

SANDOKAN

QUEST FOR A THRONE

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Emilio Salgari

Translated by Nico Lorenzutti



Sandokan: Quest for a Throne

By Emilio Salgari

Original Title: *Alla conquista di un impero* (1907)

Translated from the Italian by Nico Lorenzutti

Special thanks to Catherine Peck

ROH Press

First paperback edition

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ISBN: 978-0-9782707-6-6

Contents

Chapter 1: Lord Yanez	1
Chapter 2: The Kidnapping.....	12
Chapter 3: In the Tiger's Den	21
Chapter 4: The Shaligram.....	32
Chapter 5: Tigers	42
Chapter 6: On the Brahmaputra.....	50
Chapter 7: The Rajah of Assam.....	60
Chapter 8: The Black Tiger	70
Chapter 9: The Hunt.....	80
Chapter 10: The Rajah's Court.....	88
Chapter 11: The Play	98
Chapter 12: The Duel.....	106
Chapter 13: Surama's Abduction.....	116
Chapter 14: Sandokan to the Rescue.....	126
Chapter 15: The Attack.....	137
Chapter 16: Panthers.....	147
Chapter 17: The Fakir's Confession	159
Chapter 18: The Servant.....	168
Chapter 19: The Rescue.....	179
Chapter 20: On the River	191
Chapter 21: The Hunt.....	204
Chapter 22: The Trial.....	217
Chapter 23: The Greek's Revelations	226
Chapter 24: The Battle.....	237
Chapter 25: The Tiger's Retreat.....	248
Chapter 26: Trapped.....	255
Chapter 27: The <i>Bhainsa</i>	265
Chapter 28: The Sadiya Hillmen	274
Chapter 29: On the Brahmaputra.....	282
Chapter 30: The Attack on Guwahati.....	289

Chapter 1

Lord Yanez

The ceremony had come to an end. The Shaligram, a holy relic coveted by every ruler in India, had been returned to the Umananda Temple and hidden in a place known only to the rajah, his ministers and the high priest.

Thousands upon thousands of Vishnu's devotees had come from every village along the shores of the Brahmaputra, hoping to catch a glimpse of the black spiral-shaped shell, for the ancient rock was known to contain a hair from the head of that great Hindu deity. For several hours a grand procession had followed the great chariot around the streets of Guwahati, City of Eastern Light and capital of Assam, but at last the crowds began to thin as pilgrims, townspeople, soldiers, *devadasis*, and musicians hurried back to their homes, temples, barracks, and hotels in search of rest and refreshment.

Two men clad in foreign attire stood out among the throng as they slowly walked down the central street of the great city, pausing from time to time to engage in conversation.

One was a European in his early fifties with a curled grey moustache, a thick grizzled beard and bronzed skin. He was dressed in a white jacket, white trousers, brown leather long boots and a large hat of Manila hemp adorned with small red silk tassels that matched the thick red velvet sash about his waist.

The other was Asian, from the southeast judging by the olive hue of his skin; slightly younger, he had dark piercing eyes, a fine black beard and long wavy hair that fell to his shoulders. In contrast to his companion, his attire was princely: a fine green silk jacket with gold braid and buttons, trousers of the same color and yellow leather long boots with pointed curled toes. From his thick white silk sash hung a magnificent scimitar whose handle was inlaid with diamonds and rubies of great value.

Sandokan: Quest for a Throne

Tall, handsome and well-built, both displayed the vigor of men decades their junior.

“So, Yanez?” asked the more richly dressed of the two as he stopped for the tenth time, out of earshot from the crowd. “What have you decided? Our men are getting restless. You know patience has never been a virtue of the Tigers of Mompracem. Eight days of visiting temples and strolling along the Brahmaputra; that’s not how you take a kingdom.”

“Always in a hurry,” smiled his companion. “Even after all this time the Tiger of Malaysia’s heart still yearns for battle.”

“It’s the curse of my nature,” the legendary pirate admitted, returning his friend’s smile. “We can’t all be as calm and unflappable as you.”

“Sandokan, I wish I could snatch the rajah’s throne this very day and give his crown to Surama. But this promises to be more difficult than we expected, we’ll need more than a bit of luck to get close to him.”

“More than a bit of luck? That doesn’t sound like the Yanez I know. You don’t have a plan?”

“I do... well, part of one,” replied the Portuguese.

“And?”

“The rajah hates foreigners, so to get into his good graces we’ll need to do something extraordinary to grab his attention.”

“Sambigliong and our men are at the ready, I doubt there’s anything thirty-five Tigers cannot accomplish. And Tremal-Naik and Kammamuri arrive from Calcutta tomorrow to bolster our numbers; they’re each worth a dozen men. So now, tell me, what extraordinary feat do you have in mind?”

Instead of replying, Yanez stopped in front of a large building. Long wire baskets filled with cotton soaked in coconut oil hung in the windows, bright flames lighting the interior. The ground floor appeared to serve as an inn or restaurant and judging by the noise coming from within, it was bustling with activity.

“This is it,” said Yanez.

“This is what?” asked Sandokan.

“The Rajah’s Prime Minister, His Excellency Kaksa Pharaum will not sleep easily tonight.”

“Why?”

Lord Yanez

“Listen to that racket. It was not wise of him to take residence atop a hotel; it’s a decision that could cost him dearly.”

Sandokan looked at him in surprise.

“This is where we begin?” he asked.

“If all goes well. I’ll start with a classic gambit; it fooled James Brooke, it should work well enough here. Are you hungry, little brother?”

“I could do with a meal.”

“Then come, we’ll put a little something between our teeth. Unfortunately, you’ll have to dine alone,” said Yanez.

“You’re being mysterious.”

“All part of the plan. Choose a table not far from mine; but whatever happens do not intervene. Once you’ve eaten, summon our men and have them mill about the street within earshot of the window.”

“What if things don’t go as you planned?”

“I have my pistols and my kris hidden in my sash. Trust me, just watch, listen, and eat, and pretend to be blind, deaf, and dumb.”

Before his friend could utter another word Yanez turned and walked into the hotel, donning an air of such serious determination that Sandokan smiled despite his amazement.

The restaurant was not as busy as Yanez had expected. It was comprised of three rooms, spartanly furnished with several tables and benches; a large number of servants ran about, carrying jugs of arrack or palm wine, and large bowls of rice topped with fish from the Brahmaputra that had been fried in coconut oil and sprinkled with herbs.

