomp and ceremony! I shall rule this Empire in my own way and in my own style. Is that agreed?”

All the ministers murmured their approval and thus, Jho Butaba officially became the Crown Prince of Manda. Bulisa descended from the throne and Jho Butaba ascended. All the ministers and officials of Manda raised their cheers of happiness and approval.

CHAPTER 4

Having installed Jho Butaba as the ruler of Manda, Bulisa returned to his home in the hilly countryside of Southern Manda. His two ‘Gems’, Jhola and Bhuva went with him.

Patah no longer appealed to Bulisa as it was now a calm and quiet city, free from the influence of the evil Butaba. He knew that his work was done and he had to return to his own little village in the hills.

The three of them reached the village of Gowa on a horse carriage, specially arranged for them by Jho Butaba. It had grown dark by the time they arrived and small oil lamps twinkled in the streets of Gowa as the horse carriage pulled up outside a small cottage.

“Return to Patah,” said Bulisa to the carriage driver, “And tell your leader that we thank him for his kindness! We would have taken much longer to reach here had we hired a bullock cart.”

“That’s all right, my lord!” said the carriage driver, “We are all much obliged to you! You have got rid of Ben Butaba and that’s a great feat! Thank you, sire!”

As the horse carriage drove away, Bulisa went up to the cottage door and searched for his keys.

“Hello, hello!” a voice cried out from the darkness in front of the house, “Who goes there?”

“It’s me, Bulisa!” said Bulisa, turning around, “Why it’s you, Ghoda! What a long time it’s been since we met! Come on up! I’ve just returned from Patah!”

A small man came up to the door. He was holding a candle and held it up at Bulisa’s face and sighed with relief.

“Thank god for that!” he said, wiping his brows, “Sorry about that Bulisa, but I just wanted to make sure that it was you!”

“Let’s go in and light a lamp!” said Bulisa, opening the front door, “Come in, Jhola, come in Bhuva!”

The four of them entered the dark house. It smelt musty. Bulisa wandered into the darkness for a few minutes and returned, carrying an oil lamp that lit up the place considerably.

“Go around the house and open all the windows, Jhola,” he said, “Bhuva, you go and find a broom and dust up the place. My friend and I will wait here.” The two men saluted and went to obey their master’s orders.

“Well, Bulisa,” said Ghoda, in a shaky voice, “You have company?”

“Those two are friends of mine that I brought down from Patah!” said Bulisa, in a casual tone, “But you! Your nerves are quite worn with anxiety! What is the matter with you?”

“I’ll tell you all about it, Bulisa,” said Ghoda, “Let’s get you settled down now!”

Within half an hour, the cottage was back in shape. Large oil lamps lit up the place brightly, the floors and walls were dusted and cleaned with mops and the cobwebs removed from all the furniture. The mustiness had gone out of the air and the place looked fresh and new again. Ghoda looked at the two men work and was amazed at their speed and skills.

“Come into the living room and let’s talk!” said Bulisa, “By the way, I haven’t introduced you to my friends yet! This person here is called Bhuva and the other is Jhola! They’re my friends from Patah! Bhuva, Jhola! This is my next-door neighbour, Ghoda!”

Ghoda exchanged pleasantries with the two men.

Seated in the nice, comfortable armchairs, the three travellers looked tired, but satisfied, after their long journey home.

“It’s been years since I saw you, Bulisa!” said Ghoda, “I hardly expected you to return! But I heard a horse carriage pull up in front of your house and wondered who it could be! Shall I bring you down some dinner from my house? You must be hungry.”

“Oh no!” said Bulisa, smiling, “We had dinner on the way. The good Emperor gave us a good, packed dinner to carry with us. We’ll just go to bed after a while.”

“The good Emperor, indeed!” cried Ghoda, incredulously, “That Ben Butaba! He made arrangements for your journey? You must be joking!”

Bulisa laughed aloud.

“You don’t know this yet, my friend,” he said, “All of Manda will know within a few days! Do you know, Ben Butaba is no more! Jho Butaba, his nephew, has taken over as Emperor!”

Ghoda sat back in his chair for a few seconds, gazing with amazement into Bulisa's eyes, to see whether he was joking or not.

"This is too much for me to digest," he said at last, his voice low, "I'll take my leave now, gentlemen! I'll see you in the morning with breakfast and you can tell me all about it! Right now, all I can say is, goodbye!"

Getting up from his chair like a zombie, Ghoda left.

Bulisa laughed again and Bhuva's eyes twinkled with amusement.

"Well, master! What did I tell you?" he said, a half-smile playing on his lips.

"You're always right, Bhuva!" said Bulisa, with amusement, "Well! We can turn in now! Lock the door and put out all the lamps and go to bed. I'm tired and I'm sure you two must be! I have a spare room upstairs which you can use as a bedroom. Good night!"

"Good night, master!" said Jhola and Bhuva.

CHAPTER 5

The little village of Gowa woke up to a beautiful, sunny morning. The chill in the night air had been removed by the golden rays of the sun, but it was still pleasantly cool. The fresh mountain air was a complete contrast to the warm, stuffy atmosphere in the city of Patah. Bhuva and Jhola woke up first and went outside the cottage to enjoy the cool, gentle breeze that was blowing across the hills.

Gowa was very picturesque in the sunlight. It was a much smaller village than either Bhuva or Jhola had imagined. There were a few small but beautiful cottages and lovely gardens dotting the undulating landscape. There was only one bigger building in the entire village and that was the village chieftain's house. The blue-grey hills and the clouds in the background completed the scenery.

"This is a wonderful place!" said Jhola, with a sigh, "Master is so lucky to have a place such as this."

"Look at that orange sky!" said Bhuva, pointing to the east, where the sun had just begun its upward journey, "That will make an excellent picture!"

"Hello, hello! How are you boys?" asked Ghoda, who had just come out of his house, which was the cottage next to Bulisa's, "I'll get breakfast ready in an hour's time. You people must be hungry."

Bhuva turned to Ghoda and saluted him mechanically.

“Yes, sir,” he said, “This fresh atmosphere does improve one’s appetite. I feel as though I haven’t eaten for days!”

“Ah Ha!” said Ghoda, smiling, “I expected to hear something like that! By the way, do you fellows know about Bulisa’s plans? Is he going to stay here permanently now or is he returning to Patah?”

“I’m afraid master does not reveal his plans to us always,” said Bhuva, returning the smile.

Ghoda looked at them quizzically.

“Master, eh?” he asked, “I thought that you were his friends from the city!”

“Oh! Master is too kind to us to call us servants,” said Jhola, joining the conversation, “Besides, we are not really...”

Suddenly Bhuva nudged Jhola gently, but firmly. Jhola stopped halfway in his sentence.

“Oh! We were just unemployed men in the city,” said Bhuva, “Master Bulisa was kind enough to take us into his service as assistants.”

Ghoda nodded, but his expression told them that he was still not convinced.

“Oh, all right then,” he said, “When Bulisa is ready for breakfast, call me. I’ll come up and have a little chat with him. Bye for now!”

After standing in silence for a few seconds, Ghoda returned to his cottage.

“Don’t talk too much, Jhola,” said Bhuva, in a lowered voice, “Master has told us not to tell anything to anybody. We must respect his wishes.”

“Yes, I’m sorry,” said Jhola, “Well! Let’s get back inside and see if master is up. He might want us.”

Bulisa was up. He was downstairs looking for them when they came in.

“Where have you been?” he asked, “I was looking all around for you.”

“We were outside, master,” said Bhuva, lowering his head, “We were just enjoying the fresh, cool breeze. It’s a completely new environment for both of us!”

Bulisa smiled.

“All right!” he said, “Get breakfast ready, Jhola! I’m hungry!”

“Your friend from next door told us that he would get breakfast ready in his house, master,” said Bhuva, “He told us that breakfast would be ready in an hour’s time.”

“Indeed!” said Bulisa, “Well, then! I suppose we must wait. Get yourselves freshened up. There’s a small stream flowing down the hills half a mile away from here. It’s good, clean fresh water. Otherwise, there’s a well behind the house.”

In an hour’s time, the four men were sitting at Bulisa’s breakfast table, eating freshly baked bread and fruits.

“Well!” said Ghoda, after they had finished, “You told me something incredible last night and I’m still not quite sure that you told it! Tell me now, for I am ready for anything now!”

Bulisa then told him all about the events that had shaken the capital city of Patah in the last few days. Ghoda listened to this extraordinary account with growing astonishment.

“Well,” he said, after a few minutes of deep thought, “What you have told me indeed gives me heart! Now, it’s my turn to tell you about something, my friend! You remember, last night when I met you, I was all nervous and shaky?”

“Yes,” said Bulisa.

“I feared that the raiders had returned again, when I heard a horse’s neigh,” he said, lowering his voice, “You see... since you left Gowa, years ago, a lot has happened here that has destroyed our peaceful lives. Even as I speak now, the whole village is trembling with anticipation at having to face those raiders again. They’re about due, this time of the month!”

“Raiders!” exclaimed Bulisa, “You mean dacoits or bandits, surely!”

“No! No!” said Ghoda, “We thought so too, at first! You see, they first came to our village several months ago - almost a year ago, I think - and there were about thirty armed men, all on horseback, wearing black robes and black masks. One of them went from house to house and asked all the villagers to gather outside, threatening them with instant death if they did not obey. We all gathered in front of them, trembling with fear. Their leader, a tall, thin man with a peaked turban, told us that he was a warlord from the south and threatened to destroy our village if we didn’t pay a ‘tax’ every month. He told us that he would visit our village at the end of each month and we must keep our money or valuables ready. If we failed to comply, he would raze the village to the ground. Well, month after month, a representative of theirs came to our village and collected their

‘taxes’. Two months ago, however, the village chieftain defied their representative and threw him out of the village. That was the beginning of our troubles! My god! The next day, a group of them - maybe a dozen - arrived on horseback and went straight to the chieftain’s house. Within minutes, the chieftain was taken outside the village and beaten up with heavy sticks and stones. We stood on the streets, watching with horror, as they struck their blows, too scared to intervene. At last, one of the men, carrying the chieftain on his shoulders, came up to us and dropped him on the ground like a sack of potatoes. I’ll never forget the tone of his voice when he said, ‘This is just an example. Beware! The next example will be the entire village.’ Most of us went to our homes trembling, but a few of us helped take the poor chief back to his house and dressed and bandaged his horrible wounds. He has been in bed since then and he has just begun recovering. Even now, he walks with a limp in his right leg, where they struck him heavily and repeatedly. Now, listening to your exploits in Patah, I feel a light of hope returning to my heart. If you fellows can deal with so many of Ben Butaba’s fearsome guards at one time, I’m sure you can take care of those raiders!”

CHAPTER 6

Bulisa sat back in his chair for several minutes, closing and opening his eyes slowly.

“Hmm! Extraordinary!” said Bulisa, after a few seconds, “They must be a fearsome lot, walking into a village with such audacity and getting away with such blackmail, month after month! Surely, you people must have complained to the authorities in the nearest barracks?”

“No, no, we didn’t, Bulisa,” said Ghoda, “As though Ben Butaba’s men would care to help us! We knew that no help would come from those quarters! It was like choosing between the devil and the deep sea. However, now that Jho Butaba is the leader, we shall go to him and seek his protection! You are really a genius, Bulisa! I still cannot believe how you fellows managed to throw him out!”

“Hmm!” said Bulisa, “Even now, help may not be prompt in coming from him! Remember how far away Patah is from here! The authorities here would not have received the news of Ben Butaba’s fall from power and his subsequent death and they would continue to act as though he is still their leader. If you were to seek Jho’s help, it would take several days to reach you. And surely the raiders would return before that!”

“They would surely be here by tomorrow!” said Ghoda, “And that is why I am hoping that what you’ve told me about your deeds in Patah is no exaggeration. These two here must be pretty fearsome warriors themselves.”

“I am no warrior, sir,” said Bhuva, smiling, “But I do know magic and I can use my head quite well!”

“And I am the stronger of the two!” said Jhola, also baring his teeth, “I can take down twenty men at a time with a single blow, maybe more!”

Ghoda looked at Bhuva and Jhola with twinkling eyes.

“That’s why you two were so tight-lipped when I asked you about yourselves!” he said, smiling, “Unemployed men, indeed! For the kind of talent that you possess, anybody would want to have you working for their cause, not against!”

“That’s right!” said Bulisa, “And we intend to use those talents and powers to fight on the side of Good. Wherever we go, I shall use my Gems only to protect, not to harm, innocent people. But let’s get back to the subject at hand... the raiders...”

“Yes,” said Ghoda, his face growing dark and apprehensive, “Most probably they’ll be here by tomorrow! You see, ever since that representative of theirs was manhandled and thrown out of the village by our chieftain, he never comes alone. Two other armed men always come with him. Last month they increased the ‘taxes’ as punishment for our chief’s behaviour and this month none of us have enough money to pay up. I dread the consequences of non-payment!” He shuddered as he spoke.

“Never fear!” said Bulisa, his beady eyes glistening with anticipation, “We will face them when they come! We’ll deal with them firm and proper!”

“Hmm!” said Ghoda, with a doubtful look on his face, “They’ll surely come to this cottage when they see that it’s occupied again. When their leader found that this one cottage was unoccupied the first time they arrived, he flew into a terrible rage. Now that you’re here, they will not spare you! They’ll probably want to punish you in some way for your absence all these months!”

“Aha! That’s good!” said Bulisa, smiling and rubbing his hands, “Nothing would suit us better! When they do arrive, make sure that they find out that this cottage is occupied once again. They’ll surely come here first and we’ll be ready for them!”

That night, Bulisa and his ‘Gems’ went to sleep late, after discussing their plans for the morning.

“Practise all your techniques, Bhuva; and you too, Jhola!” said Bulisa, before retiring into his bedroom, “They must be really tough fellows, going by what Ghoda has told us this morning. Be prepared! I have complete confidence in your abilities!”

The next morning, a heavy fog hung over the little village of Gowa. The air was chilly and dank and the two ‘Gems’ did not feel as wakeful and fresh as they did the previous morning.

“Wake up, men!” said Bulisa, who had been up much earlier and was looking bright and fresh, “We must meet Ghoda before those raiders arrive!”

Bhuva and Jhola woke up and rubbed their eyes.

“Well, master!” said Bhuva, “Must we have a wash before we go?”

“Yes,” said Bulisa, firmly, “The water is cold and fresh today! One splash on your faces will wake you up completely. Today is an important day, remember!”

The two men went to the back of the cottage and found the well. Bhuva looked down the well and found that the water was not very deep. Drawing some water in a metal bucket, they splashed themselves about.

“Brrr! Oooh! It’s freezing!” said Bhuva, breathing quickly and sharply, “These hill resorts sure are uncomfortable at times!”

While Bhuva hurriedly returned into the relative comforts of the cottage, Jhola stayed outside and washed himself slowly and leisurely.

“Hmm! It’s really not very cold!” he said to himself, “Huh! Really! That Bhuva!”

CHAPTER 7

The whole village of Gowa was in a state of anxiety that morning. The cloudy fog had left them gloomier than ever as they waited for the fearsome ‘tax’ collector to arrive. Ghoda himself was deep in thought when Bulisa and his ‘Gems’ entered his cottage. His face was grim and his brows were furrowed.

“Oh! Come in, Bulisa!” said Ghoda, opening the door for them cautiously, “Everybody is so restless today! Nobody knows for sure when those raiders will visit us, but somehow, I feel it in my bones that today is the day! It’s almost the end of the month

and they'll be here, surely! That wretched little 'taxman' of theirs will turn up with his sack and come knocking at all our doors!"

