

**NINE**



Though fresh into the academy, we were seniors. Since all the NDA chaps joined directly into the third term, we were automatically granted the privilege of lording over the DEs who were in the first term. To Maachh's frustration, we could not indulge in ragging the jangoos because of the new commandant's anti-ragging dictum that had suddenly come into force.

'I am sure the present commandant's son is joining the academy next year and that is why he is an anti-ragging advocate,' he theorised. 'What is the point in protecting them so much? We went through our share of ragging at the NDA without complaining, and are we not much better for the experience?'

Porky shared his views – 'Yes, now that it is our turn to have a little fun, ragging has to be avoided.'

We all agreed that a bit of fun was harmless, and that it built bridges between the nervous jangoos and the seniors.

Much to our alarm, the Bong was adamant about ragging the juniors.

'I am going to satisfy my ragging urge,' he declared. 'A few rules have to be broken for the sake of my mojo.'

We didn't remind him – mojo or no mojo – he was always breaking and bending the rules anyway.

It was obvious to all of us that Maachh had recently picked up the word 'mojo' and wanted an excuse to use it. His vocabulary had accumulated over a thousand words over the course of our training and he brandished them without blinking. It had begun with Shakespearean phrases and ended with a stray expression in Spanish, Italian, and German, thanks to the movies he watched.

Actually, it was all Porky's fault. He was to be blamed for getting Maachh started on the topic of ragging. He decided to channel his inner William Tell, one night. With infinite patience, the fellow had crafted a bow and some arrows during his carpentry classes at the NDA. Proud of his creation, Porky protected the articles with fierce possessiveness. Not even his closest pals had been able to wheedle him into parting with them for a practice session.

One night, he was suddenly seized with the desire to use one of the jangoos for target practice.

‘It will prove my expertise without doubt,’ he smirked.

‘We could all try our hands,’ seconded Maachh. ‘I bet I can shoot an arrow to a decent distance.’

We were aghast at the idea. This was not NDA where you could get away with some ragging. Using a junior as a target was unheard of. It was a criminal idea.

‘Are you crazy?’ I said, trying to change his mind. ‘If anything goes wrong, you will get thrown out of the academy. You may even land up in prison if the guy gets hurt.’

‘Don’t worry, Pessi,’ Porky replied. ‘Nothing will go wrong.’

With Maachh cheering him on, the joker set out on his mission.

It was a moonlit and peaceful night with not even the hoot of an owl breaking the quiet. The wind rustled softly through the gigantic trees, casting dark shadows on everything around us. It was the witching hour and that made the experience all the more eerie. Certain that the two chaps were on a calamitous path, Sandy and I followed them to the end of the barracks. We were the self-appointed watchdogs.

Maachh and Porky knocked on a few doors and commanded the jangoos to step outside their rooms and line up. There were about eight of them, clad in their pyjamas, rubbing sleep out of their eyes.

‘Good evening guys. It is nice to see you alert and smiling,’ began Porky, addressing the grim faces around him. The fact that not a single face creased in a smile didn’t dent his enthusiasm. ‘Tonight, two of you are going to get lucky. Now, let’s see who are the two lucky bastards who will get to share the experience of a lifetime.’

I felt sorry for the chaps. They didn’t know what was coming. The poor sods fidgeted nervously as they waited for Porky to make up his mind.

The joker, his hands clasped behind him, circled around them importantly,

studying their posture. He rebuked a slouching cadet and straightened him.

After he had gone around twice, Porky singled out two nervous looking jangoos and ordered them to follow him to the clearing near the mango grove beyond our barracks. The rest of them went back to bed, heaving a sigh of relief at having escaped his attention.

Maachh herded them towards a tree. He drew a circle on the ground with a stick and made one of them stand within the circle he had drawn.

‘All you have to do is to remain standing at that spot without moving a muscle,’ Porky instructed. Maachh went ahead and placed an apple on the poor chap’s head. The fruit had been especially brought from the mess for the archery practice.

Holding our breath in suspense, we watched as Porky took out his bow and arrows with the aplomb of an ace archer. He strode across to the line marked on the ground, took position, and aimed. Barely had the arrow whooshed through the air when the jangoos serving as Porky’s target collapsed in a heap on the ground. We rushed to the poor chap and checked his pulse. Sandy, who had the foresight to bring a bottle of water, sprinkled some on the chap’s face. We were worried but Porky wasn’t. While we were ministering to the guy, the other jangoos made his escape.

Porky was furious when he found the junior missing.