About two dozen Indians sat at the tables, all of high caste, judging by their apparel; mostly Kalita and Rajput hillmen that had journeyed from the nearby mountains of Duleh and Landa to offer prayers to the Shaligram.

The sight of that European come to dine among them appeared to have ill effect on all the patrons, for the room immediately fell silent, and the joy produced by the wine and arrack vanished in an instant.

Yanez, taking in every detail, walked through the first two rooms into the third and sat at a table occupied by four bearded Kalitas, each bearing a small arsenal of guns, daggers and talwars – swords with sharp curved blades – that protruded from their thick sashes. The Portuguese looked at

each in turn, then without a smile or a greeting cried out in accented Pidgin English:

“Food! My lord hungry!”

The four Kalitas, displeased by the stranger’s uninvited company, picked up their bowls and changed tables.

“Perfect,” mumbled the Portuguese. “It begins.”

He had barely uttered those words when a boy passed carrying a plate of fish. Yanez rose quickly, grabbed him by the ear and forced him to stop.

“My lord hungry!” he cried, pressing his face towards him. “Put food here! That’s twice my lord asks you!”

“Sahib!” exclaimed the Indian. “I can’t! This fish—”

“Call me my lord, you scoundrel!” shouted Yanez, feigning annoyance. “I am great Englishman. Put fish here! Smells good.”

“I’m sorry, my lord. It’s for another customer!”

“My lord hungry. I eat. I pay.”

“One minute, and I’ll take your order.”

“I count time; you late, I cut off your ear.”

He drew a magnificent gold watch from a pocket, put it on the table, and fixed his eyes on the minute hand.

At that moment Sandokan entered the restaurant and sat at an empty table by a window. No one paid him much heed, his clothes and appearance drawing little attention from the other patrons. He could have easily passed for a wealthy Hindu from Lahore or Agra come to take part in the religious celebrations.

The legendary Malay pirate had barely sat down when three or four young servants went to his table to take his order.

“By Jupiter!” Yanez exclaimed angrily, casting away the cigarette he had just lit. “He came in after me, and they’re all flocking to serve him. Well, Lord ... Moreland,” he said smiling slightly at the memory, “won’t stand for this! Ah! A drink!”

A jug that had been ordered by the four Kalitas who had first occupied the table, sat within reach, next to a glass. Yanez, without any thought to its owners, grabbed it, raised it to his lips, and drank.

“Good arrack,” he said. “Exquisite!”

Lord Yanez

He was about to drink again, when one of the four bearded Kalitas approached the table, and said in heavily accented English:

“Excuse me, sahib, that’s my jug. Your unclean lips have touched it, now you must pay for it.”

“Call me my lord,” replied Yanez.

“As you wish, as long as you pay for the drink that I ordered for myself and my companions,” said the Kalita dryly.

“My lord no pay. Thirsty, find jug on table and drink. Leave my lord alone.”

“This is not Calcutta; we do not bow to white men here.”

“Bow or no bow, not important to my lord. I am rich and powerful Englishman.”

“All the more reason to pay for what you take.”

“Go to hell!”

He spied another boy carrying a bowl of cooked fruit, grabbed him by the neck and shouted:

“Here! Put here, in front of my lord. Put here or my lord strangle you.”

“Sahib!”

Ignoring the young man’s cry, Yanez snatched the bowl, put it before himself and pushed the boy away with such force it knocked him into a nearby table.

“My lord very hungry!” he muttered as he began to eat. “I send sepoy and cannons here... boom... boom... boom... shoot all scoundrels!”

A dark murmur spread through the room as all eyes turned to the foreigner.

The four Kalitas had risen to their feet, eyeing him fiercely, their hands resting on the butts of their long pistols.

Only Sandokan laughed silently, while Yanez, unperturbed by the mood in the room, devoured the fruit before him, washing it down occasionally with glasses of arrack from the Kalitas’ jug.

When he had finished, he grabbed another server and tore a bowl of fish curry out of his hands.

“For my lord!” he shouted. “You no serve me, I take it!”

This time a howl of indignation rose in the room and the patrons sprang to their feet as one man.

Sandokan: Quest for a Throne

“Get out, Englishman! Get out!” they shouted menacingly.

A Rajput, a rough looking man, bolder than the others, walked towards his table and pointed to the door.

“Enough!” he said. “Go!”

Yanez, who was already attacking the fish, looked up.

“Pardon?” he asked calmly.

“Go!”

“Me my lord!”

“Lord or sahib, get out!” replied the Rajput.

“My lord no finish dinner. Very hungry.”

“Go eat in Calcutta.”

“Too far. My lord no move. Here good food; I eat, I pay, I go.”

“Throw him out!” shouted the Kalitas in unison.

The Rajput tried to grab Yanez, but the Portuguese quickly picked up the fish and threw it in his face, momentarily blinding him.

At that act of defiance the four Kalitas whose arrack Yanez had taken, charged at the table, howling like demons.

Sandokan had also sprung to his feet and was about to draw a weapon from his sash, but a quick look from Yanez immediately stayed his hand.

The Portuguese could easily take care of himself. He hurled a bowl of curry at the Kalitas, then grabbed a bamboo stool, and swung it menacingly through the air.

That quick show of strength had silenced the room and for a moment the patrons remained frozen where they stood.

“Everyone out or kill you all!” shouted the Portuguese.

No one moved. Yanez dropped the stool, drew two magnificent long-barrelled Indian pistols inlaid with silver and mother-of-pearl from his sash and shouted:

“Everyone out!”

Sandokan was the first to obey. The others, though armed, seized by a sudden panic, quickly followed.

The innkeeper, hearing all that noise, rushed into the room brandishing a metal rod.

“What’s all this ruckus? Why are you scaring off my customers?”

“Call me my lord,” Yanez replied calmly.

“Leave here at once!”

Lord Yanez

“Not finished eating. Your boy not serve me, I take dishes. Must pay for food.”

“Go eat elsewhere! I do not serve Englishmen!”

“I no go.”

“I’ll summon the guards and have you arrested!”

“My lord no afraid. Guards no frighten Englishman.”

“Get out!” the innkeeper shouted furiously.

“No!”

The Assamese raised the metal rod, but immediately stepped back to the door. Yanez had picked up the pistols he had set on the table and pointed them at the innkeeper’s chest.

“Leave or I kill you!”

The innkeeper slammed the door shut, while the Kalitas and Rajputs who had come from the adjoining rooms, shouted:

“Do not let him get away! He’s mad! Guards! Guards!”