"We have our plans ready," said Bulisa, "We have lit the oil lamps in our cottage so that those fellows can see the glow of light through the windows. They'll surely be attracted to us then!"

"Most of us close all the doors and windows when they arrive!" said Ghoda with a nervous little laugh, "None of us want their attentions! But your cottage is the second one from our row of cottages and surely they'll come and visit you before they visit anybody else!"

Suddenly Ghoda became rigid and his eyes widened.

"Shh! Listen! Can you hear that? That was surely a horse's hoofs!"

Bulisa pricked up his ears and so did the 'Gems'. Sure enough, they could discern a faint rattle in the distance. Ghoda's ears were really sharp.

"They've just entered the main street," he said, in a low voice, "The ground is hard and stony just as you enter the village and so I could hear those steps. Hush! They're here! They're dismounting..."

Within a few minutes, Bulisa could hear a rough, harsh voice just outside the cottage. Ghoda's face glistened with sweat.

"They're here sooner than I expected! Let's watch them through our side window," he whispered. The three of them went to one of the bedrooms on one side of the cottage and watched through the window.

The fog was not very heavy and it was lifting now and Bulisa could discern a couple of dark shadows walking in the direction of his own cottage.

"They're investigating your cottage, Bulisa," said Bhuva, "They've seen your lights and they want to find out who's living there! What will you do now?"

"Wait!" said Bulisa and the three of them waited.

They waited a full five minutes. Suddenly there was a thunderous noise. Somebody was crashing his fists against the front door of Ghoda's own cottage.

"He's come here!" said Ghoda, shakily, "He'll break the door down if I don't answer. Wait here in this room!"

Ghoda nervously went up to his front door and opened it. Three men, wearing black masks, were standing at the door, their fists clenched menacingly and their eyes glowing with malevolence.

“Who do you think you are, you wretch?” asked one of them, coming forward and grabbing Ghoda’s shoulders, “Answer the door promptly or we’ll teach you a lesson that you’ll never forget in your life!”

“What... what do you want?” asked Ghoda, faintly.

“That cottage next to this one!” said the masked raider, in a harsh, threatening tone, “Who lives there now? It had been locked up all these days and we haven’t collected any tax from the owners of that place! Answer truthfully or I’ll take your life!”

While he was speaking, Bulisa, Bhuva and Jhola had come out of the bedroom and were now standing behind Ghoda. Seeing this, the three masked men roughly pushed Ghoda aside and entered the cottage, still clenching their fists in a menacing pose.

“It’s us,” said Bulisa, slowly, “We are the new residents of this village! Who might you be, my dear boys? You look so lovely and angelic this bright sunny morning!”

The raider who had spoken before, came forward and standing close to Bulisa, stared straight into his eyes. Bulisa did not waver. Wearing a sardonic smile, he returned the stare.

“Nobody speaks to us in that tone, stranger!” said the raider, at last, “You had best learn to respect us or your life won’t be worth living! LOOK HERE!” He spoke the last words turning to Ghoda, who was cowering like a frightened rabbit behind Jhola, “You’ll tell these fellows to mind their tongues! TELL THEM WHO WE ARE, DOG!”

Ghoda looked at Bulisa wearing a desperate look on his face.

Jhola took one step forward and without a word of warning grabbed the nearest raider with his left hand and locked him in a deadly bear hug. The man screamed with agony at the crushing force. The other two rushed forward to help their comrade, but Bhuva raised his hand and pointed a finger at them. Deadly red sparks flew in their direction and stung them like bees. They cried out in pain.

“AH! AH! LET ME GO! Let me go!” cried the raider who was held in Jhola’s fearsome bear-hug. After a few seconds he released him and the man fell on to the ground like a crushed sack of potatoes.

The other two were still suffering from their sharp, stinging burns and were hopping around the room, crying out in pain. At last, recovering some of their composure they hopped out of the cottage, helping the third man to his feet.

In the skirmish they had lost their black masks and cloaks. All three of them were thickly bearded.

Cursing and spitting, they ran as quickly as they could to get their horses.

Bulisa, Bhuva and Jhola followed them out, but they did not show undue haste.

“We’ll get even with you for this!” said one of the raiders, the one who had suffered the crushing bear-hug, “You think you’re tough guys, don’t you? Well don’t forget my words: You three will pay for this!”

His voice was shaky and his face was still twitching with pain. He mounted his horse hastily and the other two followed suit.

“Goodbye! See you soon!” said Bulisa smiling in his most pleasant manner, “Sorry for the trouble we’ve given you! But that’ll teach you not to come around threatening poor, defenceless people and taking away their hard-earned money!”

The three riders did not wait to listen. They quickly rode off down the road heading south. Soon they disappeared from view.

“Well, Jhola!” said Bulisa, turning to the big man, “Did you hurt him too much?”

“Hurt him!” said Jhola in a horrified voice, “I just gave him a gentle little embrace of friendship, nothing else!”

Bulisa and Bhuva looked at each other and laughed.

“Well, let’s get back into our cottage!” said Bulisa, “This cold, damp air might give us a chill!”

CHAPTER 8

The morning fog had slowly drifted away in the next few hours and by noon, the village of Gowa was bathed in sunlight. There was not a cloud in the sky and it had become comfortably warm. Ghoda, who had not left his own cottage since the raiders had visited the village, gathered enough courage now to venture outside. He walked up to Bulisa’s cottage, treading slowly and tentatively, looking around him as though he expected a lion to pounce on him any moment.

“Well?” he asked Bulisa slowly as he entered the cottage, “What did they tell you before they left?”

Bulisa smiled and waved Ghoda to a chair.

“Nothing, Ghoda!” he said, “We just exchanged pleasantries with them! They told us that since we were so friendly towards them, they hoped to visit us some other time and have a quiet dinner with us!”

Ghoda shook his head impatiently.

“Don’t joke, Bulisa! This is a serious matter!” he said, “Those raiders will return to our village in large numbers, armed to the teeth! In their anger they would surely wish to destroy us all. I sure hope that you can handle them then!”

Bhuva, who had been in the kitchen and had just entered the room, smiled at Ghoda’s fears.

“No, no, sir,” he said, “We can easily deal with those thugs! What you have witnessed today was just a sampling of our real powers.”

Ghoda nodded and returned the smile.

“You were great, man!” he said, “Those flying sparks you threw at those fellows must have really burned right through their flesh and caused a lot of pain.”

“That’s not all that I have in my armoury,” said Bhuva, “Master has taught us so much more.”

“All right,” said Ghoda, “If you are really confident, then we can all rest easy! I’ll go around and tell the rest of the villagers not to worry. I’ll tell them all about you and what you did to those raiders today!”

To his surprise, Bulisa shook his head vigorously.

“No, no!” he said, “Please don’t! It won’t serve any purpose and besides, I’m a quiet, retiring man. I don’t want my name to do the rounds in public circles.”

“Oh, really, Bulisa!” said Ghoda, in dismay, “This is only a small village! Surely you wouldn’t be affected by that kind of publicity here! Besides, the village chief must be informed. It will give him some hope and courage.”

Bulisa shrugged his shoulders, still shaking his head.

“Tell him then!” he said, “But try and keep it quiet, will you? Neither Jhola nor Bhuva would like any kind of publicity, however small or insignificant!”

Ghoda looked at Bulisa for a few seconds with a peculiar look on his face and then got up to leave.

“Really, Bulisa!” he said slowly, when he was at the door, “The more I think I know you, the less I really seem to know! You’re a strange man. You have achieved so much and yet you remain aloof to popular fame.”

Bulisa closed his eyes.

“I am a strange kind of man, Ghoda!” he said.

The next day, there was a buzz of excitement in the little village square. Apparently, somebody had seen the raiders leave the village the previous morning and had also noted the fact that they had seemed agitated and hasty in their departure. The same anonymous person had also seen Bulisa and his two ‘Gems’ talking to the raiders, just as they had been mounting their horses. People began speaking in hushed whispers about Bulisa and his strange companions. The village chief, a short, fat middle-aged man with greying whiskers and a bald pate, decided to see Bulisa and talk to him about it when he heard these rumours. However, before he could go over to Bulisa’s cottage, Ghoda came to his house and told the chief about Bulisa, Jhola and Bhuvu and their exploits both in Patah and in Gowa.

“Well, chief!” said Ghoda, after his lengthy narrative, “That’s what really happened. Please don’t talk too much about it, for Bulisa is a very reticent man and doesn’t want any attention on himself or his friends.”

The chief sat back on his large, comfortable arm-chair and closed his eyes for a few moments.

“The people are in a state of nervous tension this morning,” said the chief, “Somebody must have seen those raiders leave the village in a hurry yesterday and saw your three neighbours having a chat with them before they left. That must have been the man who has been spreading rumours in the market-square today. My servants were told about it by the village grocer when they were out shopping this morning. What shall I tell the villagers to calm them down?”

Ghoda shook his head and shrugged his shoulders in helpless resignation.

“We need not fear the raiders anymore,” he said, “For I have seen Bulisa and his men work wonders in front of my own eyes. The raiders will, of course, return in

numbers as soon as possible to take revenge on us. Rest assured that Bulisa and his men will take care of them. Once they defeat the raiders in battle and capture them, we can call in the authorities and hand them over to justice. After that, I suppose Bulisa will be quite prepared to talk about his deeds. Till then my mouth is sealed and I beg you, chief, not to open yours either. Please forgive me for talking to you in such a manner.”

The chief shook his head and smiled kindly at Ghoda.

“I wish I could share your hope, Ghoda,” he said, patting his right leg - the leg that had received special treatment at the hands of the brutal raiders, “I shall personally thank Bulisa and host a special banquet in his honour if and when he manages to free us from the clutches of those fiends. But that’s a big if! Remember how those brutes treated me when I refused to give in to their threats? How I wish those raiders can be punished for their wicked deeds!”

Ghoda nodded his head several times, quickly and eagerly.

“Just wait and watch, chief!” he said, with a twinkle in his eyes, “I couldn’t get myself to believe Bulisa when he talked about his exploits in Patah, before I actually saw him in action with his two remarkable friends! Why, that Jhola is as strong as an ox! He can crush a man to death with just a friendly little embrace. And that Bhuvu! My god! He has fantastic magical powers! He can throw sparks of fire from the end of his fingers! And that’s not all, he says!”

“Good, good!” said the chief with a touch of impatience in his voice, “When have you learnt to fib, Ghoda? I always thought you were an honest man! I agree with what you say that Bulisa and his two friends are indeed remarkable! But to colour your descriptions with such fantastic statements about magical and supernatural powers is really a bit too much! First, let me see those powers with my own eyes and then I’ll believe it.”

Ghoda’s eyes lit up with indignation.

“Oho! So that’s it, chief! You don’t believe me, then!”

“Come on, Ghoda,” said the chief, adjusting himself more comfortably on his chair, “There were three of them against three raiders. Surely they could have easily driven out those fellows from the village just as I had done a couple of months ago. Nothing special in that, surely!”

“But their feats in Patah! Surely you must believe that!”

“It must have been a popular uprising, Ghoda, my innocent little one,” said the village chief wearing a broad, self-satisfied smile on his face, “They might have been leaders in some kind of rebellion and turned Ben Butaba’s own men against him! That again is a commendable deed, but not extraordinary or magical.”

Ghoda’s face had become darker and darker as his indignation turned to hurt and anger. He got up stiffly from his seat and marched to the front door.

“Goodbye, chief!” he said, in an unpleasant tone and banged the door behind him as he left.

CHAPTER 9

Ghoda returned to his own cottage, mumbling to himself. It was nearly time for lunch and he was extremely hungry. He found Bulisa waiting outside his front door with his two ‘Gems’.

“Ah! So you’re back are you?” asked Bulisa, looking quite distressed, “Did you go around telling people about us? I was out shopping today and found the market-square buzzing with rumours about us!”

“Me!” said Ghoda, in a rasping voice, “I don’t go around telling tales. The chief somehow got to know about it and he was about to come around to your place to find out, just when I entered his house.” He was still feeling quite hot and the words shot out of his mouth with unusual harshness.

“I believe you,” said Bhuva, suddenly, “Do you remember, master? I told you last night that somebody watching us yesterday when we were dealing with those raiders! It must have been that person who has been spreading rumours about us!”

“Come in and have lunch with me, Bulisa,” said Ghoda, “I want to talk to you.”

The afternoon meal was a good, heavy one and the four of them spent quite a while tackling it. After the meal, Ghoda felt much better and they returned to the living room and sat down on the comfortable chairs.

“The chief doesn’t believe a word I told him about your achievements, Bulisa,” he said, “I’m afraid I was rude to him about it. But of course, it was natural that he should doubt my words. After all, heroes like you are not born every day.”

“That’s not important, Ghoda,” said Bulisa, “It’s just this. I wanted to discuss my plans about facing those raiders. If there is a fight in the middle of the village, people are going to get hurt. Therefore, we don’t want to face them inside the village. What do you propose we do and when do we expect them?”

Ghoda considered this question for a while. He was as anxious as Bulisa to prevent a wild battle inside the village. Besides the danger to people, he was also worried about the damage to property, both public and private. He had spent a huge fortune in designing and building his own cottage and was not anxious to expose it to possible damage or even destruction. There were also beautiful gardens inside the village that would not remain unscathed in the event of a battle.

“Well,” he said, at last, “The raiders reach our village from the south, don’t they? I have a plan. Listen. After you pass the last row of houses in the southern end of the village, there is a gentle downward slope in the landscape, extending to a few hundred metres. At the end of the slope there is a large, flat, grassy clearing, beyond which there is forest cover. There is a road that comes through the forest and into the clearing and climbs up the slope to reach our main village street. That’s the road that is used by those raiders to reach us. Do you follow me?”

“Yes, I always knew about that road, though I’ve never used it. I have never travelled south beyond Gowa.” said Bulisa.

“We can station a look-out at the top of the slope just outside our village at any strategic point,” he continued, “If it is not foggy, he will have an admirable view of the entire clearing and the road up to the edge of the forest. From that forest edge, the distance is about half or three-quarter of a kilometre to our village. The look-out can then warn you immediately and you can be ready for those raiders before they come up the slope and reach the village.”

“That’s good, Ghoda; excellent, in fact,” he said, “That slope in the hill is an extremely strategic point. I shall have a look around that place and choose a place to station our look-out. You find a suitable man for the job. Good bye, Ghoda.”

Bulisa and his ‘Gems’ took leave of Ghoda and went to the southern end of the village, which was just a hundred paces away from his own cottage. The entire village did not stretch across from north to south any more than one kilometre.

The last cottage in the row marked the end of the village. The stony village street ended abruptly here but was joined by a curving mud road that came from inside the forest, across the grassy clearing and up the slope.

The terrain was rocky at this point but at the bottom of the slope it was thick with lush, green grass. Jhola effortlessly moved two of the larger rocks to a suitable location and placed them close together, leaving a small gap between them. Bulisa sat behind the rocks and peeped through the gap and exclaimed with satisfaction.

“This view is excellent,” he said, “One can hide behind these rocks quite safely and watch the road all the way from where it comes out of the forest up to the top of the slope. But our only problem is to find a suitable volunteer to keep watch all the time. Nobody would want to stay outdoors during the night, when the wind is particularly harsh and chilly. Although I think that we can safely avoid a night watch as I am quite sure that the raiders would not visit us at such odd hours, we cannot be too careful.”