‘What kind of soldiers are these guys going to make when they can’t be brave enough to trust a fellow officer?’

‘Would you stand there with an apple on your head and allow Maachh to pull the trigger of his air gun?’ asked Sandy.

‘But I am an excellent archer,’ protested Porky. ‘I wouldn’t have hit the guy.’

‘He doesn’t seem to know that,’ chuckled Maachh, pointing towards the jangoos who were sprawled on the ground.

‘Are you guys insane?’ Sandy admonished them. ‘If this guy has a heart attack, all of us will be behind bars.’

The thought had a sobering effect on the jokers.

Together, we carried the semi-conscious jango back to his room and laid him on his bed, but not before Maachh had delivered a stern sermon to the unfortunate chap. He made dramatic gestures to enliven the speech while we tried hard to suppress our smiles.

Relieved that Porky's moment of madness had passed without any serious mishap, we made our way towards our rooms.

Sandy, who had been quiet all through the drama, now spoke up.

'It wasn't really a bright idea to drag those chaps to the ground. They are sure to squeak tomorrow morning and we will be in hot water.'

'They wouldn't dare.' Porky grunted.

'Let us keep our fingers crossed that they won't know your names,' said Sandy.

We trooped back to our rooms yawning tiredly. The idiotic idea had robbed us of a couple of hours of precious sleep.

'This is not the end of the matter,' announced Maachh. 'No one can cheat me of my right to rag the jangoos. Next time, I will have a foolproof plan. We can't have these piddly chaps fainting on us.'

'Exactly!' seconded Porky. 'What will they do when they have to go to war? Collapse in a heap at the first sight of the enemy? They need guidance.'

Appalled at their audacity, we wondered what stupid plans the guys were concocting in their pea-sized brains.

We didn't have to wait long.

On the very first moonless night, Maachh knocked on our doors just as we had begun a cacophonous orchestra of snores. Peering sleepily into the dark, we wondered what misfortune had struck the Bong this time.

'Pssst,' he whispered mysteriously. 'Assemble near the swimming pool if you want to catch some action. Hoot like an owl when you get there and if I hoot

back, it means everything is alright.'

With that, he disappeared into the darkness. The guy knew that none of us would want to miss out on the action.

The swimming pool was guarded through the night, and it was not easy to reach it undetected.

'It is no big deal,' snorted Porky when we expressed our concern. 'Aren't we trained to evade the enemy?'

'That's a different matter altogether,' objected Sandy.

'Well, this is an opportunity to use the evasion tactics.'

Maachh had assured us a full quota of entertainment and none of us was willing to miss the fun. Entertainment in any form was always welcome in the lacklustre life of GCs, so the three of us stole silently under the cover of darkness towards the swimming pool.

Standing in the shadows, we did the owl hoot as agreed upon and waited for the joker to arrive. There was no responding hoot. Tension grew as we wondered if the idiot had been caught by the guards. Just then, a clear owl hoot rang out in the dark and we spotted him slithering silently towards the pool with a jangoos behind him. The macabre tableau unfolding before us was as interesting as a high-octane thriller.

For good measure, we hooted again, and Maachh replied with a counter hoot. Three minutes later in a series of rapid actions, Maachh had prodded the jangoos up the diving board of the swimming pool. Even as we wondered about his intentions, he instructed the fresher to jump from the 10-metre board.

To his credit, the Bong had selected well. The jangoos turned out to be perfect soldier material. Whether it was the fear of being pushed by Maachh, or the need to get over with the ordeal, we will never know but the chap closed his eyes and jumped from that height without wasting a minute. There was a loud splash as he hit the water.

Within a few seconds, the sound of whistles rent the air and we could hear steps running towards the pool. We sprinted towards our barracks without a backward

glance. Swimming at night was prohibited. We knew that the jangoo would spill the beans if he was caught by the guards.

Fortunately for him, the jangoo was smart. Darting like a rabbit, he snuck into the shadows before the guards could catch him.

From a safe distance, we watched the sentries switching on the flood lights to search for the errant swimmer. Exhausted after the futile search, the guards finally switched off the lights and departed from the swimming pool.

All was not over for Maachh, who insisted on carrying out his duty towards the brave jangoo.

‘Bravo!’ he clapped. ‘You are definitely officer material and I am proud of you.’ Maachh declared proudly. ‘From tonight, you will be my protégé.’

We heaved a sigh of relief and hoped that Porky and Maachh had gotten over their mad ideas of ragging the freshers.