Yanez laughed loudly.

“By Jupiter!” he exclaimed. “All as planned, it truly could not have gone any better!”

Calm and impassive, like a true Englishman, he sat down at another table on which rested another bowl of curry and gulped down a couple of spoonfuls. He had just put the spoon to his lips a third time when the door swung open and six soldiers wearing large turbans, bright red jackets, wide trousers and red leather boots, trained their rifles on him.

The six were well built, as tall as grenadiers, and bearded like mountain brigands.

“Surrender,” said one whose turban was adorned with a vulture’s feather.

“To who?” asked Yanez, as he took another spoonful of curry.

“To us; His Excellency the Prime Minister’s Personal Guard.”

“Where take me?”

“To see His Excellency.”

“Very well.”

He tucked his pistols into his sash, stood up, placed a small pile of rupees on the table and calmly walked towards the guards.

“His Excellency will meet great Englishman.”

“Your weapons, my lord.”

“I never surrender pistols: gift from Queen Victoria because I am great English Lord. I will not hurt minister, you have my word.”

The six guards exchanged uncertain looks, but then perhaps fearing reprisals if the man proved to be who he claimed, bid him to follow.

Meanwhile the patrons had gathered in the neighboring room, ready to lend a hand to the guards if need be. When Yanez appeared, he was greeted with an explosion of cries.

“Hang him!”

“Throw him out the window!”

“He’s a thief!”

“He’s a villain!”

“He’s a spy!”

The Portuguese looked at them squarely and merely laughed in reply.

They left the restaurant and walked a few steps to another door in the same building. One of the guards opened it and led Yanez up marble steps lit by brass domed lanterns.

“This Prime Minister’s house?” asked Yanez.

“Yes, my lord,” replied one of the guards.

“I eat with him now.”

The guards looked at him in amazement, but remained silent.

They reached the landing and entered a beautiful room, elegantly furnished with several silken sofas, large blue percaline curtains and opulent furniture, inlaid with ivory and mother-of-pearl.

One of the guards walked to a bronze gong that hung above a door, picked up a wooden hammer and struck it twice.

The sound had not yet faded, when a curtain was raised and a man stepped into the room and fixed his eyes on Yanez, more with curiosity than with anger.

“His Excellency Prime Minister Kaksa Pharaum,” announced one of the guards.

“Good evening!” said Yanez, removing his hat and extending his right hand.

Kaksa Pharaum was a man of about fifty, as thin as a fakir, short, with dark bronze skin, a hooked nose and a thick beard that concealed most of his face. He wore a simple yellow silk *dboti* adorned with red embroidery about the length of a dressing gown, and a pair of dark red slippers.

Lord Yanez

Although he had seen Yanez's hand, he ignored it, and stepped to one side to get a better look at the foreigner that stood before him.

"You were the cause of the disturbance below?" he asked.

"Yes," said Yanez.

"Did you know I lived above that restaurant?"

"No, sir; I was hungry and I wanted to eat."

"All that ruckus because you were hungry?"

"When your Excellency is hungry, you eat I am sure. It's the same for me."

"I am Prime Minister—"

"I am Lord James Moreland, from England, great friend of Queen Victoria, Empress of India."

At those words the minister's frown vanished and his face brightened.

"You're a lord?"

"Yes, Excellency."

"Did you not tell the innkeeper?"

"I told everyone; no one gave me food. Not like in England. We give food to Hindus."

"So you could not dine, my lord?"

"Only a few bites. I'm still hungry, very hungry. This evening I'll write to the Viceroy of Bengal and tell him I could not complete my mission; the Assamese refused to feed me."

"What mission?"

"Assam has been plagued by tigers; I am a great hunter, I've come to kill the beasts."

"So, my lord, you came to offer us a valuable service. I regret you were treated so rudely; allow me to make it up to you. Come."

He dismissed the guards with a gesture, drew back a curtain and led Yanez into an adjoining room illuminated by a spherical glass lantern that hung from the ceiling and filled the room with soft opaline light. Beneath it stood a table laden with a variety of delicacies served on dishes of gold and silver.

"I was just about to dine," said the minister. "Would you like to join me, my lord? Consider it an apology for the innkeeper's bad manners."

"Thank you, Excellency. I will write to my friend the Viceroy of Bengal and tell him of your kind welcome."

“I shall be grateful.”

They sat down and began to eat, occasionally exchanging a few compliments.

To further show his hospitality the minister ordered his servants to bring his guest some beer. Yanez smiled gratefully and sipped it slowly, the brew being more bitter than he had expected.

When they had finished, the Portuguese leaned back in his chair and fixed his eyes on the minister’s face.

“Excellency, I have been sent by the Viceroy of Bengal to discuss a matter of grave diplomatic importance,” he said in perfect Hindi.

Kaksa Pharaum started.

“Forgive me for the unconventional manner in which I approached you—”

“You’re not an English Lord?”

“I am a lord and I am also first secretary to His Excellency the Viceroy,” Yanez said. “He sent me here as his secret ambassador. Tomorrow I’ll present you with my official papers.”

“You could have asked for an audience, my lord. I wouldn’t have refused it.”

“The rajah would have been informed, and I wanted to speak to you privately.”

“Does the British government have designs on Assam?” Kaksa Pharaum asked nervously.

“Not at all, rest assured. No one wishes to threaten the independence of this state. We have no cause to move against Assam or its ruler. However, what I have to tell you must remain secret, we cannot risk being overheard by anyone. It would be best if you dismissed your servants for the evening.”

“As you wish, of course,” replied the Minister, forcing a polite smile.

He stood up and struck the tom-tom that hung on the wall behind his chair.

A servant appeared almost immediately.

“You may retire for the evening. Extinguish all lights save those in my chambers,” said the Minister, “We are not to be disturbed.”

The servant bowed and left.

Lord Yanez

Kaksa Pharaum waited for the sound of footsteps to fade, then sat down once again.

“We’re alone now, my lord, and rest assured no one would dare intrude upon our conversation. Now, what is it you have to tell me?”

Chapter 2

The Kidnapping

Yanez drained another glass of that terrible beer with a grimace, then drew a beautiful tortoiseshell cigar case inlaid with diamonds from a pocket, took out two large manila cigars and offered one to the minister.

“Try one, Excellency,” he smiled. “They’re from the Philippines. I was told you appreciate a good smoke, a rare trait among Indians, most of your compatriots would rather chew betel nut.”