“I can do it if you like, master,” said Jhola, “I don’t mind the cold. In fact I don’t even feel it. I can stay outdoors at night.”

“Hmm! I suppose you can,” said Bulisa, nodding, “Listen carefully, now! Be extremely alert during the night, especially if it is pitch dark. You must keep your ears open for the sound of horses’ hoofs. As there are likely to be plenty of horses, I think you can hear them clearly even from a distance. Besides, they are sure to be carrying torches if they come at night. In that case you can easily see them. Don’t fall asleep on the job, I beg you! All our plans would come to naught if you do. If you do see them, return at once to the cottage and wake us up. Together we’ll go down to face them and hopefully meet them before they reach the bottom of the slope. The clearing is large enough for us to do battle comfortably.”

The three of them slowly walked back to Bulisa’s cottage. They found Ghoda waiting outside and there was another man beside him.

“This is Mola, my trusty servant,” he said, “He has agreed to keep watch at all times, but not after dark. You can speak to him and give him any instructions.”

Mola was a small, thin man with a pale face, dull eyes and jet-black hair. He wore a thin moustache and looked calm and serene. He almost looked as though he was about to fall asleep and his incessant yawning did not help reassure Bulisa.

“You will stay alert at all times, won’t you?” he asked, after giving him the necessary instructions, “You must not fall asleep on the job. It’s most important!”

“Yes, sir,” said Mola, in a dead, monotonous voice, trying hard to suppress another yawn, “I will do as you say, sir. I’ll stay behind those rocks you mentioned and watch through the gap. If I see those raiders coming towards our village I will warn you at once, sir... Is that all, sir?”

“Yes, sir!” said Bulisa, in a bright, cheerful voice, eyeing Ghoda with a questioning twinkle in his eyes.

Ghoda and his servant took leave of Bulisa without another word.

“Well, what do you think?” asked Bulisa to Bhuva, as soon as they were back inside their cottage, “Can he do the job by day and Jhola by night?”

Bhuva, who had looked extremely doubtful at the sight of Mola, shook his head decisively.

“I don’t think so, master,” he said, “He looks a bit too... bored and dull to me. If we leave him alone on such an errand, he would fall asleep in five minutes.”

“In that case, you can have that job,” said Bulisa, “You can...”

Before Bulisa completed his sentence, Bhuva raised his hands and shook his head hastily.

“Master! Master!” he said, with a despairing expression on his face, “Mola is eminently suited for the job! He impresses me as an alert, able, quick-witted man! I should highly recommend him for the job.”

CHAPTER 10

The night was cold and windy. Jhola, at his watch behind the two rocks, sat in a huddle, wrapped up in a thick, warm blanket. The moon was playing hide-and-seek behind the passing clouds and his eyes could not pierce the oppressive darkness that enveloped the landscape all around him. He had a small oil lamp beside him, which threw a small circle of light around where he was sitting, but its glow was dull and insignificant when compared to the surrounding darkness.

The night seemed to stretch out endlessly and every hour seemed like a day. Jhola began yawning more and more frequently as the hours crawled by. At last, his eyelids grew heavier and heavier and he could not prevent them from closing. He tried to shake

himself out of his drowsiness but within ten minutes of his first yawn, he was fast asleep, snoring loudly.

He was awakened by the chirping of a bird. Waking up with an exclamation he saw a dull grey light beginning to emerge in the eastern sky. It was nearly dawn and he had no idea how long he had slept. It was still fairly dark but the pitch black darkness of the night was gone and he could make out the vague, dark shape of the landscape in the distance.

Suddenly a thin point of light flashed in the distance, through the gap in the rocks and got his attention immediately. He strained his eyes and saw a small, dark bulk emerging from the distant forest. The flickering flash of light that he had seen now became clear and constant as the bulk emerged out of the dark forest cover into the clearing. Behind that flash of light came several others, one behind the other. From what he could make out, the carriers of those torches were heading in the direction of the village along the road.

Jhola wasted not one instant. Taking the oil lamp with him, he rushed back into the village and banged the front door of Bulisa's cottage. After what seemed an eternity to him, a sleepy Bhuva opened the door.

"They're here, I think!" said Jhola, urgently, "Warn master. We must get down to the clearing to meet them."

Within a few minutes, Bulisa, Jhola and Bhuva were hurrying down the village street out of the village and rushing down the slope.

The long line of flickering lights now looked much bigger and clearer. They were indeed torches carried by men riding horses. It had now become slightly brighter and Bulisa could make out that the men were wearing dark cloaks and covering their faces with masks.

"We'll wait here," said Bulisa to the others in a low voice as they reached the bottom of the slope, "They'll be here within a minute."

Within minutes, the first rider perceived three men blocking the road at the bottom of the slope and stopped suddenly.

“Somebody’s blocking the road ahead,” said the first man to the one immediately behind him, “All of you dismount and we shall find out who they are and punish them for their insolence.”

The riders got down from their horses and still carrying their torches, walked down the road to meet the three strangers.

There were about thirty of them, all walking in a menacing manner towards Bulisa and his ‘Gems’. The sight of those fearsome men would have sent any other man running away in terror, but they did not intimidate Bulisa.

The man who looked like their leader stopped a few yards in front of Bulisa, Bhuva and Ghoda, who were standing side by side with folded arms. The other raiders stood behind the leader.

“Make way, you insolent dogs!” cried the leader, waving his torch in front of him in a menacing manner, “Or perish in the process!”

“Boss! Boss!” cried one of the raiders, “They look like those three who threw us out of the village; those men I told you about! Let’s destroy them, boss! Destroy them!”

The raiders wasted no more time. They rushed towards Bulisa and his two men with loud, angry cries, waving their torches above their heads.

Four or five of them reached Bulisa and tried to hit him with the flame of their torches, but Bulisa stepped back and avoided the blows.

Bhuva suddenly closed his eyes, raised his hands and jets of water appeared from his open palm and doused the flame of their torches.

The other raiders screamed with rage and charged Bhuva, but Jhola stepped between them and began waving his large arms in front of him. One by one, the raiders fell in front of him as they met his blows. They scattered around like a pack of cards in a wind and their glowing torches fell at his feet. With a mighty roar, Jhola stamped on the flaming torches with his large, heavy feet and put them out.

The leader of the raiders now turned to Bulisa again and drew his sword from a sheath that was hanging behind his shoulder. With a fearsome yell, he flung himself on Bulisa and slashed at him quickly.

Bulisa, who had been concentrating on another raider, now fell back with a sharp cry of pain. Jhola, hearing this, grabbed the leader with his arms and crushed him with such

force that within a few seconds the leader had stopped screaming. Even after he was dead, Jhola continued crushing the limp body till it was a shapeless mass of crushed bone and flesh.

“YAAAH!” cried Jhola, releasing his mighty hold, “YAAAH!”

The few raiders who were still on their feet, screamed fearfully in unison and began running away in the direction in which they had come. The sight of their leader crushed to death by the mighty Jhola sent waves of fear down their spines and propelled their flight.

Bhuva suddenly raised his hands high above his head and created a wall of electricity around the fleeing men, thus trapping them effectively in a deadly cage. When they tried to tear out of their strange prison, they fell back with sharp cries of anguish and some of them even dropped in a faint.

Bulisa, who was down on the ground, now picked himself up painfully and examined his wound. The swish of the deadly sword had cut right across his right shoulder and it was now bleeding. Within seconds, he fell back on to grassy ground again, hissing with pain.

After taking care of the few remaining raiders and imprisoning them within walls of electric fields, Bhuva and Jhola went up to Bulisa.

“It’s a big cut, master!” said Bhuva, examining his master’s wound, “We must wash it with clean water and tie it up at once. Let’s get back to the village.”

Bhuva and Jhola lifted Bulisa from the ground and slowly carried him up the slope and back into the village. Within a few minutes, they were back inside the cottage and took Bulisa up to his bedroom.

Within half an hour, the whole village was abuzz with excitement as the news of the raiders’ defeat at the hands of Bulisa and his men made the rounds.

The village chieftain and Ghoda, who were among the first to receive the news, rushed down to Bulisa’s cottage to inquire about his health.

“Ah! I am all right!” said Bulisa from the depths of his comfortable bed, his voice slightly weak and shaky, “I wouldn’t have got hurt had I concentrated on the battle. Luckily I escaped with a mere scratch.”

Ghoda looked at Bulisa’s bandaged shoulder with concern and shook his head.

“My god, Bulisa! You call that a mere scratch! Why, you must have lost a lot of blood! You look so pale and weak.”

Bhuva took a glass of water from a side table and gave it to Bulisa who sipped it slowly.

“The raiders!” said the village chief, “We must secure and keep them in custody till the authorities arrive. Shall I send my men around to get them?”

“Oh! No need!” said Bhuva, smiling, “I have imprisoned them very effectively within walls of electric fields. They are still lying around in the clearing outside the village and won’t go anywhere in a hurry.”

The chief gaped at Bhuva with wide-eyed astonishment.

“My god!” he said, “How did you do such a thing?”

“Didn’t I tell you, chief!” said Ghoda, hotly, “He does have magical powers!”

“I’m sorry I underestimated your powers, Bulisa,” said the chief, still dazed, “Now I can really believe everything that Ghoda here told me about your feats in Patah! AH! Am I still asleep? I really must shake myself out of this dream!”

“It’s no dream, sir,” said Bhuva, still smiling at the chief’s expression, “We are all awake. Definitely awake!”

CHAPTER 11

The authorities arrived within the next few hours from the military camp closest to Gowa. The raiders were released from their temporary prisons of electric fields and conveyed to the waiting wooden cages that were mounted on horse carriages. The bodies of the raiders who had been killed were also carried away in closed carriages. The whole operation lasted an hour as the living prisoners were numbered and the dead ones counted. Till the authorities left Gowa, the market-square was closed down, as it was being used for this purpose and only the village chief and a few others could gain admission.

Bulisa lay in bed for about a week after the event and the villagers, who had been told the truth about him and his two friends by now, thronged in numbers outside his cottage and tried to gain entry. Jhola was at the door at all times to prevent them from trying to force their way in.

During the time Bulisa was convalescing, Ghoda stayed with him and took care of him. His servant, Mola, was also around to help.

“Ghoda,” said Bulisa, one morning at the breakfast table, several days after he had completed his recovery, “I’m afraid I must leave the village.”

“What!” said Ghoda, stunned, “You mean you’re moving out?”

“Oh, yes!” said Bulisa, munching a piece of fruit, “The village is now back to normal and all is quiet and peaceful. I’m now feeling quite all right. So I think that we had best move on.”

Ghoda shook his head vigorously.

“No! No!” he said, “I won’t let you leave, Bulisa! You’re such a great man now! You’ve achieved so much! Why don’t you stay at home for the rest of your life and live calmly and peacefully! You’re a hero to all of us here and we wouldn’t like you to leave, surely!”

“Hmm! I’m sorry, Ghoda,” said Bulisa, shaking his head slowly, “But I have quite made up my mind! I will leave today. But don’t worry! I’ll surely return some day or the other.”

Ghoda’s eyes lowered and his face became dark with disappointment.

“So,” he said, slowly, “Tell me when you’ll return!”

“It may be a week, a month, a year or even ten years, Ghoda,” said Bulisa, “It depends on where I’ll be going in my travels.”

“You’re not going back to Patah?” asked Ghoda, raising his eyes in surprise.

“No, no, not there!” said Bulisa, quickly, “I’ll be heading further south from here.”

“What!” said Ghoda, his surprise turning into disbelief, “This village is the southernmost tip of Manda! Once you cross the forested regions of this hilly countryside, you’ll be outside Manda, in the plains of Madriland, the Empire to our south. Surely you aren’t thinking of visiting Madriland?”

“Oh, yes, we are,” said Bulisa, “We heard that Madriland is quite a beautiful place; an ideal holiday resort. We’ll be travelling to several parts of Madriland and hence I really cannot tell you when we’ll return.”

Ghoda stared at Bulisa with strange glow in his eyes.

“Do you know about Madriland?” he asked, his voice lowering to a whisper.

“I think I do, really!” said Bulisa.

“Well, I think my servant, Mola, can tell you something more... something you probably don’t know about that cursed land!”

“Cursed? Why cursed?”

“You wait,” said Ghoda, in a sinister whisper, “Mola will tell you.”

The dull, pale-faced Mola came up and stood in front of Bulisa, blinking his eyes for a few minutes.

“Sit down, Mola,” said Bulisa and the little man sat down at the breakfast table.

“Tell him all about your country, Mola!” said Ghoda, “Tell him all about it.”

For a few seconds Mola looked at his master with a quizzical expression on his face.

“All right, master!” said Mola. For the first time, Bulisa saw a tinge of emotion on Mola’s face. For the first time his dull, serene eyes became expressive and mobile. He looked like a hunted rabbit.

“I’ll begin at the beginning, sir,” he said, after a short while, “I am a native of Madriland myself, the son of a rich nobleman and we once lived in a large, luxurious mansion, surrounded by large estates and lovely gardens, in the most expensive area in the capital city of Vagah. We were of royal blood and our family was close to the ruling family of Madriland. The Emperor, the great Madrikumbah himself, was my father’s second cousin and a very close friend to all of us. We were all happy and comfortable and I was looking forward to the future with great joy and anticipation. The whole Empire was in a state of peace and prosperity and everything looked rosy. Madrikumbah had himself marked me down as a likely Prime Minister in the future and I attended the magnificent court meetings of the Emperor and lived the life of a royal prince. The Emperor was a wonderful man those days, kind, just and extremely popular among the people, for he never enacted harsh laws and imposed hefty taxes. Besides, he was a pleasant, soft-spoken man, who never got angry or even raised his voice. However, about two years ago, a sudden change came over the Emperor. He woke up one fine morning in a mad rage and stamped around the palace, raving like a lunatic. He suddenly became cruel and harsh and enacted harsh laws and imposed more and more taxes. My family was no longer allowed to enter his palace; we were thrown out of our own lovely mansion and our properties were seized. We moved into the worst part of the city, a

crowded slum, where we first came into contact with the low populace. The conditions were appalling and we fell sick within a few days of moving into our new residence, a small, dingy hut built in mud and straw. We were all in a state of shock at these sudden developments as the whole Empire began crumbling around us. People moved about in fear, having been made prisoners in their own land. Criminals thrived and organised crime flourished. Law and order broke down completely and gangs of armed thugs indulged in looting and extortion and terrorised the people. Soon, my father died of a serious illness, leaving behind a small amount of money that he had managed to save. With no means of survival and starvation staring us in the face, we decided to escape from Madriland and seek our fortunes elsewhere. Already, the poor people were feeling the effects of the economic crash. Starvation deaths and epidemics became common. We kept the money that father had left us in a safe place and made our preparations for escape. To cut a long story short, we managed to hire a horse carriage, food and supplies for our long journey with that money and secretly left Vagah. For days we travelled across the breadth of Madriland, heading north and saw that even the countryside was in the same state as the city. Our food supplies began to run low and my brothers died of hunger and thirst in that arduous journey. Alone, I managed to cross the northern plains and crossed the forest which separates Madriland from Manda. I came out into this hilly countryside and found this village. I was very nearly dead myself, when I reached this place! These kind villagers took me and nursed me back to my health. I then decided to stay here, as it seemed a quiet, peaceful place. Master Ghoda here took me into his employment his servant and I have been living in his care ever since. It was then that I told him my story. Then, when the raiders first came to our village, I recognised them as belonging to the same gang of organised criminals that terrorised Madriland. Having looted and ravaged my own Empire, they had come into Manda, seeking fresh pastures. Then the three of you came to this village and dealt with those raiders in the manner you did. I was the man who spied on you when you drove out those terrible raiders from the village the first time. A gleam of hope returned to my heart and I became so light and joyous that I could not contain myself. I went and told some of my friends about the incident and they went around town, spreading the news and colouring it with their own imagination. Since then, I waited for an opportunity to talk to you and tell you about the

true state of affairs in Madriland, but I never got the chance. Now, at last, when you told my master that you were going to Madriland, I got my chance to tell you all about it. Now do you understand why master wants to prevent you from going there?"