“I acquired the habit in Calcutta, while I was serving as the rajah’s ambassador,” said the minister as he accepted the cigar.

Yanez handed him a match, lit his own cigar, took a few puffs and exhaled, savouring the aromatic smoke as it rose toward the lamp, then turned his eyes back to the minister.

“As I said, Excellency, I’ve come on behalf of the Viceroy of Bengal to obtain information on events in Upper Burma. We’ve heard troubling rumours of an insurrection. As you border this turbulent kingdom, I’m sure you keep abreast of what transpires there. The Viceroy will of course be grateful for any assistance you can provide and will reward you handsomely.”

At the mention of a reward, the minister smiled.

“You were right to come to me,” he said. “It’s true: there is a violent insurrection in Burma now, led by a former monk who has cast away his yellow robes and taken up a scimitar.”

“Against King Phibau?”

“Yes, but more so against his wife, Queen Su-payah-Lat, who last month ordered the monarch’s two younger wives strangled, one of whom had been chosen from among the princesses of Upper Burma.”

“What tale is this?”

“I will explain all, my lord,” replied the Minister, narrowing his eyes.

The Kidnapping

“According to Burmese law, the king can have four wives, but at least one must be chosen from among his sisters, a cousin, or at the very least a princess to keep the royal bloodline pure.

“When King Phibau ascended the throne, he had two sisters to choose from. The king felt more inclined to select the eldest, but the youngest, Princess Su-payah-Lat was determined to become queen and displayed such great affection for him that the Queen Mother decided, in her high wisdom, that the love deserved to be rewarded and that her son should marry them both. Her plans, however, were thwarted by the eldest sister, Princess Ta-bin-deing, who preferred to enter a Buddhist monastery. Is all this clear so far?”

“Crystal,” said Yanez, who had little interest in the story. “And then, Your Excellency?”

“Phibau married Su-payah-Lat and two other princesses, one of whom belonged to a noble family from Upper Burma.”

“And Su-payah-Lat had the princesses strangled?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“And then what happened? Another murder, this time by the king?”

“No. Su-payah-pa... pa...”

“Continue, Excellency,” said Yanez, looking at him coolly.

“Where was I...?” asked the minister, who suddenly appeared to be struggling to keep his eyes open.

“The third murder.”

“Ah, yes!” Su-payah-pa... pa... pa... is that clear?”

“Absolutely. Continue.”

“Pa... pa... a son... the court astrologers... Do you follow, my lord?”

“Perfectly.”

“Then he strangled the two queens...”

“Yes.”

“And Su... pa...”

“Her name appears to have become a bit of a tongue twister. By Jupiter! Have you had too much to drink?”

The minister, who for the twentieth time had closed and reopened his eyes, looked at Yanez drowsily; the cigar fell from his lips, he slumped back into his chair, then rolled onto the ground unconscious.

“Nothing like a little opium to make a fine cigar all the more relaxing,” smiled Yanez. “And now to work; Sandokan thought I’d lost my touch, he’ll be pleased.”

He picked up the cigar the minister had let fall and went over to an open window.

Although the lights in the neighbouring buildings had long since been extinguished, the night was clear and the sky cloudless; he immediately spied several groups of men walking about, smoking and chatting as they took the cool evening air.

“Sandokan and the Tigers,” muttered Yanez. “All is well.”

He cast the cigar butt out the window, put two fingers to his lips and whistled softly.

The men below froze then two small bands went to seal off each end of the street, while the remainder gathered beneath the lighted window.

“Ready,” said a voice.

“One minute,” replied Yanez.

He tore the big silk cords from the curtains, fastened them together tightly, tested them, then secured one end about a hook in the wall and wrapped the other about the unconscious minister’s chest.

“His Excellency weighs very little,” said Yanez, pulling him up.

He carried the minister to the window and slowly lowered him towards his men. Ten arms were quickly raised to receive him and gently brought him to the ground.

“My turn,” said Yanez, his voice low.

He doused the lamp, grabbed the rope, and quickly climbed down to the street.

“All as planned,” said Sandokan. “You haven’t killed him, I hope.”

“He’ll be fine tomorrow,” smiled Yanez. “Little brother, allow me to introduce His Excellency Kaksa Pharaum, Prime Minister of Assam.”

“Saccaroa! You move in powerful circles.”

“Let’s go, Sandokan. The night watch could stumble upon us at any moment. Did you find a cart?”

“The *chopaya* is parked at the end of the street.”

“Perfect. Quickly now, there’s no time to waste.”

The Malay pirate whistled to summon the men who had been keeping watch at the far end of the street. They quickly gathered round him then

The Kidnapping

set off towards a large blue carriage. It was one of those covered wagons that Indians employ for long journeys called a *chopaya*, where, sheltered from the sun, they can eat, smoke and sleep in comfort. The hinder section, furnished with mattresses and cushions serves as a bedroom, the fore section is usually equipped with a table strapped in place and serves as a lounge. Four white zebus harnessed with red saddlecloths were yoked to the large blue cart.

The minister was placed on a mattress, then Sandokan and Yanez climbed aboard and sat down near to him while their men dispersed in pairs and groups, taking different directions to avoid drawing suspicion. Once they had all vanished from sight, the *chopaya* set off, driven by a Malay pirate dressed as a *bandyman*¹, a torch set next to him to light the way.

“Take us home, Sambigliong,” said Sandokan. Then, turning to Yanez, who was lighting a cigarette, he asked: “Will you tell me your plans now? I can’t even begin to fathom what you’re up to. I thought they were going to murder you in that restaurant.”

“Murder a white man! They’d never dare,” said Yanez, slowly exhaling the smoke from his cigarette. “Not in public anyway.”

“You took a great risk.”

“A calculated one.”

“What are we going to do with him?” asked Sandokan, casting a glance at their prisoner.

“We’ll question him, and his answers will get me into the rajah’s court.”

“You still intend to visit the tyrant’s court? For the last eight days we’ve been told repeatedly that he does not see Europeans.”

“He’ll receive me with great honours. All I need is the Shaligram. He wouldn’t dare refuse the man who’s returning a hair from Vishnu’s head. And when I meet him, Surama will be one step closer to the throne.”

“I do not understand how the abduction of a minister, Vishnu’s hair, and the Shaligram connect to the taking of a kingdom.”

“Little brother, do you know where the priests hide that sacred shell?”

“I do not.”

“Neither do I; I’ve asked numerous Indians over the last eight days and no one seems to know.”

¹ Bandyman: Cart driver

“How then do you plan to obtain that information?”

“The minister,” said Yanez.

Sandokan looked at the Portuguese in admiration.

“You devil of a man!” he exclaimed. “You’d be able to outwit Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu if it came to it.”

“You may be giving me too much credit,” laughed Yanez. “There’s one last obstacle we’ll have to overcome for our plan to succeed.”

“What’s that?”

“A man.”

“You’ve just abducted the Prime Minister; we’ll abduct him as well.”

“I don’t think it’ll be as easy. He’s said to wield great influence at court and does all he can to prevent the rajah from meeting with outsiders.”

“Who is he?”

“A European, I’m told.”

“An Englishman?”

“I do not know. We’ll ask the Prime Minister.”

The *chopaya* stopped abruptly, interrupting their conversation.

“We’re here, Captain,” said Sambigliong.

The carriage had halted before a stone edifice on the bank of the Brahmaputra. The place was deserted; the remnants of an ancient wall stood nearby on either side of it, once perhaps part of the city’s fortifications but now little more than rubble.

Black stone statues of Indian gods and elephants peered down from a frieze above a large bronze door, the structure’s only entrance.

Sambigliong had barely finished speaking when the door opened and a dozen men emerged and immediately encircled the carriage.

“Were you followed?” asked Sandokan, jumping to the ground.

“No, Captain,” replied one of the men who had taken part in the abduction.

“All is well in the pagoda?”

“All is as we left it.”

More men emerged from the doorway, carrying torches. Though all were dressed like the local Assamese, a closer look revealed them to be foreign to Northern India. Some were short and stocky with small dark eyes and reddish-olive skin, others were much taller, with large eyes, handsome features and skin of a yellowish hue. But despite differences in

The Kidnapping

appearance, those Malays and Dyaks from Borneo were equally renowned for their ferocity, boldness and indomitable courage.

“Take him below,” said Yanez, jumping down from the *chopaya* and pointing to the sleeping minister.

A well-built Malay with a wrinkled face and jet black hair picked up Kaksa Pharaum and carried him into the building.

“Hide the *chopaya*,” added Yanez, turning to Sambigliong. “We may have need of it later. The four of you,” he said, pointing to his men, “will stand guard outside. We may have been followed.”

He relit his cigarette, summoned a couple of torchbearers and with Sandokan and the remainder of his men following close behind him, stepped through the doorway and headed down a narrow, debris-strewn passageway that led beneath the ground.

After having gone fifty or sixty metres they entered a large circular chamber that had been dug out of the rock. In its center stood an enormous rectangular stone adorned with carvings of three goddesses: Parvati, the goddess of destruction and rejuvenation, Lakshimi the goddess of wealth and prosperity, and Saraswati the goddess of knowledge, music, arts and science.

“Remain here,” Yanez instructed his men. “Keep your rifles within reach; I’ll have no surprises. Come, Sandokan.”

He took a torch from one of his men and set off with the Tiger of Malaysia down a second, narrower corridor. A few minutes later they stepped into another large chamber illuminated by a lamp that cast a soft yellow light.

Unlike the first chamber, this one had been made suitable for habitation. Thick Gujarati carpets and tapestries embroidered with gold and exotic designs covered the walls and floor. It had been furnished with large sofas with silk cushions and several large metal shelves that held numerous flasks and glasses. A table stood in the centre, inlaid with tortoise-shell and mother-of-pearl, surrounded by several bamboo chairs.

One part of the wall, however, remained uncovered, a large niche that housed a statue of Krishna, eighth incarnation of Vishnu, depicted as a black-skinned cowherd.

The minister had been set down on one of the plush sofas, snoring blissfully as if he were in his own bed.

“It’s time to wake him,” said Yanez, casting away his cigarette before taking a long-necked flask from a shelf that was filled with a reddish liquid. “This should do the trick.”

“You gave him opium?” asked the pirate.

“A cigar laced with it,” replied Yanez.

“Two drops of that liquid in a glass of water should suffice. His mind should clear immediately.”

The Portuguese filled a glass with water from a crystal bottle that rested on the table and carefully added two drops of that reddish liquid. The water turned red and began to fizz then slowly reverted to its original transparency.

“Open his mouth, Sandokan,” said the Portuguese.

The pirate approached the minister, drew his dagger and gently pried open the man’s teeth.

“Now,” said Sandokan.

Yanez poured the contents of the glass into Kaksa Pharaum’s mouth.

“It should take about five minutes,” said the Tiger of Malaysia.

“You may as well light your pipe.”

“An excellent idea.”

The pirate took a beautiful chibouk adorned with pearls from a shelf, filled it with tobacco, lit it, stretched out on a sofa like a Turkish pasha and began to smoke.

Yanez remained by the minister, studying him closely. The Indian’s breathing was gradually becoming more regular; his eyelids began to flutter and his limbs twitched once or twice. The Portuguese heard him sigh deeply, then at last Kaksa Pharaum opened his eyes.

“You do love your rest, Excellency,” smiled Yanez. “How do your servants wake you? We travelled for over an hour and you slept like a stone. I wish I could sleep as soundly.”

“What... My lord!” exclaimed the minister, standing up suddenly and looking around in astonishment.

“Yes?”

“Where am I, my lord?”

“Welcome to my humble abode.”

The minister stood silently for a moment as he examined his surroundings more closely, then exclaimed:

The Kidnapping

“By Shiva! I’ve never been in this room before.”

“Of course not!” replied Yanez, with a note of mockery in his tone, “You’ve never deigned to visit me.”

“And who is he?” Kaksa Pharaum asked, pointing to Sandokan, who continued to smoke quietly upon the sofa.

“A great prince and a great warrior known throughout the South China Sea as the Tiger of Malaysia. His ferocity is legendary.”

Kaksa Pharaum shivered despite himself.

“There’s no need to be afraid, Excellency,” said Yanez, noticing the minister’s unease. “When he’s smoking, he’s as docile as a lamb.”

“And what is he doing here, in your house?”

“Keeping me company.”

“You mock me!” Kaksa Pharaum shouted furiously. “Enough! Enough of this! Have you forgotten that I am as mighty as the Rajah of Assam? You will pay dearly for this! Tell me where I am and why you’ve brought me here or I’ll—”

“You may shout and scream for as long as you wish, Excellency, no one can hear you. We’re several metres below ground and these walls are quite thick, not a sound will reach the surface. But there’s no need to fear, no harm will come to you if you answer my questions.”