CHAPTER 12

Bulisa sat listening to this extraordinary narrative and closed his eyes for a few seconds in deep thought. Mola was still twitching with emotion.

Jhola cleared the breakfast table and they returned to the living room before resuming the conversation. Both Bhuvu and Jhola had also been listening to this story and were deeply impressed by it.

"Hmm! What you have told me is an extraordinary story," said Bulisa, making himself comfortable on an arm-chair, "Madrikumbah's behaviour is the most extraordinary part of it. How the very soul of kindness and virtue could have become such a cruel, fierce tyrant is more than I can comprehend. Ben Butaba's case is a different one. He had always been the devil incarnate from the beginning."

"We were shocked beyond recovery," said Mola, his eyes still showing some of the horror he had felt at Madrikumbah's sudden transformation, "My father never recovered from the blow! He probably fell ill because of that, more than anything else. He might have survived those terrible conditions under which we lived, but he could not reconcile himself to the fact that his best friend, the Emperor, was now his worst enemy. Not just his enemy, but the enemy of all the people!"

"What do you think might be the cause of Madrikumbah's sudden transformation?" asked Bulisa, in a thoughtful voice.

"I have been thinking over it ever since I came to this place," said Mola, "I have been trying to convince myself that he must have gone mad. Nothing else seems to explain his atrocious conduct."

"Madness is a possibility," said Bulisa, "But it is not very probable. A mad Emperor would soon destroy himself. On the other hand, from what you tell me, he has only grown stronger, more powerful and terrifying. His grip on his own subjects has only become stronger, not weaker. If he were mad, I could not imagine him wreaking such havoc in such a short time. All his actions seem to be the normal actions of a real tyrant: cold, calculated, sinister moves designed to terrorise an entire population."

“I think so too, sir,” said Mola, “After his mad fit of rage that fateful morning, we saw him just once. You see, my father met the Emperor that same evening and tried to talk the Emperor out of his madness, but it was unsuccessful. I was there then, and can I ever forget the expression on his face? His face was terribly contorted like a wild beast and his eyes glowed with a strange, evil light. It was then that I realised that it was no natural illness that had got hold of the Emperor. He was not himself, that much I could realise. The very next morning, the Emperor’s men ordered us out of our mansion and banned our entry into the Emperor’s palace. We were literally on the streets!”

“Now that you have told me about it, I must investigate this matter,” said Bulisa, “Rest assured that I will do my best to restore normalcy in your native land. I will try and find out the reason behind your Emperor’s madness and try and find a solution to the whole problem. Together with my ‘Gems’ I am quite confident of success!”

“You are mad!” said Ghoda, suddenly, “Do you quite comprehend the enormity and gravity of the situation in Madriland? Do you think that the three of you can go into that country and magically solve all its problems? Just because you beat Ben Butaba and managed to capture those raiders you think you can tackle evil of such proportions? You will surely come across dangers that are far more threatening than any you have come across so far. Is it worth the risk?”

“Master is right!” said Mola, in a decisive voice, “I fear that you might find Madrikumbah more than a match for your powers. Your life will be in constant danger if you venture into that cursed land! You will be trapped within his clutches with no means of escape for the rest of your lives, if you get caught! I myself was very lucky to escape in one piece from Madriland! I shall never forgive myself if I let the three of you venture into that country and fall into the hands of that vile tyrant.”

Bulisa shook his head with a smile.

“You have only further strengthened my resolve with those words,” he said slowly, “We shall surely not rest till we free Madriland from the clutches of that evil entity, which has got hold of their Emperor and imprisoned and terrorised his subjects.”

Bhuva nodded, quickly. Both he and Jhola were in a state of eager anticipation.

“Shall we start at once then, master?” asked Bhuva, hardly able to contain his excitement.

“Patience, Bhuva, patience!” said Bulisa, still smiling, “We must make our preparations before we leave! Thank you, Mola! You have indeed given us an excellent reason for visiting Madriland, with your amazing story.”

Ghoda turned to Mola and stared at him indignantly, as though he held him responsible for his friend’s decision. Mola looked at his master and shrugged his shoulders helplessly. He had done his best to try and dissuade Bulisa from seeking his own doom.

The village chief was surprised and disappointed when he found out that Bulisa was planning to leave. Ghoda had rushed to his house with the news after his unsuccessful attempts at changing Bulisa’s mind.

“Please, chief!” he said, in an urgent voice, “Talk to Bulisa and try to convince him to stay. As it is the people are restless, trying their best to get into his cottage and meet their heroes! If they find out that he is leaving the village, they would become quite violent with grief and disappointment. Please tell Bulisa this and ask him to stay!”

The chief did not look particularly concerned.

“Look, Ghoda!” he said, yawning, “I’m sure Bulisa has his own, good reasons for leaving the village. He belongs here, remember! He’ll surely return!”

Ghoda shook his head violently.

“I’m sure you wouldn’t let him go if you knew the whole story,” he said, “But I don’t have the time to tell you all about it. All I can say is, he is going to a place where his life and the life of his companions will be in danger. And that is no ordinary danger! Please, I beg you!”

The chief shook his head slowly, but decisively.

“I’m sorry, Ghoda,” he said, “I’m as disappointed as you are that he is leaving our village. But I really cannot prevent him from leaving. When I saw his powers with my own eyes, I was convinced that he is no ordinary man! His powers are great, indeed, and it would be criminal if we, in our selfishness, hold on to him and keep him with us. There are so many others in the world, besides us, who may need his help. And when you mention danger, I am inclined to laugh! You remember, once, how angry you got when I told you that you were merely exaggerating their powers? That was before I saw their

true potential! I tell you now - mark my words - no danger in the world can possibly threaten them!”

Ghoda saw that he could argue no more.

“Well, chief!” he said, his voice low and his eyes dark with disappointment, “I hope you’re right! I sincerely hope that you’re right!”

CHAPTER 13

Late that night, Bulisa and his ‘Gems’ sat together to discuss their plans. Bulisa’s face was set in a firm, grave expression, which indicated that he was indeed ready to face up to any challenge.

“That was the most extraordinary story we heard this morning, master,” began Bhuva, in a low voice, “What do you make of it?”

“Consider the sequence of events, Bhuva,” said Bulisa, “A kind, noble, just Emperor becomes mad all of a sudden! A sudden fit of anger, perhaps? A searing rage that tears at his soul? What could be the reason for that transformation and how do we explain it? There is no doubt about it! He has been possessed, Bhuva! Possessed by an extraordinarily potent, evil spirit. Whether that possession was initiated by the spirit by its own will or was forced into the body of that unfortunate Emperor is the question to ask. The man is sane, no doubt, but cannot control his actions because of that spirit possession. Madrikumbah must be saved and Madriland must be saved from that evil spirit, Bhuva. During my days in the army I have travelled a lot and seen a lot. During my travels, I have come across necromancers: enchanters who could call upon spirits and control them using their will-power. Their powers are dangerous to themselves and others - for if they lose control of the spirit while the spirit has been called upon, they will unleash those forces within the material plane. Life-forces are not play-things, Bhuva, but extremely potent. Magics that deal with life-forces must be handled only by the most adept and powerful necromancers. It took me several years to learn these magics and even so I never use them unless absolutely required. I always use a form of sorcery that does not rely upon life-forces but upon inert, ethereal forces. That is safe, for those ethereal forces cannot harm the caster. Ethereal magic is less powerful than necromancy, but safe, nonetheless. To counter life-forces, however, I now need to teach you some of

the secrets of necromancy, Bhuva! For if we must help rid Madriland of that evil spirit, you too need to know something about it.”

“You’ll teach me necromancy, then, master?” asked Bhuva, his eyes bright and eager.

“Not all its aspects, Bhuva, for we have little time before we embark on our long, perilous journey,” said Bulisa, “But you shall know just enough to help me in my own spell-casting. I will teach you how to focus your will-power to control a spirit, Bhuva and that is the most important aspect of necromancy - the magic of life-forces. Summoning spirits is difficult, Bhuva, and controlling them are even more so. I can safely handle a spirit on my own. But I will need your focussed energy to be on the safe side. Once a spirit is called upon to the material plane, I will use an amulet to entrap and carry it. That will be the first step. Then we can use the spirit’s life-force to cast spells whenever needed. As I keep casting spells, the spirit’s potency will slowly leave the amulet and drain its life-force. Once the spirit is completely drained, the amulet will lose its power and it will need to be recharged by again summoning another spirit. Note one point, Bhuva! The amulet’s physical properties such as shape, size and material strength will depend upon the potency of the spirit! If we use too weak an amulet to try and contain a very potent spirit, the spirit will break out of the amulet and get released into the material plane and may even possess the necromancer! So pay attention, Bhuva! Listen carefully and imbibe all that I have to teach you now!”

Bulisa and Bhuva left Jhola to guard the cottage and went out into the night, carrying an oil lamp each and a small, black book. They did not return till daybreak.

“Get us some food, Jhola!” said Bulisa, in a tired voice, “We are just about gone!”

Both Bhuva and Bulisa fell into deep, comfortable arm-chairs and wiped their brows. Bhuva’s face was white and chalky and Jhola was concerned.

“What have you been doing, Bhuva,” he asked, bringing a bowl of fruits and a jug of water from the kitchen, “Master, are you all right?”

“We were out practising a few techniques of necromancy, Jhola,” said Bulisa, pouring water into his mouth, “And my god! We did catch a particularly spirited spirit, didn’t we, Bhuva?”

“We went down to the clearing near the edge of the forest to pick a spot,” said Bhuva, smiling, “Master then taught me some techniques of necromancy. Then we began our summoning ritual. I cleared a patch of grass and drew our magical circle. Then master began chanting some deep, strange sounding words. For five full minutes we waited, Jhola, and nothing came! We were just about beginning to give up when a sudden glow of light lit up the landscape. I was quickly into position and I began chanting my own words to control that spirit. But it was too quick! Within a few seconds I was almost crushed by an overpowering feeling of weight on my body when master quickly recovered control and trapped the spirit within our magical circle. My god! I grew numb with pain and my mind was all in a whirl for a full ten or fifteen minutes. While I lay on the ground limp and helpless, master quickly transferred the trapped spirit within that black book and then helped me recover. My god! I still shudder to think of what that spirit would have done to me had master not recovered in time!”

“It was a particularly violent spirit, Bhuva,” said Bulisa, shaking his head, “It must have been the spirit of the leader of those raiders. You killed him, didn’t you Jhola?”

“Yes, I remember crushing him to death,” said Jhola.

“Then I am sure of it,” said Bulisa, “His spirit must have been wandering around the place since that fateful day! Now it is within my black book, ready and eager to do my bidding!”

“Oooh!” said Bhuva, still touching and feeling his shoulders and limbs, “It almost crushed ME to death!”

“Spirits of those who have died a violent death are usually violent, Bhuva,” said Bulisa, “The leader of the raiders was crushed to death and his spirit tries to crush its victims to death in a similar manner. Till the spirit is completely deprived of its life-force, it will continue to seek vengeance. Now safely within my amulet, it will perform magic upon my bidding. That will slowly destroy the spirit’s life-force.”

“You’re sure that spirit won’t escape now?” asked Jhola, fearfully eyeing the black book that Bulisa had placed on a side table.

“Oh! Don’t you worry about that!” said Bulisa, laughing, “That black book is the safest amulet in the whole world! I have trapped more potent spirits within it and none have escaped.”

“It is a sanctified prayer book,” explained Bhuva, “One of the best protections against evil spirits. Once a spirit is trapped within that, it cannot escape. Master taught me that!”

“Next time I will teach you more lessons, Bhuva,” said Bulisa, “You need more practise. I will teach you how to concentrate and focus your mind such that you won’t be attacked by a spirit the moment you summon it. Once you’re fully prepared, we’ll begin our journey. Madriland needs our services badly.”

CHAPTER 14

The next day was a busy one for Bhuva and Bulisa. Ghoda, who had, by now, convinced the village chief that Bulisa and his ‘Gems’ must stay in Gowa, came in the morning to try and speak to Bulisa. He was stopped at the door by Jhola.

“The chief wants to talk to Bulisa!” said Ghoda, indignant at being stopped at the door, “You must let us in! Please!”

The village chief, who had come with Ghoda, was also quite put off by this reception.

“Oh, really!” he said, huffily, “You do not quite understand! I must talk to Bulisa. Ghoda has told me all about Madriland and Mola’s story. He must stay here! I order that!”

“Master doesn’t take any orders!” said Jhola, “I’m sorry. He cannot see you now! He’s busy today!”

But Ghoda was firm. He pushed his way into the cottage and the chief followed suit. Jhola hesitated only for a second before claspings the two of them with his mighty arms and depositing them outside. Even though he did this as gently as he could, the chief landed rather sorely on his left shoulder and cried out in pain.

“Oh, you rogue, you!” he cried, rubbing his shoulder, “You’ll not get away with this! Disrespecting me, the chief of this village! Just you wait!”

Jhola smiled in amusement.

“I’m sorry,” he said, almost apologetically, “But orders are orders and I take orders only from one man: my master!”

“I tell you, you insufferable fool, we’re doing this for your own good!” said Ghoda, in an exasperated voice, “Bulisa must not go to Madriland! You’ll never get out of there alive! Please ask your master to see reason!”

The two of them returned to Ghoda’s cottage, where Mola was waiting anxiously for news.

“Oh, dear!” he cried, when Ghoda told him what had happened, “I feared as much! It’s all my fault, master! Please forgive me!”

“Not yours, Mola, not yours!” said Ghoda, shaking his head, “Bulisa had already decided to leave for Madriland before you told him your story. He’s a strange man with strange tastes. I think he’s faced more dangers in his life than we can ever imagine. Your story has just given him one more reason to visit that cursed land!”

“But I tell you, master!” said Mola, in a shaky voice, “Even he cannot save Madriland! Mere words cannot convey the terror and dangers he would face there!”

“I’ll surround the village with my men,” said the chief in a decisive voice, “They’ll see to it that Bulisa doesn’t leave. We’ll also build fences and...”

“As though that would stop him!” said Ghoda, scornfully.

“Then what do we do?” asked the chief, shrugging his shoulders, “I give up!”

“And so do I,” said Mola.

“Then begin praying!” said Ghoda in a tone of resignation, “Only the Almighty God can save Bulisa and his friends now!”

Bulisa and his ‘Gems’ had completed their preparations for their long and arduous journey to Madriland. Jhola had tied all their belongings into a sack. Bhuva went to the town nearest Gowa to hire a horse carriage for their journey into Madriland.

The town was a small one, but was bustling with activity. It had a small market-square, which was swarming with human activity and a modest town hall just opposite. Bhuva went straight to the town hall to meet the town chieftain.

The town chieftain, who had heard about the feats of Bulisa and his ‘Gems’ and their role in ousting the evil Ben Butaba, greeted Bhuva enthusiastically and asked him all about Bulisa.

“Take as many horse carriages as you like, my friend!” he said, shaking hands with Bhuva, “I am indeed happy to serve Bulisa, the man who destroyed that evil tyrant Ben Butaba.