“What do you want of me, my lord?”

“All in good time, Excellency. First let me apprise you of your situation. There are thirty men just outside that door, seasoned warriors that could destroy an entire sepoy regiment. Do not try anything foolish; you will not leave this room against my will. Am I clear?”

“Perfectly.”

“Excellent, we’ll begin with a story. Sit down and listen.”

“You’re going to tell me a story?”

“Yes, Excellency, a story drawn from the pages of your country’s history.”

He gently pushed the minister into a chair, took a few glasses of fine crystal and a flask of amber liquid from the shelf, then opened his cigar case and offered one to the prisoner.

At the sight of it Kaksa Pharaum shuddered nervously.

“There’s no need to fear, Excellency,” said Yanez. “These aren’t laced with opium. Would you prefer a cigarette? Your choice.”

Sandokan: Quest for a Throne

The minister shook his head.

“A glass of whiskey then,” continued Yanez. “I’m having some as well. It’s excellent.”

“Perhaps later. Tell me this tale of yours.”

Yanez drained his glass, lit the cigarette, and leaned back in his chair.

“As you wish, Excellency,” he said. “It’s not a long story, but I think it will be of great interest to you.”

Sandokan continued to watch the conversation in silence, reclining on the sofa, smoking his chibouk.

Chapter 3

In the Tiger's Den

“Eighteen years ago,” began Yanez, “the rajah’s brother ruled Assam, a wicked tyrant who was suspicious of all those about him, especially his relatives who he suspected of plotting to steal his riches and his throne.

“Among his kin was an uncle, a tribal chief, a valiant warrior admired throughout the nation for his skill and bravery, for he had repeatedly defended the borders from Burmese attacks. Aware of his nephew’s unfounded suspicions, he had retired to the mountains to live among his loyal men. His name was Mahur, have you heard speak of him, Excellency?”

“Yes,” Kaksa Pharaum replied dryly.

“That year Assam was struck by famine; the Brahmins, gurus, and priests convinced the rajah to perform a special ceremony to appease the anger of the gods. The prince readily agreed and insisted that all his relatives had to attend, including his uncle, who, suspecting nothing, brought his wife and children, two boys and a little girl named Surama. All were received with the honours due their rank and hosted in the royal palace.

“Once the ceremony had ended, the rajah invited his relatives to a grand banquet, during which the tyrant, as was his custom, drank large amounts of alcohol. The wretch was emboldening himself for what was to come. Just before sunset he rose and retired with his ministers, bidding all to continue to enjoy the festivities.

“Minutes later a shot rang out and one of the rajah’s cousins fell to the ground with a bullet in his skull. But before anyone could react, a second shot thundered and another guest fell forward onto a table, dead.

“The rajah had fired both shots from a small terrace above them. Eyes bulging, face perversely contorted, he clutched a smoking carbine, his ministers to either side of him.

““Die you greedy dogs!” he bellowed. “You’ll never have my throne!

You'll never steal my riches! Bring me another drink! Bring me another drink! Or I'll have you all beheaded!

"Terrified, the ministers filled his glass repeatedly. He drained one after another, then turned to fire upon those unfortunates, indifferent to their pleas for mercy.

"Men, women and children scattered in all directions, screaming in fear, but there was no escape, the courtyard walls were too high and the gates had been barred shut. Bullets rained down relentlessly, ministers passing the tyrant a fresh carbine after every shot, the madman howling like a jackal each time he struck his prey. Mahur, whom he hated most, was one of the first to fall, a bullet shattering his spine. His wife soon followed, then, one by one, his two sons.

"Thirty-seven of the rajah's relatives had been invited to the banquet and in less than ten minutes thirty-five lay dead in the courtyard. Only two had miraculously escaped: Sindhia, the rajah's younger brother, and Surama, Mahur's daughter, who earlier had been sent into the palace to play with the other young girls and had watched the massacre from a balcony.

"Bullets had grazed Sindhia three times, but he still jumped about the courtyard like a young tiger, diving in every direction to confuse his brother's aim. Terrified, he cried out again and again:

"Spare me! Spare me and I'll leave your kingdom forever! I'm your father's son! You do not have the right to kill me!"

"The rajah ignored those desperate cries and fired two more shots, but his brother dodged them both and at last the tyrant lowered his rifle and shouted:

"If you promise to leave this land forever, I'll spare your life, but only on one condition."

"I accept whatever you propose!" replied the young prince.

"I'll toss a rupee into the air, if you can strike it with a bullet from this carbine, you may set off for Bengal."

"I accept!" repeated the young man.

"The rajah tossed him a carbine.

"Be warned," shouted the madman, "if you miss the coin, you'll suffer the same fate as the others."

"Toss it!" shouted back the prince.

"The rajah tossed a rupee into the air. There was a shot, but the coin

In the Tiger's Den

struck the ground intact. The rajah, however, slumped back in his chair, dead. Sindhia had quickly pointed the weapon at his brother and shot him through the heart.”

“Everyone in Assam knows that story,” said the minister.

“But not what happened next,” replied Yanez, pouring himself another glass of whiskey and lighting a second cigarette. “Do you know what happened to Mahur’s daughter, the only other person to survive the slaughter?”

Kaksa Pharaum shrugged.

“Who would have given much thought to a little girl?”

“That little girl was of royal blood.”

“Continue, my lord.”

“When Sindhia learned that Surama had survived, instead of welcoming her to court and offering her his protection or at least sending her to live among her father’s tribe, he sold her in secret to the thugs who were traveling the country in search of young women to train as *devadasis*.”

“Ah!” said the minister.

“Tell me, Excellency, are those the actions of an honourable man? Surely Mahur’s daughter, a young girl of warrior caste, deserved better treatment from her only kin,” said Yanez, suddenly serious.

“It’s not for me to judge. What happened to her? Did she die?”

“No, Your Excellency, Surama grew into a beautiful woman with only one desire: to wrest the crown from her cousin.”

Kaksa Pharaum started.

“Wrest the crown?” he asked nervously.

“And she will succeed,” Yanez replied coldly.

“And who will help her?”

The Portuguese stood and pointed to the Tiger of Malaysia.

“That man there. He’s overthrown more than one mighty ruler and years back he slew Suyodhana, the Tiger of India, the notorious leader of the Indian Thugs. Together we lead the Tigers of Mompracem, the most dreaded band of pirates in the South China Sea. Even proud and mighty England, ruler of half the world, has bowed her head before us on more than one occasion.”