“One will do, sir!” said Bhuva, “I must go now! Master will be waiting for me. We are leaving early next morning and we cannot waste any time. I will convey your greetings and good wishes to master.”

“Oh, please do!” said the town chieftain, “And please visit my place one day, all three of you! I want to arrange a grand feast and celebration in your honour! If you need any kind of help, please don’t hesitate to ask! I can send you all my best warriors with you if you want. And take as much money as you want from my treasury! I’m sure the Emperor, Jho Butaba, will not mind one bit! In fact, he’ll be very happy that I was able to help you.”

“Oh, thank you so much for your offer, sir!” said Bhuva, “But we can manage on our own. Now I must leave, sir, and thank you so much for the horse carriage!”

As he returned to Gowa, he found Bulisa and Jhola standing outside their cottage talking to the village chief and several others. Ghoda was among them and his voice was the loudest.

“Now, Bulisa, listen!” Ghoda was saying, “This is your last chance! Please reconsider your decision! I beg you!”

“The horse carriage has arrived, master,” said Jhola to Bulisa, and Bulisa nodded.

“Please, Ghoda, understand one thing!” said Bulisa, in a firm voice, “We must do what we must. If you stand in my way any longer, I’m afraid I must brush you aside. Sorry, my friend, but my mind is already made up! We leave tomorrow at dawn and that’s it!”

Bhuva got down from the carriage’s driver’s seat and joined the discussion.

“Master,” he said, “The town chieftain asked me to convey his greetings and his best wishes to you. He also offered to lend us men and money for our quest.”

Bulisa nodded.

“All right, Bhuva,” he said, “Take the horses and the carriage to the backyard and give the horses water and food. They must be fresh and ready for the journey tomorrow.”

CHAPTER 15

Early next morning, Bulisa and his 'Gems' mounted the horse carriage. Bhuva got into the driver's seat and took the reins.

It was still dark, though the eastern sky had a pale pink tinge to it. Bulisa was extremely anxious to leave the village before dawn.

"Quietly, now!" whispered Bulisa, as Jhola got into the carriage, "Let's not wake anybody up. If Ghoda finds out that we're leaving, he'll surely try to stop us."

At last, as the carriage rolled out of the village quietly, Bulisa breathed a sigh of relief.

"Take the road through the forest, Bhuva," said Bulisa through the little window in the partition that separated the driver from the passengers, "We must head south till we reach the borders of Madriland. Once we enter Madriland, we can make further plans..."

"Master!" said Jhola, looking out of the carriage window behind him as they slid down the gentle slope into the grassy clearing, "I can see some lights in the village."

Indeed, the village was waking up. Somebody had seen the horse carriage move stealthily out of the village and had given the alarm.

Ghoda, still groggy and sleepy and in his night dress, rushed out to the main village street, shaking his fist in annoyance at the disturbance.

"Here! Here! What's going on?" he screamed.

"Bulisa and his friends are leaving, master!" said Mola, "They have gone down the slope into the grassy clearing and are heading towards the forest."

The two of them rushed down the main road to the end of the village and were just in time to see the dark, shadowy form of the carriage disappear into the forest cover.

"We can never catch them now, master," said Mola, breathing heavily, "The carriage is just too fast."

"Oh, yes?" challenged Ghoda, gritting his teeth, "Well, we'll soon see about that."

In a sudden burst of energy he ran down the slope down to the grassy clearing, trying to make ground by taking a shorter route to the edge of the forest; the road having a gentle curve to it before it entered the forest. But before he could reach there, he stumbled and fell.

"Master! Master!" cried Mola, rushing down to help Ghoda, "Are you all right?"

“Yes,” said Ghoda, lying flat on his back, panting heavily, “But I just can’t go on! I’m just not a fast runner. But you! What are you doing standing in front of me like a dazed monkey! After them! Go, go, go!!”

“I’m sorry, master!” said Mola, in a desperate voice, “But I’m afraid I cannot. That horse carriage is just too quick for me!”

“All right!” said Ghoda, slowly getting up to his feet, “Let’s go back, then! I’m just about gone! And I’m still not half-awake yet! Just wait till I get my hands on Bulisa! If he ever returns from Madriland, alive, I’ll teach him a lesson he’ll never forget!!”

Meanwhile the horse carriage was rattling down the dark road that cut through the forest. Though the sun had come out, it was still dark inside the forest because of the tree cover and Bhuva was having trouble guiding the horses along the road. The early morning mist also added to his woes and he could not even see the road two metres in front of him. At last, he jerked the horses to a halt after the carriage had nearly rammed into a tree. There was a sharp curve in the road which he had not seen.

“What is it, Bhuva?” asked Bulisa, anxiously, as he stepped out of the carriage. The air was chilly and damp as the mist hung tightly around him.

“Sorry, master!” came Bhuva’s voice, “This mist is just too thick that I cannot drive. I just missed a curve ahead and we nearly had an accident.”

“All right, then, we’ll stay put for some time till the fog clears,” said Bulisa and got back into the carriage.

He explained the situation to Jhola, who was wearing a puzzled expression on his face after the carriage had jerked violently to a halt and he had been thrown out of his seat.

In the next half-hour, the mist gradually cleared and the light got better and they resumed their journey.

This time, though, Bhuva drove the carriage just a little slower than before as a safety measure. The road also got narrower and narrower as they ploughed through and at one point it was just a couple of metres wide. The carriage literally had to squeeze through the trees.

For several hours, the lonely carriage carried on and on, through the thick, oppressive forest. The road was not straight all the time and kept curving in and out, in and out, making it really difficult for Bhuva.

At last, by mid-day, they had reached the end of the forest. It was not really an abrupt end, but the tree-cover got thinner and thinner and the road got wider. The temperature rose steadily and Bhuva could feel that the horses were getting tired as well. At one spot, he found a small pond by the side of the road and stopped.

The water was crystal clear and cold.

“We’ll rest here awhile,” said Bulisa, after having a long, satisfying drink of water and filling up their water jugs, “Let the horses have their fill as well.”

Jhola tied the horses to a tree near the pond as Bhuva got their packed lunch out from the carriage and they sat down in a little clearing to eat.

Just as they finished their lunch and got up to leave, they found a tall man standing near the carriage. He was wearing a black uniform and a black helmet on which the picture of a skull was embossed. A long sheath hung below his shiny leather belt.

“Well, gentlemen!” he said, as they approached him, “Going to Madriland, I presume?”

“Yes,” said Bulisa, cautiously, “Who are you and when did you come here? I didn’t see you approach us!”

“I am Nohar, a soldier in the army of our great Emperor, Madrikumbah!” he said, stiffly, “You are close to the border now and I must warn you: keep out of our country! If you’re wise, you’ll take my advice.”

“I’m wise, but sorry, I won’t take it, anyway!” said Bulisa, smiling.

Nohar shook his head, with a tinge of sadness in his eyes.

“I feared as much,” he said, “But if you must enter my country, remember one thing! Don’t let yourselves be caught by the Warriors of the Red Fist. You’ll never see daylight for the rest of your lives and I really, literally mean it. They are Madrikumbah’s own hand-picked special forces and not one man they’ve taken away has been seen again.”

“Special forces, eh?” asked Bulisa, with interest.

“I am a border security guard, myself,” said Nohar, still shaking his head, “I am one of the few men in Madriland who can breathe easy, because I am far away from the centre of all the trouble!! My god, am I glad of it!”

“Tell us the way to your Empire’s capital city, Nohar,” said Bulisa, “My friends and I are very keen to visit your beautiful country!”

“No! No! You fools!” cried Nohar, with a tinge of emotion, “That is the last place on earth you would wish to visit, if you were sane! Vagah has been turned into a place of terror, so I hear! People are living in a state of fear in the entire country, but especially so in Vagah! They are slaves in their own land and the Warriors of the Red Fist have complete control over them! Why, I heard horrifying stories of people living like caged beasts in and around Vagah, for the place has become overcrowded with prisoners being brought every day from all over the country.”

“And the rest of the country?” asked Bulisa, in a grave voice.

“Slightly better, so I hear!” said Nohar, “But poverty reigns supreme in our once glorious Empire! People are literally starving to death all over! I fear that you will suffer their fate if you enter Madriland! Food and drinking water are scarce resources in our country, at the moment. But, at least in the countryside, people live in relative freedom.”

CHAPTER 16

“Most extraordinary!” said Bulisa, slowly, “But we are prepared for all that! Our aim is to investigate the causes which have led to such extraordinary changes in your Empire and free your people from tyranny.”

Nohar laughed aloud, and continued laughing until Jhola slapped him heavily on the back and nearly pushed him into the pond.

“My goodness!” said Nohar, gathering himself up from the edge of the water, “What do you think you’re doing? Don’t you dare lay your hands on me again!”

He walked up to Jhola, who was laughing at him, clenching his fists and gritting his teeth.

He raised his arm as if to strike Jhola, when he suddenly found that his hand was in the grip of some strong, invisible force. Screaming, he tried to break himself free, but in vain.

“What was that?” asked Nohar, his face white with fear, when he was released at last from that invisible force.

Bhuva and Bulisa smiled at Nohar’s fear and amazement.

“That was me,” said Bhuva, “I held your hand with a magical force-field.”

“Relax, my friend!” said Bulisa, in a kind voice, “We mean no harm. We merely wish to help you and your people.”

Nohar’s face had undergone a radical transformation. While derision and amusement had been his initial reaction to Bulisa’s bold proclamation, now his face showed deep respect and awe.

“You men have strange powers, indeed!” he said, slowly, glancing dubiously at Bhuva, “You are free to enter my country, of course. But be careful, all the same. I can help you get in, but not get out! That’s your headache.”

All four of them now got into the carriage and resumed the journey. The road continued getting better. They reached the border post within a quarter of an hour. Nohar got down from the carriage and went away to talk to the other border security guards who were manning the post. All of them stared at Bulisa and his two ‘Gems’ with amazement.

“You really wish to enter Madriland,” asked one of the guards, who had been listening to Nohar’s story with growing astonishment.

“Yes, we do,” said Bulisa, smiling.

“You will not find any place to stay for the night!” said Nohar, returning to Bulisa, scratching his head, “Vagah is a long distance away from here and you have to travel a whole day to reach there at the very least. There are few villages on the way where you can find a decent place to stay. People don’t encourage strangers in these parts, for they have their own worries to keep them busy. What do you intend to do?”

Bulisa looked and saw the road stretching out in front of him, with no signs of civilisation as far as he could see. The whole countryside around him looked wild and inhospitable.

“What about those places over there,” he asked, pointing to a clump of huts a few hundred away from the edge of the road.

“Those huts are our barracks,” said Nohar, “But you cannot stay there. It is not allowed and besides, they are poor lodgings for people like you.”

“Oh! That’s all right. We can stay there, then!” said Bulisa, smiling still.

The other guards stared at Nohar with perplexed expressions on their faces.

“Our superior officer is away at the moment,” said Nohar, slowly, to the others, “If we are to keep these people as guests with us for tonight, he must not find out. Do any of you know when he’ll be back?”

“Oh! He’ll not return for a couple of days, yet!” said one of the guards, a plump, red-faced, bearded man, “He is on a tour of the nearby districts to collect taxes. These people will be safe for the time being. But they must leave before dawn, tomorrow. Otherwise they’ll not reach Vagah till late at night! But... my god! Why would they want to visit Vagah at all?”

“Don’t ask me!” said Nohar, “But they’re no ordinary men, take it from me! However, your plan sounds good to me. We’ll keep them for the night with us. Not one of us must breathe a word about this to anyone, though! Get it?”

All the security guards grunted their assent.

“It’s getting late,” said Nohar, turning to Bulisa, “You three are free to explore the countryside for the next two hours, but you must return here before sundown. Get it?”

“Why must we be here before sundown?” asked Bhuva, with some heat.

“Please listen to me!” said Nohar, in a pleading voice, “The countryside is barren for miles around and it is easy to lose yourselves in the wilderness if you wander away too far. But if you keep close to the road, you can find your way back. If you’re not back before sundown, how can you find your way back here? That is the reason why I asked you to be back by sundown. Kindly excuse me for my rude language!”

“What! Nohar!” said one of the other security guards, glaring at Bhuva, “You talk to them as if they are your masters or something! Listen, you three! We’re the bosses here and you’ll do what we tell you to do without question! Understand?”

Jhola was about to react violently to this, when Bulisa’s restraining hand prevented him from saying or doing anything.

“Oh, that’s all right, Nohar!” he said, holding back the furious Jhola, “We’ll do as you say. In fact, I don’t think we’ll go around at all. We’ll tie the horses and park the carriage somewhere close by your huts. We’ll just walk around for some time and return even before the time stipulated.”

“Oh! We’ll take care of the horses and the carriage,” said Nohar, “You don’t worry about that.”

“Why did you submit so easily to them, master?” asked Jhola, when they had walked quite a distance away from the border post, “Are they to give us orders and we to take them, lying down?”

“Easy, Jhola, easy!” said Bulisa, “We’ll just keep to the road. All I wanted was a few minutes alone with you. Let’s just keep walking and talk about our plans for the morrow!”

“I think that these border security guards are not to be trusted!” said Bhuva, in a serious voice, “Are we wise in leaving the horses and the carriage with them, while we wander away like this?”

“Yes, we are, Bhuva,” said Bulisa, “They fear their superior officers so much that they cannot possibly do us any harm without causing enquiry. And if their superior officer finds out about us or our possessions, they would be in deep trouble not just for letting us into the country but also allowing us to stay in their barracks. You saw how anxious they were to get rid of us and wash themselves clean of the matter?”

“But our plans, master?”

“That is another matter. From what we hear so far, Bhuva, all the action seems to centre around Vagah! Undoubtedly Vagah is the place of terror. The rest of the country is suffering no doubt, but their suffering is poverty, excessive taxation and a devastated economy. All this seems to be the effect of whatever is happening in Vagah, which seems to be the cause of all the trouble. Madrikumbah has converted Vagah into a slave-camp for his evil purpose, whatever it may be! For this, he has created an elite force to go around the country and capture able-bodied people and bring them to Vagah as slaves. The result is inevitable devastation to the people and their livelihoods all over the country. This has led to a growth in crime and organised terror. So much I gather from all we know so far! Is it clear to you?”

“Yes, master!”

“We must act carefully and try and find out the root cause of Madrikumbah’s actions and destroy it. If we fail, we may never leave this place, dead or alive. But we will succeed, my Gems! We MUST succeed for the sake of these wretched people!”

CHAPTER 17

That ‘barrack’ huts that provided Bulisa and his ‘Gems’ shelter for the night were humble and rudimentary. The soldiers themselves slept on rough matting spread on the floor, but the guests had to sleep on the bare ground. The night was a chilly one and Bhuva suffered the most, tossing and turning, while Jhola slept like a log, snoring loudly.

The three weary travellers were woken up by Nohar, the next morning. It was still dark outside, but the soldiers were up and ready, in their black uniforms. The guards who had keep watch during the night were just turning in for a well-deserved rest.

“You can start your journey now, sir,” said Nohar, “It is early still, but you must start now if you want to reach Vagah by tonight. I’ve packed some lunch for you in this bundle. You may not find food to eat anywhere in the countryside. You must solve the food problem on your own if you manage to survive after reaching Vagah! Good luck!”

Bulisa took the bundle from Nohar gratefully.

“We’ll leave now,” he said, shaking Nohar’s hands, “Thank you for your help and guidance.”