The minister slowly rose to his feet, his eyes moving anxiously from Sandokan to Yanez.

Sandokan: Quest for a Throne

“You’re pirates?” he stammered.

“Warriors. Formidable, determined, warriors,” replied Yanez, his tone serious.

“And what do you want of me? Why have you brought me here?”

Instead of replying Yanez refilled the glasses and handed one to the minister.

“Have a drink, Excellency. It’s of the finest quality I assure you, and it’ll help clear your mind. Drink as much as you like; no harm will come to you, you have my word.”

The minister, believing he should not refuse, nervously picked up the glass and put it to his lips.

Yanez watched him in silence for a moment.

“Who is the white man at the rajah’s court?” he asked at last.

“A man I hate.”

“His name?”

“Teotokris.”

“Teotokris!” muttered Yanez. “That’s a Greek name.”

“A Greek!?” exclaimed Sandokan. “What’s that? I’ve never heard speak of Greeks.”

“They’re Europeans,” said Yanez. “They’re reputed to be the cleverest men in Europe.”

“A worthy opponent then?”

“It appears so.”

“Excellent,” smiled the Tiger of Malaysia.

The Portuguese cast away his cigarette and turned to Kaksá Pharaum.

“Does he have much influence at court?” he asked.

“More than the royal ministers.”

“I see.”

He stood up again and circled the table three or four times, stroking his beard, then stopped suddenly before the minister.

“Where is the Shaligram hidden?” he asked bluntly.

Kaksá Pharaum’s eyes widened in fear, but he remained silent.

“Did you understand my question, Excellency?” asked Yanez.

“The Shaligram!” stammered the minister.

“Yes, where is it hidden?”

“I do not know, my lord, I swear; only the rajah and the high priest are

In the Tiger's Den

privity to that information," said Kaksa Pharaum, recovering his composure.

"You lie," replied Yanez, raising his voice. "The rajah's ministers are all privy to the secret: my sources have confirmed as much."

"The others, perhaps, not me."

"You would have me believe the rajah's Prime Minister knows less than his subordinates? I warn you, Excellency, it is not wise to lie to me."

"Why do you need to know where it's hidden, my lord?"

"I need to borrow it," Yanez said boldly.

Kaksa Pharaum roared.

"You intend to steal it!" he shouted. "Our most sacred relic! Coveted by every ruler in India! Madness! You'd destroy this very realm! If the stone is taken, it will be the end of Assam! It was foretold long ago!"

"Foretold by whom?" Yanez asked ironically.

"Our wisest, holiest men."

The Portuguese shrugged; the Tiger of Malaysia chuckled mockingly.

"As I said, Excellency, I only need to borrow the shell, it will not leave Assam. I'll need it at most for twenty-four hours, you have my word."

"Then ask the rajah if he'll grant you that favor. I do not know where it is kept."

"You refuse to tell me," said Yanez, changing tone. "Not wise."

A gong sounded from outside the room.

"What is it, Sambiglion?" asked the Portuguese.

"Señor Yanez, Tremal-Naik is here."

Sandokan put down his pipe and quickly rose to his feet.

The door opened and a man walked into the room.

"Good evening, my dear friends!"

Sandokan and Yanez greeted him warmly, shaking his hand in turn.

"It's so nice to see you both again," said Tremal-Naik. "It makes me feel twenty years younger!"

The newcomer was a handsome Indian from Bengal, about fifty years old, well built, with fine energetic features, light bronzed skin and dark eyes full of fire.

He was dressed in the manner of modern wealthy Indians, who have exchanged their *dbotis* and *dubgabs* for the simpler and more comfortable Anglo-Indian costume: a white linen jacket with red silk frogging, a thick

embroidered sash, white trousers and a small striped turban.

“How’s Darma?” asked Sandokan and Yanez in unison.

“Fine, fine,” replied the Bengali. “Sir Moreland has taken her to Europe. He wants to show her England.”

“I’m sure she’ll enjoy herself. Speaking of journeys, I gather you’ve deduced why we’ve asked you to meet us in Guwahati?” asked Yanez.

“To keep the promise you made to Surama that day Suyodhana’s son sank the *King of the Sea*.”

“Your son-in-law was quite a foe!” laughed Sandokan.

“True, true... who would have thought that... Ah!”

Only then had he noticed the third person in the room, sitting quietly at the table.

“Who is this?” asked Tremal-Naik.

“Tremal-Naik, allow me to introduce you to His Excellency Kaksa Pharaum, Prime Minister to the Rajah of Assam,” said Yanez. “You’ve come at just the right moment. He has a secret he refuses to share; perhaps you could help us convince him otherwise. Indians are masters at getting people to talk.”

“He’s stubborn, is he?” asked Tremal-Naik, eyeing the prisoner closely. “I may have a few suggestions, but Kammamuri is more creative in such matters. Do you need the information urgently, Yanez?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve threatened him?”

“Without success.”

“Has he eaten?”

“Not since dinner.”

“It’s almost morning, how about a tiffin²? Would you care to join us, sir?”

“Call him Excellency,” smiled Yanez.

“Ah! Of course, pardon me,” said Tremal-Naik, a note of irony in his voice. “For a moment, Excellency, I’d forgotten you were the rajah’s Prime Minister. Would you care to join us for a tiffin?”

“I usually do not eat breakfast before ten,” replied the minister, forcing a smile.

² Tiffin: A light meal of meat, vegetables and beer

In the Tiger's Den

"A little change will do you good. I set out from Calcutta yesterday morning; the food on the train was terrible and even worse once I got to Assam. I'm as hungry as a tiger. What do you say, my friends, shall I ask Kammamuri to prepare us some breakfast? How is this old pagoda stocked for food?"

"We brought ample provisions," replied Yanez.

"Come then. Kammamuri is an excellent cook. I'm sure he'd be happy to whip something up."

The two men left the room, leaving the Prime Minister alone with Sandokan.

The pirate relit his chibouk, stretched out on the cushions and began to smoke, his eyes fixed upon the prisoner.

Kaksa Pharaum had dropped back in his chair, taking his head in his hands.

The two men sat in silence for several minutes, Sandokan continuing to smoke as the prisoner thought about his predicament. Then the pirate drew the pipe from his lips and said:

"May I offer you some advice, Excellency?"

Kaksa Pharaum raised his head and fixed his eyes upon the formidable man.

"By all means, sahib," he said nervously.

"Tell my friend what he wishes to know; otherwise you'll only invite more trouble. I do not say this lightly, Excellency! He'll force the secret from you, one way or another. They call me the Tiger of Malaysia, they call him the White Tiger. Some say he is the more ruthless of the two; I would advise you not to cross him."

"I cannot tell you what I do not know!"

"The cigar my friend gave you may have clouded your memory," said Sandokan. "I'm certain, Excellency, that a good breakfast will help clear your head."

He leaned back on the sofa and returned to his pipe. A deep silence descended upon the room; Kaksa Pharaum, more frightened than ever, slumped back in his chair, taking his head in his hands once again.

The Tiger of Malaysia sat there almost motionless, eyes fixed upon the minister. They remained that way for half an hour, then the door opened and an Indian walked in carrying a steaming bowl of fish in a black sauce.

He was in his mid-forties, tall and strong-limbed, with dark bronze skin and fine energetic features; his clothes were white and he wore no jewelry save for a pair of large gold earrings.

“Kammamuri!” exclaimed Sandokan, putting down his pipe. “Nice to see you again, my friend!”

“Greetings, Tiger of Malaysia!” replied the Indian. “The pleasure is all mine!”

Four men had followed him in, carrying a variety of dishes and several bottles of beer.

Kammamuri set the bowl before the minister just as Yanez and Tremal-Naik stepped into the room.

The Tiger of Malaysia rose from the couch and sat down opposite the prisoner; while the minister, stone still in his chair, studied his captors in nervous silence.

“Forgive me, Excellency,” said Yanez, “I realize this breakfast is far inferior to the great meal you treated me to last night, but we’re a good distance from town and the shops have not yet opened. I hope you’ll do honour to our modest fare all the same. You look positively terrified; I hope the meal will cheer you.”

“I’m not hungry, my lord,” stammered the poor man.

“Take a few bites, just to keep us company.”

“And if I refuse?”

“I’m afraid my men would force you. You should never refuse the hospitality of an English lord. Come now, I can vouch for the quality of our kitchen. Take a few bites, and we’ll resume our conversation.”

Kaksa Pharaum’s eyes went to the bowl of fish in black sauce that Kammamuri had placed before him, then back to Yanez then to the other bowls that had been set upon the table. Their contents appeared to be similar.

At last, aware he had no choice, he picked up a fork and slowly began to eat. The others were quick to join him, devouring the contents of their bowls in minutes.

The minister had barely swallowed a few mouthfuls, when he dropped his fork and looked at the Portuguese sharply.

“Yes, Excellency?” asked Yanez, feigning great amazement.

“My stomach is burning,” replied Kaksa Pharaum, his face turning pale.

In the Tiger's Den

"Do you not like spicy food?"

"Not this spicy."

"You'll get used to it. Have another bite."

"No... no... a drink... a drink... my stomach is burning."

"A drink? What kind of drink?"

"Anything. Anything! That beer will do!"

"Oh no, Excellency. I'm afraid I could not allow it. This is English beer. You may not know this, but in England we add cow fat to our beer, it improves the flavour and speeds fermentation. You, sir, know better than I what fate attends an Indian who eats of the sacred beast. I would not want to be responsible for the pains you'd bear in the afterlife."

Sandokan and Tremal-Naik struggled to contain a smile, there seemed no limit to their friend's imagination. Yanez, grave faced, filled a mug with beer and handed it to the minister resignedly.

"Still if you insist, I do not wish to see you suffer."

Kaksa Pharaum shrank back in horror.

"No... never... I could never... water... my lord... water!" he shouted. "My stomach is on fire!"

"Water!" said Yanez. "I'm afraid there's none about. There is no well in this pagoda and the river is quite far from here."

"I'm dying!"

"Nonsense! A touch of indigestion. You'll be fine in a moment."

"You've poisoned me! You've poisoned me! The fire has spread to my chest!" cried the minister. "Water! Water!"

"Water, you said?"

Kaksa Pharaum had risen to his feet, his hands pressed tightly against his stomach. His mouth was flecked with foam and his eyes bulged from their sockets.

"Water... you dog!" he screamed, his voice no longer human.

Yanez stood up.

"Will you tell me what I wish to know?" he asked coldly.

"No!" shouted the minister.

"Then no water."

"I've been poisoned!"

"No, you haven't."

"Water!!!"

Sandokan: Quest for a Throne

“Kammamuri!”

The Maratha, who had been standing just outside the door, entered the room carrying two large bottles of water and set them upon the table.

Kaksa Pharaum, at the height of his suffering, had reached out to grab them, but Yanez quickly stayed his hands.

“Tell me where the Shaligram is hidden and you can drink your fill,” he said. “I warn you though that you will remain in our hands until we find it, so it would be useless to deceive us.”

“My insides are burning! Just one drop, one drop...”

“Where is the stone?!”

“I do... not... know...”

“You know,” said the relentless Portuguese.

“Kill me then.”

“Tell me what I want to know.”

“Wretched scoundrels!”

“If we were, we’d have killed you long ago.”

“No more! No more!”

Yanez took a glass and slowly filled it with water.

Kaksa Pharaum watched transfixed, bellowing and roaring like a wild beast.

“Will you speak now?” asked Yanez, once the glass was full.

“Yes... yes...” gasped the minister.

“Where then?”

“In the Umananda Temple.”

“We knew that. Where?”

“In a chamber beneath the statue of Matsya.”

“Where in the chamber?”

“There’s a stone... a bronze ring... lift it up... inside a small chest...”

“Swear on Shiva that you’ve told us the truth!”

“I... I... I swear... water... water...”

“One last question. Is anyone guarding the chamber?”

“Two sentries.”

“You may drink now, Excellency.”

Instead of taking the glass, the minister grabbed one of the bottles, put it to his lips and swallowed furiously. When he had drained more than half

In the Tiger's Den

the bottle it dropped from his hands and he fell back unconscious into Kammamuri's arms.

"Lay him on the couch," said Yanez. "By Jupiter, what did you put in that sauce, Kammamuri? He's not going to die, is he?"

"No need to worry, Señor Yanez," said the Maratha. "It was just a *bhut jolokia*, a strong chili pepper common in Assam. He'll be fine tomorrow."

"You'll guard him, and I'll have another two men stand watch at the door. If he escapes, we're done for."

"What about us?" asked Sandokan. "What's the next step?"

"We'll wait until nightfall, then go steal the Shaligram."

"And just why do you need that little shell?"

"Patience, little brother, patience. Trust me; I'll tell you all in good time."