“Be very careful, for you may find that the people are far from friendly,” said Nohar, “The countryside is full of wild, discontent peasants; but they do not represent any great danger to three strong men like you! The real danger to watch out for is the Warriors of the Red Fist. They are armed and numerous and wander around the country searching for victims, either to satisfy their thirst for blood or to take as slaves back to Vagah. I fear that you may find them too much to handle, in spite of your powers.”

“Tell me more about them!” said Bulisa, in a grave voice.

“I know little of them myself!” said Nohar, “I am in the regular army of Madriland and I am one of the few blessed souls who is free from their terrible control. When I was posted at Vagah, I saw horrible scenes of death and destruction, which still haunt me! Thankfully, I was transferred to the border security forces and I left Vagah along with my friends in a hurry! Those warriors wear crimson uniforms and dark masks. I sometimes think that they are demons, so wild and terrifying they are to behold. Indeed once I saw one of them tear a victim from limb to limb with his bare hands and drinking his blood! OOOH! I still shiver to think of that! We were all so frightened to death and we still are!”

“You think they may be demons?” asked Bulisa.

“I do think so, for once I observed that they didn’t have hands as we humans do, but hairy paws with sharp, razor-like claws!”

Bulisa nodded thoughtfully.

“And what are the other perils we may expect to find in your charming country?”

“There are numerous gangs of dacoits and raiders who roam the countryside. Crime has flourished like never before, since this trouble began. But I sometimes feel sorry for them. They are poor people driven to desperation by the appalling condition of their lives. They frequently come into conflict with the Warriors of the Red Fist. I have heard many times of entire gangs of dacoits being slaughtered by the Warriors and eaten as food. Oooh! Horrible!”

“Thank you, Nohar! Now, we must leave,” said Bulisa. Bhuva and Jhola got the carriage ready and mounted.

“Keep going straight down the road!” cried Nohar, as the carriage started moving, “Good bye and good luck!”

Bhuva and Bulisa were seated inside the carriage and Jhola was in the driver’s seat. For a while, they remained silent as the horses ploughed on steadily. Bhuva looked out of the window and saw the countryside around him. It was wild, desolate and rocky with very little vegetation.

“What a forlorn place this country is, master!” said Bhuva, “This road seems to go on and on forever! When will it end?”

Bulisa, who had been in deep thought, broke out of his reverie.

“You are right, Bhuva,” he said, “But now let us consider our plans. If we are stopped on the way by those Red Fist Warriors, we must fight. We must avoid capture at all costs, till we reach Vagah. Do you have that amulet with you?”

“You mean that black prayer book, master? Yes. It is safe within my waist pouch.” said Bhuva.

“The spell that is contained within it is our most powerful weapon. We must be careful how we use it, for we can only use it once if I unleash the full power of the life-force. And judging by what we have heard about the terrors of Vagah, we may have to use it with the full power.”

“But if we need it more than once, master?”

“We must depend upon our other form of magic: the ethereal magic which you know very well,” said Bulisa, frowning hard, “But let us hope that the spirit that is possessing Madrikumbah is not much more powerful than my own spells.”

“Those Warriors of the Red Fist, then?”

“It is evident to me, Bhuva,” said Bulisa, “that they must be the flesh-and-blood agents of that vile power that has taken control of Madrikumbah. Nohar’s description of their activities and their appearance leave no doubt in my mind that they cannot be human. But demons are not unheard of. In my experience, I have come across them once or twice, while dealing with necromancers. They are terrible, mindless creatures who will attack anyone who is not protected by a special talisman and obey the commands of those who control them through necromancy. If we come across them, we must unleash some of our more powerful ethereal spells and hold them at bay. They are physically strong, but possess absolutely no mental abilities. Therefore I think that we can deal with them without having to resort to the more powerful necromancy.”

The carriage plodded on and on for hours. The sun had come out slowly and the darkness slowly gave way to a glorious pink sky which became blue. As the day wore on, the sun rose higher and higher and the temperature rose steadily.

They stopped at the sight of a well close to the edge of the road.

“Let us fill up our jugs here and give the horses a break,” said Bulisa. “Are you two hungry?”

“Well, yes, master,” said Bhuva, glancing at Jhola.

“Then perhaps we shall have our packed lunch here as well.”

There was a clump of trees and a patch of grass a few yards away from the well, which looked like a welcome oasis in the middle of a parched desert. Jhola led the horses to the well and then let them graze around for some time. The three of them took shelter from the hot sun under a tree and took their lunch.

“No sign of a village yet!” said Bhuva, looking down the long, straight road ahead, “I wonder how much farther we have to travel until we come across a human settlement.”

“Don’t worry, Bhuva,” said Bulisa, “We shall stop at the first village we come across and find out more about the people of this country.”

They continued the journey after their meal. For a long time, they did not come across any signs of life.

“I see something in the road ahead, master,” cried Jhola, suddenly. Bhuva and Bulisa jumped up from their seats. They had been relaxing in their seats, having closed their eyes in rest, but the sudden announcement woke them up in a flash.

At a distance, the small blur in the road looked like a herd of cattle, but as they drew near, they found that it was a group of men: rough, bearded men, dressed like peasants. They were carrying clubs made of thick wooden stumps and were waving them over their heads menacingly.

“HALT! STOP!” cried one of the peasants as the carriage drew close to them, his voice rough and unfriendly, his eyes glowing with malevolence, “GET DOWN, whoever you may be!”

Jhola stopped the horses and got down from his seat, clenching his fists, ready for action. Bhuva and Bulisa got down from inside the carriage and raised their arms in a gesture of peace.

“We come in peace, friends!” cried Bulisa, “We are, but harmless strangers in this strange country.

The peasant who had first addressed them came forward. His eyes showed a mixture of anger and astonishment at the sight of the three strangers.

“Who might you be, strangers,” he cried, patting his club, “I’ve never seen the likes of you before in our place!” A murmur of approval rose from the group of peasants, each one of them wearing expressions of intense, but unfriendly awe.

“My name is Bulisa, and we come from the Empire to the north of your country! I assure you that we mean you no harm.”

The peasants shook their heads incredulously and glanced at each other.

“Oh! Is that so?” said the first peasant, who was obviously the leader of the group, “How and why did you come here? Answer me or I’ll have your head!!”

Jhola, who was getting more and more impatient at his manner of speech, moved forward in a menacing attitude. Bulisa held him back.

“Be patient, Jhola,” he said, “We are here to free you from the clutches of that evil entity that has got hold of your Emperor.”

At these words the peasants uttered a roar of amused contempt. Some of them spat on the ground with vehemence.

“Fools!” cried the first peasant, his eyes streaming, “You will never get out of this country, alive! Take it from me! Madrikumbah’s special forces will have your blood or your freedom! Go away! Go away the way you came!”

At these words, Jhola roared with fury and broke away from the restraining hand of his master. He ploughed through the group of peasants, dealing blows left and right. The peasants, were taken aback at this attack, but quickly rallied around their leader and tried to get Jhola with sharp, fierce blows from their clubs. Jhola, surrounded by the peasants, fought back with a mighty force that sent each and every one of them flying in every direction. The peasant leader came forward with his club raised in an attitude of menace, but Jhola plucked the club out of his hand and raised him from the ground by his shoulders.

“AAAH! Let me go! Let me go!” cried the peasant leader, struggling in the iron grip of Jhola, “I give up! I give up!”

“Shall I crush him to death, master?” asked Jhola, in a booming voice.

“STOP IT, JHOLA! Stop it, I say!!” shouted Bulisa, raising his hands, “Let him go!”

Jhola released his grip and the peasant leader fell down on the hard ground with a thud. The other peasants gathered around their leader, trembling with fear. The leader sat on the hard ground for a couple of minutes, recovering his breath. Bhuvu and Bulisa helped him to his feet.

“I... I say!” said the peasant leader, in a shaky voice, “You are a strong one! But no offence meant! I... We merely wished to warn you... that’s all, strangers!”

“I understand,” said Bulisa, in a kindly voice, “But are you all right?”

“I am!” said the peasant leader, “But you three seem to be no ordinary men! That much I can gather!”

“But tell me, where do you people live?” asked Bulisa, looking around him. The countryside looked barren and desolate for miles around, with no signs of any human settlement.

The peasant shook his head with a melancholy expression on his face.

“It’s a long story!” he said, “But please! Come with us and we’ll show you!”

CHAPTER 18

Bulisa and his ‘Gems’ ascended the carriage and the peasants led the way. They left the main road and walked along a small, rough cart-path which cut across the barren countryside. The peasant leader, who had got into the carriage along with Bulisa and Bhuva, pointed out to a large, rocky hill in the distance.

“We live in a huge cave inside that hill,” he said, “Our village was destroyed a few months ago by those devilish Red Fist Warriors. Most of the villagers were taken away as slaves, but some of us managed to escape. Since then, we live in the cave, like savage cave-men, holding out against any dangers that threaten us. The cave is sheltered by mighty rocks and inaccessible to anybody unfamiliar with the terrain and so we are safe within. There are about two hundred people living in that cave.”

“What about food and water?” asked Bulisa.

“There are several fresh-water springs around the hillside,” said the peasant leader, “Food was a problem, initially! That’s why we are out here in the open country. Groups of us often come out in search of food; to hunt down any animal that we can and take back to our stores inside the cave. We have managed to stock up large amounts of food, though, and we can hold out inside for months together if we are under siege.”

The ground became rougher and harder as they approached the hill and the terrain was uneven.

“The last half-mile that leads to the entrance of our cave, we must walk. Your carriage cannot approach the mouth of the cave,” said the peasant, “Please get down. You must leave your horses and your carriage in some shelter under a rocky ledge.”

The horse carriage stopped and the three men got out. There was a natural ledge that stuck out of the face of the hill, which made an ideal place to park the carriage and leave the horses in safety.

They joined the group of peasants who were walking ahead of them and continued their journey. The climb became slightly steeper at this point. Bhuva puffed and panted as he walked. The path was a rough, winding one, cut off the rocky face of the hill.

A huge rock blocked their path ahead at one point.

“That is the rock of protection!” said the peasant leader, “We always bow before it to pay our respects.”

The group of peasants went down on their knees in front of the huge rock and lowered their heads for a few minutes. Bulisa and Bhuva did the same, but Jhola stood apart, scratching his head and watching them with astonishment.

After getting up on their feet, they began climbing up the face of the hill close to the rock of protection. Bulisa observed that a part of the rock hid a small crevice in the face of the hill. It was a small crack, but they peasants squeezed into it, one by one.

“Come!” said the peasant leader, “I hope you three can climb!”

Bulisa and Jhola managed to climb up the hill face, but Bhuva struggled. At last, seeing that Bhuva could not make it on his own, Jhola lifted him bodily and seated him on his mighty shoulders and made the climb up to the crevice.

The small, insignificant crack widened out considerably as the three men squeezed inside.

“This,” said the peasant leader, “is the mouth of the cave! Please follow me!”

Their strange journey through a long, narrow passage ended in a large, bright cave. They were deep in the heart of the rocky hill. The cave was tall and wide, like a huge gallery, but there were a several small tents erected all over the place. There was a hole in the high roof of the cave through which sunlight came pouring in and gave the place natural lighting.

“This is our village now,” said the peasant leader. They were standing on a ledge at some height from the level of the floor of the huge cave. “Let us climb down.”

They came down from the ledge through a rough staircase that was hewn out of the rocks.

“There are several entrances to this central cave!” said the peasant leader, in a proud voice, “Look at those other ledges.”

Indeed, all around the cave were several similar ledges that had been carved out of the face of the rock. At each one of them there were the entrances to passages that led out of the cave.

Bulisa, Bhuva and Jhola looked around the whole cave with wonder.

“This is wonderful!” said Bulisa, at last, “You have done well to find such a place to live in!”

“You will stay with us, then?” asked the peasant leader, in an eager voice, “We can provide you food, shelter and safety! Something that you will not get anywhere else in this entire country!”

“No, no!” said Bulisa, shaking his head, “We are here to rescue you people from the evil force that has taken hold of your Empire! We must continue our journey, for it is getting late!”

The leader’s face became dark with disappointment. For a few seconds he stood in silence, thoughtfully.

“All right, then!” he said, slowly, “But you must spend the night with us. But, I nearly forgot! It is past noon and time for lunch. You will join me in my tent, then?”

Bulisa looked at his ‘Gems’ who glanced at each other questioningly. Jhola was already patting his stomach, indicating his growing hunger.

“But we’ve already had lunch...” began Bhuva, but Jhola pushed him aside.

“Thank you so much,” he said to their host and glared at Bhuva.

The peasant leader led the three travellers through the maze of tents to one which was slightly larger than the rest.

“This is my home!” he said, “Please come in!”

They entered the tent. It was a bright place, well-lit by several candles and a single, large oil-lamp. There were several things inside the small space, including a small stove, several small, crude vessels, a large jar of water, a rough, rolled-up mattress and a large sack, overflowing with other rough, household objects and edible items.

The host lit the stove after a long struggle and cooked a small meal, consisting of vegetables and roots and small pieces of meat.

The meal over, Bhuva and Jhola helped the host clear the place. The used plates and vessels were pushed to one corner of the tent.

“I can only wash them out on the hillside,” said the host, “We cannot wash or clean or do anything inside the cave, as there is no drainage system. All of us must go out to the open hillside and do all our washing and cleaning at the springs. It is one of the inconveniences of living in this large cave!”

“Don’t worry, my friend,” said Bulisa, “You will soon resume your normal lives back in the open country without fear! There will be no need for you to live as fugitives in your own land!”

“I sincerely hope and wish for such a thing, sir! But I fear that it is mere wishful thinking.”

“No! No! Have no fears about that! We are here to help you! Now tell us more about yourselves and how things came to such a pass in your country. Please tell us everything that may occur to you, for it will be surely of help to us in our quest.”

CHAPTER 19

“It must have been two years ago, I forget when, exactly,” began the peasant leader, stroking his rough beard, “That was when the whole trouble began. Strange and terrible rumours got around the country that an extraordinary madness had seized our Emperor. Our village, a small, quiet, out-of-the way place, was largely undisturbed by such news, initially. Then, one fine day, a group of officials arrived at our village with a large convoy of soldiers. They announced that our taxes had increased three-fold and that we had to pay up immediately or face the consequences. We were shocked beyond imagination at this sudden announcement and most of us surrendered our hard-earned wealth. In one instant, a prosperous, well-to-do community had been turned into a bunch of paupers. Those who refused to part with their wealth were horrendously beaten to death in the middle of the village and their bodies were left as warnings to us. My god! Worse was to follow. For a while, we were left alone and our village began to limp back to some semblance of normalcy. We were living like destitutes, suffering and starving, but at least there were no more visits by the Emperor’s vile officials and though poor, we felt thankful that we could still work the fields and grow our food. However, this year our monsoon failed and we didn’t receive the usual rainfall that made our lands fertile for growing our crops. That was some months ago and we feared that we would all perish in the face of a fearsome drought. That was when the vile officials returned to the village a second time and demanded that we pay up our taxes. We rebelled openly! In sheer desperation we drove them out of our village, fighting like madmen for our very lives and our livelihood. The soldiers, though well-equipped, were outnumbered ten to one and fled like cowards, screaming for their lives! That was the day when we knew that our days of

peaceful existence were numbered. The village elders called an emergency council meeting where it was decided that all of us had to leave the village and escape to some other place of safety, before the soldiers returned in large numbers to extract revenge. A group of us went around the wild countryside in search of such a place. It was at that time that some of us found this hill and stumbled on this large hollow cave in the middle of it. We had first explored the natural cracks on the face of the hill, which led to deep, narrow passages and which, in turn opened out into this large cave. We were jubilant at our discovery and returned to the village and informed the village elders. They decided that we had to start moving in the shortest possible time. Within the next few days, a large number of us were chosen. We were to make the preparations for our escape. I was part of that group. We set out to the hillside cave to prepare for our migration. We carried with us large sacks of essential goods, food, bundles of clothing and other important things from the village so that we could all leave the village at a moment's notice. We had left the village in the morning of that fateful day and by the time we returned, it was almost dark. Tired and hungry, we made our way back to the village. My god! Imagine our shock when we found that the village had been razed to the ground! Every house, every building had been torn to the ground. Everything was in ruins! There was no sign of any massive battle, but all the people were missing. An eerie silence greeted us. In sheer desperation we screamed and shouted to see if there was any sign of life. We searched among the ruins desperately for bodies, but we found none. At last, one of us found an old, wounded man, lying near the market-square, his face bleeding horribly. He was one of the elders of our village and he was in a dazed state when we found him. A few other villagers were lying around him, but they were all dead. Seeing that there was nothing that we could do for the old man amidst the ruins, we carried him back to the hillside cave where we could at least give him food and water. Once he had recovered some of his strength, he told us what had happened in the village in our absence. 'Some time after you fellows left,' he said, gasping for breath, 'A large group of soldiers arrived at our village. They were not soldiers of the regular army. They were wearing masks and dark red uniforms. They assembled near market-square. There was one man who was unlike them. He was wearing the regular army uniform and he came forward and announced that they were the Warriors of the Red Fist. He ordered all the villagers to

assemble peacefully in the middle of the village and threatened us with dire consequences if we disobeyed. Most of us were terrorised into submission at the sight of those horrid, masked men, but a few of us, including myself, openly challenged them to do their worst. In a moment, the man raised his hand and ordered the Red Fist Warriors to attack us. The battle was short and swift. We were struck down like flies, but we continued to get up and fight. At last, tired of seeing our resilience, the regular army man came forward and ordered them to kill us! Though wounded badly, I was seething with rage. I pounced on that man and we rolled on the ground, struggling and fighting. In the middle of our fight, I managed to snatch a necklace that he was wearing, but he didn't notice that. Then I received a horrid blow on my head from behind and I fell down, unconscious. When I recovered, I found that the village was abandoned and that the Red Fist Warriors had torn down our homes and buildings to the ground. Being too weak, I lay where I was till you found me! Now, take this necklace and keep it safely with you, for it looks strange and unique to me and is obviously a valuable jewel.' The old man then handed us the necklace, which we kept with us. He fell ill and died within a few days and we buried him in the hillside. Since then, we remained in the cave, living like refugees in our own land. That is the whole story of our unfortunate village."

Bulisa, who had listened to the story with growing interest, now appeared agitated and excited.

"Where is that necklace?" he asked, his beady eyes shining, "Show it to me!"

The peasant leader looked at Bulisa, a little surprised at the urgent tone of his voice. He then rummaged his sack for a considerable time, during which Bulisa showed increasing signs of impatience. At last, after a good ten minutes, he took out a shiny, golden necklace which was studded with strange, red stones. It was glowing strangely in the light of the candles and the red stones sparkled as though they were burning.

For a few moments, Bulisa examined it with bated breath. Bhuva and Jhola, who had been equally surprised at Bulisa's strange manner, waited for Bulisa to speak. Indeed his eyes sparkled with rare exultation and he sighed once or twice in deep satisfaction.

"That is a valuable necklace, isn't it?" said the peasant leader, proudly.

Bulisa looked up and nodded.

“Its more than valuable! It is priceless! This is nothing but a demon talisman! My strong suspicions have been confirmed! The so-called Warriors of the Red Fist are demons! Only the wearer of this jewel is safe from them and may control them using its power!”

“You mean...” began the peasant leader, scratching his head in pure astonishment, “That they... those... those Warriors of the Red Fist are... are not... human?”

“Indeed, I mean exactly that!” said Bulisa, still smiling, “Chance has placed in our hands a most vital object! The soldier who wore this jewel must have been killed by those demons after it had been snatched away from him. And the old man who held it in his hands even as he dropped down unconscious, was left alone. Do you realise what this talisman means to us?”

“Indeed I understand, now!” said the peasant leader, his wild eyes shining with joy, “You can keep it! You can take it with you! I think that you are our deliverers! I thought that you were no ordinary men, but now I am sure! You are both intelligent and strong enough to take on Madrikumbah’s vile agents of evil, now that you have that necklace with you!”

“Thank you so much!” said Bulisa and wore the necklace around his neck, “We will leave tomorrow for Vagah and bring you good news!”

“You can stay here for the night,” said the peasant leader, “I can set up a tent for you! You can leave in the morning. I’ll give you a packed lunch, for you won’t find any place in this entire country where you can find a decent meal. We have heard that most villages have met the same fate as our own and you will find that the countryside is barren and devoid of any prosperous settlement.”

“Thank you for your hospitality,” said Bulisa, clutching the hand of his host.

“No! No! WE thank YOU, sir! You have brought us hope! May you succeed in your mission!”

CHAPTER 20

The three adventurers spent that night in the cave. The peasant leader had ordered that a tent be put up for them. Even a special dinner was prepared for them and they were treated like kings.

Bulisa woke up early the next morning and shook Bhuva and Jhola awake. Jhola had slept quite soundly, but Bhuva's eyes were red with fatigue and sleeplessness.

"Sorry, master," he said, "But this place is strange to me! I could hardly get a wink of sleep, lying in this tent!"

"We must be at our best today, Bhuva!" said Bulisa, in a serious voice, "For I think that before the sun sets tonight, we would have done our work in Madriland. If I cannot free Madrikumbah from that vile spirit that possesses him, I think our only chance is to kill him by turning his own Red Fist Warriors against him. But that is only when everything else fails and indeed, I would be sorry to kill such a magnificent Emperor."

"Yes, master," said Bhuva, rubbing his eyes, "But we will succeed, master! I feel it in my bones that we will!"

"Go to the chief's tent and see if he has risen," said Bulisa, "We must leave in the shortest time possible and I want a few words with him before we leave."

Jhola got up and left the tent. He returned in a few moments followed by the peasant leader himself.

"Good morning, sir," he said, yawning, "It is early. Are you leaving now?"

"Yes," said Bulisa, "In a few minutes, anyhow!"

"Just wait for some time, sir, and I'll give you your packed lunch!" said the peasant chief, "And I'll get ready for the journey, myself!"

"What! You wish to come with us?" asked Bulisa, taken aback at this sudden announcement.

"Yes, sir," said the peasant leader, "I thought over it during the night and I have decided to throw my services at your disposal. I shall come to Vagah with you and help you in your quest."

"But there is nothing that you can do for us," said Bulisa, smiling and shaking his head, "You might hinder us in our plans and unnecessarily put your own life in danger!"

The peasant leader's face was set in a stubborn expression. His wild eyes glowed with annoyance at Bulisa's rebuttal.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked in a petulant voice, "I am no coward! I don't fear death! And who knows? Maybe I can help you in some unforeseen way!"

Bulisa shrugged his shoulders. The determination in the voice was unshakeable.

“Thank you so much!” said the peasant leader, smiling, “But my god! I have not even told you my name all this while! My name is Villovvar!”

“We didn’t exactly meet as friends,” said Bulisa, smiling. “So I guess you had a reason for not revealing your name to us then.”

“Right! That is so!” said Villovvar, still shaking his head in self-reproval, “But even after we sealed our friendship, I still didn’t introduce myself! I think that I have slowly become more like a savage than a civilised being, thanks to our lifestyle. However, I shall now go and tell the people in this settlement about my plans. Then we can leave!”

Villovvar left the tent and Bulisa shook his head in amusement.

“He is quite a character, Bhuva!” he said, “But he is a courageous man! I think that his addition to our little party will only strengthen our hands and not weaken it. Let us wait till our esteemed friend gets himself ready for the journey ahead!”

They did not have to wait for long. In a few moments, Villovvar stuck his head into the tent and indicated his readiness.

The whole settlement was awake now. People had gathered in large numbers outside their tents to greet their leader and wish him luck.

“We shall triumph, my people!” cried Villovvar at the top of his voice, “The tyranny of Madrikumbah will end soon!”

“Madrikumbah will not die, if we can help it,” added Bulisa, “He is merely under the control of an evil entity that controls his thoughts and actions. We shall free him from the clutches of that entity and bring you good news!”

The people cheered loudly at this and waved their farewell.

The four travellers, carrying a sack each, left the cave and came out into the open hillside. They climbed down the hill to the ledge where they had left the horses and the carriage. Within a quarter of an hour they were back on the main road to Vagah, travelling at a fast, steady pace. The horses had been rested and fed well and were fresh and raring to go. Jhola was in the driver’s seat while the rest were inside the carriage.

“We shall be at Vagah in a few hours’ time,” said Villovvar, “I have visited our capital city once or twice long ago, much before these terrible events shook our country. It used to be a lovely place then: full of gardens and palaces, but from the descriptions that I have heard of it from rumours that reached us, it has been turned into a terrible

slave-camp after the trouble began. There are also rumours that there is a huge construction going on in the middle of the city and that the Emperor is using his large slave-force to build a tall, sinister tower there. All this I heard when our village was still in peace, from villagers in the neighbouring districts.”

“A tower?” said Bulisa, thoughtfully, “Has it been completed?”

“According to my latest information, which, by the way, is about a month old, it has not been completed, yet! It is believed that the construction work is going on at a furious pace and that several of the workers have died from sheer overwork and exhaustion. One of the soldiers in the army who is a friend of mine from the old days, told me that he had seen those poor people being chained and dragged about in cages by those vile monstrosities that you describe as demons. It is appalling! Appalling! Such barbarity should end, sir. It should end!”

“And it shall end!” said Bulisa, in a firm voice full of determination, “The tower shall not be completed! I have a feeling that if that tower is fully built, that Madrikumbah will become unstoppable.”

“You seem to know everything, sir!” said Villovar, looking at Bulisa with awe and admiration, “You seem to be a scholar and a learned one at that! In all my years, I have never seen a man like you. And your friends! I still cannot quite fathom how powerful those two really are!”

Bhuva smiled at the compliment. But he gave a sudden yawn and closed his eyes. Bulisa looked at him with concern.

“Sleep now, Bhuva,” he said, “Rest well before we reach Vagah! I need you fresh and ready once we reach Vagah.”

Bhuva nodded and yawned again. Soon he was fast asleep and the other two men stopped talking lest they disturb him.

As they travelled, Bulisa observed the countryside around him. The carriage sped past parched, lifeless fields, desolate, abandoned settlements and groves of dry trees and tree stumps. What had once been a prosperous and thriving country now looked barren and hopeless.

They had started quite early in the morning and by mid-day they were close to the great city of Vagah.

“Let us stop before we reach Vagah and have our lunch,” said Bulisa.

They stopped near grove of palm trees to have their packed lunch. In the distance ahead of them, they could see the dark, shapeless blur of the city of Vagah. But even from this distance, Bulisa could observe a tall structure rising out from the blur, like a thin candle on a mass of wax. He could not quite make out its shape or size from the distance, but saw that it was much taller than any other building that he had seen.

“That is Vagah!” said Villovvar, pointing out to the dark blur in the distance. “We shall be there within an hour. We must be on the look-out for those horrid Warriors of the Red Fist. We are sure to encounter them, now that within their radius.”

Bulisa looked at the blur for several minutes, his eyes dark with resolve and his fists clenched.

“This is the beginning of the end of your country’s troubles,” he said.

CHAPTER 21

They continued their journey towards Vagah in a state of suppressed excitement and tension. Villovvar looked out of the carriage in fearful anxiety every few moments.

“Master!” said Jhola, suddenly, “I see a group of people in the road ahead and they don’t look too friendly to me!”

“Stop a few hundred yards in front of them!” said Bulisa, in a sharp tone of voice, which indicated his seriousness and readiness for the tough task ahead of them.

Jhola did as ordered and the three travellers got out of the carriage. Jhola jumped down from his driver’s seat, wearing a fiery expression on his face and clenching his fists in anticipation.

The group of people ahead of them marched towards them slowly and deliberately. They were not the Red Fist Warriors but regular soldiers in Madrikumbah’s large army. Their faces were mean and nasty and each of them carried a large battle-axe. They stopped a few yards in front of the strangers and peered at them with a mixture of astonishment and animosity. Bulisa stood in front with Bhuva and Jhola beside him. Villovvar stood behind them, patting his wooden club meaningfully.

“Surrender!” cried one of the soldiers, in a sharp, unpleasant voice, “I don’t know who you are or why you’re here, but you shall pay for your insolence, dogs! Go down on your hands and knees and crawl before us or we shall destroy you this instant!”

Bulisa smiled and raised his hands.

“I am not your enemy,” he said, slowly and deliberately, “But if you stand in my way, I shall have no choice but to destroy you!”

“WHAT!!” thundered the soldier, his eyes blazing with fury, “You dare address us in that manner! YOU WILL PERISH THIS INSTANT! I shall not dirty my hands by fighting you, but you shall die, nonetheless! Take THAT!”

With these words, the soldiers stepped aside quickly and revealed a large horde of masked warriors behind them. These terrible warriors were wearing crimson coloured uniforms and were carrying large, ugly, blood-stained spiked clubs in their hands. The soldier who had spoken first, now touched a golden necklace that he was wearing and raised it to the level of his eyes.

“ATTACK!” he screamed.

Within seconds, the horde of Red Fist Warriors fell upon the four strangers with horribly high-pitched, inhuman shrieks. Bhuvu and Vilovar stepped back at this sudden display of ferocity, but Jhola was ready and waiting for them. In an instant, he gave a thunderous war-cry and punched out at the attackers with his mighty arms. Bulisa, having side-stepped the attackers, now raised his own demon talisman to his eyes and uttered a few strange words to himself.

Even as Jhola grabbed the nearest Red Fist Warrior and began crushing him with his mighty bear-hug, the rest of the Red Fist Warriors retreated with unwonted meekness. The black-uniformed soldiers, witnessing this, shouted with amazement and anger. The Red Fist Warriors, for the first time ever, had retreated from a fight without any orders.

“WHAT IS THIS?” screamed the first soldier, alarmed and astounded beyond recovery, “WHERE ARE YOU LEAVING?”

Bhuvu and Jhola now came forward to meet the soldiers. With a cry of rage, the soldiers threw themselves upon their enemies and swung their mighty axes at their heads. Bhuvu dodged a blow and suddenly raised his hand and pointed his fingers in their direction. A rain of fiery sparks showered on the soldiers from the sky above and they screamed with fear and pain when they were hit. Jhola now lifted the one of the soldiers above his head and swung him around in a menacing fashion.

The battle was short-lived. With cries of fear, astonishment and impotent rage, the soldiers dropped their weapons and took to their heels, running in the direction of Vagah as fast as their feet could carry them. The captured soldier screamed helplessly in Jhola's mighty hold and wriggled desperately in an attempt to escape his grip.

Villovar, who had been a spectator to these amazing scenes, now stepped forward, his face wearing an awe-struck expression.

"My god! My god!" he said, still in a daze, "What powers you have!"

"Release him, Jhola!" said Bulisa in a grim voice.

Jhola reluctantly released the terrified soldier from his hold and set him down on his feet. The soldier's face was as white as a sheet and his eyes were like those of a terrified, hunted rabbit.

"Please... please... I... I... let me go!" he said, trembling like a leaf, "I... I... I... forgive me! I... we didn't... mean to hurt you!"

"And I don't mean to hurt you!" said Bulisa, wearing a stern expression on his face, "You will first remove that jewel from your neck and place it in my hands!"

"No... no... no!" cried the soldier, "My... my very life will be in danger, if... if I remove it. I... would not survive if I return... return to my base camp without... without this necklace."

"Why so?" said Bulisa, clutching the soldier by his black shirt.

"I... I don't know... exactly why!" he said, "But our... our Emperor Madrikumbah gave... gave each of us this necklace before those Warriors of the Red Fist first made their appearance. Using... using this necklace... only using it can those fellows be controlled... otherwise... otherwise they will have our blood!"

Bulisa released him and pushed him away harshly.

"Get lost!" he shouted loudly and the soldier stumbled away from them as quickly as he could and disappeared in the distance, heading towards the city.

Villovar shook his head with a dazed expression on his face.

"This... this is too much!" he said, turning to the smiling Bulisa, "Your powers are much more than I first imagined."

"This is only the beginning, Villovar," said Bulisa, still smiling at Villovar's amazement, "This is only the beginning."

As the carriage drew closer and closer to Vagah, the four travellers saw clusters of soldiers, standing on the edge of the road, staring at them with wonder-struck expressions on their faces. None of them, however attempted to stop the carriage or block their passage into the city. Some of them even screamed in terror and fled at the sight of it.

Bulisa watched them with amusement.

“We have created quite a stir!” he said to the smiling Bhuva, “These fellows have evidently heard of our exploits some time ago. News does travel fast in this city! I think that we will reach Madrikumbah’s palace without any further disturbance.”

However, here he was wrong. As the carriage entered the city and moved in the direction of Madrikumbah’s palace through the maze of streets and the grim, desolate buildings, they were stopped by a strange, red-bearded man just near the large, market-square. He was almost a dwarf, but his eyes shone with deep hatred and malignancy. He was carrying a black book in one hand and human skull in the other.

“STOP,” he cried, in a sharp, unsteady voice, “Yes, Bulisa! Come out of that carriage! I know that it is you!”

Bulisa restrained Jhola and told Bhuva and Villovvar to remain inside the carriage. Stepping out, he found himself in the presence of Neddivall, the evil necromancer and his oldest enemy.

The little dwarf smiled evilly at Bulisa and spat harshly at his feet.

“We meet again, Neddivall,” cried Bulisa, looking Neddivall in the eye, “Your evil plan will not fructify. I gather, from your presence, that you are behind the strange madness of Madrikumbah! Well, I shall not allow you to go on with your evil ways!”

Neddivall laughed shrilly.

“Indeed!” he said, with a snarl, “I shall not let a weakling like you stop me in my very hour of triumph. My Tower Of Darkness will be completed within a few days and I shall be in full control of all the forces of this world: natural and supernatural! But first, I shall destroy you and your puny friends here!!”

He stepped aside and snapped his fingers. In an instant, a tall, huge monster that resembled a fearsome, carnivorous dinosaur, with sharp teeth and huge claws appeared behind him. It roared ferociously and blood dripped from its evil mouth.

“Bulisa! Meet my pet creature, Phoror, the Terrible! He is keen to play with you!!”

CHAPTER 22

Phoror didn't look particularly friendly. Bulisa stared up at the creature with shining eyes and gritting teeth.

"Bring it on, Phoror!" he screamed.

The huge monster bent down and grabbed Bulisa with its huge paws. Jhola, roaring like a mighty lion jumped from his seat and went straight for the creature's evil, red eyes. Phoror, however, swatted him like a fly and Jhola fell to the ground like a wounded insect.

Villovar screamed in utter terror and tried to escape from the scene, but Neddivall saw him and threw a ring of fire around him by just raising his hands.

"None of you shall escape my wrath!" he screamed, "I shall destroy all your associates, Bulisa!"

Bhuva, who was still inside the carriage, took out his black book from his pouch. Neddivall, who had turned all his attentions to Villovar, did not observe him step out slowly and discreetly from inside the carriage.

Bulisa struggled in the clutches of Phoror and not even his demon talisman could help him now.

"NOW! FACE YOU DOOM, BULISA!" screamed Neddivall. He had already opened his own black book and was leafing through it hurriedly.

Bhuva, slowly moved behind Neddivall and was about to cast his own spell on the necromancer, when he turned around and eyed him with surprise.

"YOU!" said Neddivall, reaching to grab Bhuva, "WHERE did you spring up from?!"

Suddenly Jhola, who had been lying on the ground, groaning, got up and rushed towards Neddivall, aiming a blow at him. Neddivall, distracted by Bhuva, did not see him. Just as Neddivall was about to grab hold of Bhuva, Jhola fell upon the evil sorcerer and threw him down on the ground.

"My book! My book!" screamed Neddivall, trying to get up to his feet quickly.

But Bhuva was ready for him by now. Uttering a few strange words, Bhuva released the mighty life-force that was within his amulet.

In an instant, Neddivall was screaming horribly, lying on the ground. He was wriggling and writhing in pain, his eyes streaming.

“AAH! AAAH! What is this! What is this!” he screamed, again and again as the terrible force kept crushing him with unbearable force till he stopped screaming and wriggling and lay lifeless on the ground.

The terrible creature that had grabbed Bulisa now disappeared into thin air, leaving behind a strange, red mist. Bulisa fell to the ground with a thud, but slowly recovered to his feet.

The dead necromancer and his black spell book were lying on the ground in a pool of blood. The strange curse that had weighed down the country of Madriland had been lifted.

After all four of them had sufficiently recovered, Bulisa took Neddivall’s black book and tore it to bits. He threw the pieces to the ground and burnt them with a spark of flame from his hand.

“The evil has been destroyed at its source,” said Bulisa, breathing heavily and feeling his neck, where Neddivall’s vile creature had grabbed him, “Now let us go on to Madrikumbah’s palace and see if he is all right. The spirit that had possessed him would have left him now and he will be weak and ill.”

In strange silence, the carriage moved on till it arrived at the gates of the palace of the Emperor. There were no guards or soldiers here, for the news of the events that had overtaken them lately had sent them flying in sheer terror to the safety of their barracks.

Inside the palace, Bulisa and his companions found the Emperor lying on his throne, unconscious. There were a few frightened guards who had entered the palace after the adventurers and they now stood behind Bulisa, shaking with fear and amazement. One of them was a superior officer and he stepped forward.

Bulisa examined Madrikumbah for a few minutes.

“Your Emperor shall be all right,” he said, turning to the officer, “No longer will he be the wicked tyrant that he used to be, these last couple of years. He shall be normal once again!”

“Thank you, sir,” said the officer, shaking with emotion, “Thank you so much!”

“First you must go and release all the people of this country who have been enslaved by that monster, Neddivall, through your Emperor. Release all of them from their cages and order the destruction of the tall tower that was being built in the centre of your city. Then release all the people who have been imprisoned by Madrikumbah in the last two years. Now go and do as I say!”

The soldier saluted Bulisa and rushed away to convey Bulisa’s orders to his men and share the great news with them.

“Take the Emperor to his bed chamber, Bhuva!” said Bulisa, “Jhola! You go back into the city and go to the Tower Of Darkness and help them pull it down. Villovar! You find a horse and ride back to your cave settlement and inform your people of the good news! We shall finish our business here and return to our own land! Good bye!”

Villovar stepped forward and took Bulisa’s hands in his.

“You are a real saviour of our people! Who could imagine that! That wicked sorcerer was just days away from completing his evil scheme and gaining complete control of the world! Thank you, sir, and good bye! We shall meet again, I hope, in future!”

After Jhola and Villovar left, Bhuva and Bulisa carried the huge, limp form of the great Emperor to his bed chamber.

Madrikumbah returned to consciousness after a few hours. He opened his eyes and stared at the faces of Bulisa, Bhuva and Jhola in front of him. Jhola had returned after completing his assigned task, by this time.

“Where am I?” he croaked, in a weak, unsteady voice, “What has happened to me? Who are you?”

“My name is Bulisa,” he said, in a kind, reassuring voice, “We have just freed you from the clutches of a vile necromancer who had gained complete control over your thoughts and actions.”

“My mind is a blank!” said Madrikumbah, feeling his forehead with his palm, “I don’t remember anything! But wait... I think... I think... Yes!! It’s all coming back to me now! My god! The mist is rising from my mind now!”

“You must rest and recover from your tribulations, your highness,” said Bulisa, “But do you know to what state your people have been driven to, thanks to your affliction?”

“No!” said Madrikumbah, shuddering, “Tell me the worst! I am prepared!”

“They had been enslaved in their own land. The people in the countryside have been driven to poverty and crime. Drought and heavy taxation has driven your people to starvation and death. The economy is in a state of collapse and your once-prosperous land has been converted into a parched desert. That necromancer did all that through you, to complete his evil scheme and turn your own people against you, so that he would be unhindered. He used you as a pawn in his wicked game and you have suffered as well. Now he is dead and you are free from the hold of his vile spirit.”

Madrikumbah closed his eyes for several minutes. Then he opened them and looked gravely at Bulisa.

“I think I can understand now,” he said, slowly, “I think I remember him. Let me explain everything to you, for I owe you a lot. I don’t remember the time, but it must be a year or two ago, when a dwarf-like man came to Vagah, wishing to see me. He wore a red beard and he carried a skull in his hand and he entered my palace boldly and stood in front of my throne, facing me with a wicked smile on his face. He boasted to me about his powers and told me that all he needed was money to complete his greatest scheme ever. It was about building a tall tower in the centre of Vagah, rising up so high that it would touch the sky! He claimed that it would lead to his gaining control of all the elements: natural and supernatural and that he would give me a portion of that power. He had to perform a strange ceremony inside the tower which would enable him to take complete control of the world. I was shocked and astounded at his wild manner of speech and thought that he was a raving madman. I ordered that he be beaten up severely for his insolence and thrown out of the city. My guards came forward and grabbed him by his arms and led him to the flogging chamber. Before he left, he glared at me with his wild, glowing eyes and spat on the floor. ‘I shall not let this pass, Madrikumbah,’ he screamed, ‘You and your people will suffer for this! I had come here with the intention of making you one of the most powerful and most feared Emperors in the whole world. You refuse my grand offer in such an off-hand manner. Well! Well! You shall be made one, then! And against your will! You shall know my power when I make you a mere, mindless zombie in my hands!’ I was more than sure that he was a poor, gibbering madman and I laughed aloud at his words. Indeed, I thought little of the matter and life went on as before. But one night, several months after that incident, I felt a sudden chill travel down

my spine. I was just turning in for the night, when I saw that same red-bearded dwarf stand in front of the window of this very bed chamber. He had, I think, sneaked into the palace grounds that evening and waited for his chance to get me alone. He closed and bolted the door and stood in front of me, smiling fiendishly. I opened my mouth to shout for the guards, but my mouth froze open and I could not utter a word. He laughed at my discomfiture and pushed me down on my bed. ‘You are in my power, Madrikumbah,’ he said, baring his ugly, yellow teeth, ‘You disrespected me and I shall neither forget nor forgive. Through you, I shall take possession of your Empire and destroy your people’s lives. I shall build my grand tower using your miserable people as slave labour. And you shall be powerless to stop me! Think for a few moments, you dog, for you can never think another thought on your own for the rest of your life!’ After speaking thus, he stood in front of me for a few moments, uttering strange, sinister incantations. He opened his eyes and grinned ferociously at me. ‘Goodbye, Emperor, and sleep tight!’ he said, ‘You shall wake up in the morning as a different person!’ With these words, he left me and climbed out of the window. I felt dizzy and faint and though I struggled, I fell asleep. I don’t remember anything that happened after that night! Only now I feel as though I am waking up from a strange dream.”

“We have destroyed the root of the evil, your highness,” said Bulisa, after a few minutes, “But the effects of his actions will be felt for some years to come. Your people will take a long time to recover from their hardships and your Empire’s economy must be restored to its full health. We must now return to our own country. We wish you good health. Goodbye, your highness!”

“Wait!” said Madrikumbah, trying to sit up in his couch, “Surely you’re not leaving so soon?”

“We must, your highness, for our work here is over!” said Bulisa, “Your people will take care of you and nurse you back to health. We have nothing left to do here! We will go back to Manda and tell our Emperor about the state of affairs here. He will surely help your country recover with financial and humanitarian aid.”

Madrikumbah smiled weakly at these words.

“Ben Butaba? Help us? You must be joking,” he said, “You must know him better than I do and yet you say that he will help us!”

Bulisa, Bhuva and Jhola laughed till tears trickled down their faces.

“I see that you are not yet up-to-date with the latest events that have shaken our country, your highness,” said Bulisa, wiping his eyes, “Ben Butaba is no more. His nephew and my good friend, Jho Butaba is now the Emperor.”

Madrikumbah’s face showed his surprise and delight at the news.

“Well, then, strangers,” he said, “I thank you for all that you have done for me and my country. You are free to go where you wish!”

EPILOGUE

Several months later, Bulisa found himself back in his own cottage in the village of Gowa. Jho Butaba had greeted the three heroes with much joy when they arrived at Patah and had promised all aid to the southern Empire of Madriland after listening to their extraordinary story about the events and the state of affairs in Madriland. Having secured this promise, Bulisa had relieved Bhuva and Jhola for a few months from their duties and arrived at Gowa, a relieved and exhausted man.

One morning, as Bulisa sat on his dining table, contemplating his breakfast, Ghoda burst into the cottage in a flurry of excitement.

“You fiend!” he cried, in a voice mixed with both annoyance and delight, “You have just cost me a good servant! Your wicked actions have cost me my good Mola!”

“What do you mean?” asked Bulisa, getting up to calm down his friend, “Explain yourself, Ghoda!”

“I mean just that!” said Ghoda, shaking his head in mock reproval, “Mola just announced his intentions of returning to his own country and reclaiming his fortunes and his status in his community, now that things are back to normal! You wretch!”

The sleepy Mola now entered the cottage.

“Thank you so much, sir, for all that you have done! I heard all about your wonderful deeds in Madriland,” he said in a dead monotone, trying hard to suppress a yawn.

“Why! You’re overwhelmed with emotion, Mola! Control yourself, man!” said Ghoda, shaking his ex-servant by his shoulders.

Bulisa laughed.

“You can thank my two friends, Bhuva and Jhola for that, Mola,” he said, “I did very little. Bhuva was the one who actually destroyed that evil necromancer, Neddivall. Don’t you know that?”

“What! Then you don’t deserve any of the credit for those deeds, you villain,” said Ghoda, in an impish voice, “My god! You are a crafty fellow!”

“I am leaving for Madriland in a hired horse carriage, sir,” said Mola, “I wished to thank you for your help in freeing our country from the clutches of evil and also bid you goodbye. If you see your two friends, convey my greetings to them also.”

“Goodbye, Mola, and best of luck to you!” said Bulisa, shaking hands with the sleepy ex-servant of Ghoda.

“Goodbye, sir and goodbye to you too, sir!”

With these words, Mola left the cottage, moving in a slow, dignified manner.

After a long silence, Ghoda turned and faced Bulisa with a big smile on his face.

“You know what, Bulisa?” he said, slowly and deliberately, “I am really happy for Mola. I was just joking when I called you a fiend!”

Bulisa yawned and turned back to face his breakfast.

“I knew that too, Ghoda!” he said, “You are, after all, a good man.”

[THE END]