Sample Chapters

Horse of the Servant

by RV Menon

Chapter 1: Dungeons of Goa

Figure 1: Map of the Malabar Coast

The first thing they took was my name.

Not with ceremony or proclamation, just a shrug and an entry in a book. To the men who ruled this cellar I was no longer Nagoji Sawant. I was no longer *huzurat* cavalry in the service of Chimaji Appa and the Peshwa. No longer the rider of the black horse Kanka, nor the son of a landlocked village near Nashik where the farthest water anyone feared was a swollen river in the rains. In the quiet of Maratha tents that word *huzurat* carried weight, the household horse that rode closest to command, picked out by sardars when bravery and impatience had been proved in more than one fight. Here I was a number the clerk scratched beside the words *prisioneiro marata*.

They chained us in rows along the curved wall, backs pressed to damp stone, ankles linked by rusty iron. Above, somewhere beyond the sweating ceiling, the bells of Goa's churches rang for evening prayers. Down here, the rhythm that governed us was the scrape of the gaoler's boots and the splash of the bucket that carried away blood and filth. Water dripped somewhere in the darkness, steady as monsoon rain on a Deccan roof.

I was twenty-five that year, 1738, in the seasons after we broke a string of Portuguese forts along the Konkan, old enough to have seen men I admired die foolishly, young enough to believe I could still choose the shape of my own death.

They had already taken my fingernails by the time Father Duarte came.

The padre walked carefully between the lines of prisoners, his black cassock held slightly above the slime on the floor. He was a thin man with a scholar's stoop and ink-stained fingers, the sort of holy man who looked built for argument, not battle. Yet the calluses on his right hand told me he had once held something heavier than a quill. Here he was, deep under the Portuguese fortress at Goa, eyes moving from one ruined body to the next.

I watched from the corner of my eye. That habit predated the Portuguese by years. As a boy in the Deccan I had learned to sit in the corner of a fort courtyard and see everything, from the loosened strap on a trooper's saddle to the way a sardar's hand tightened on his sword hilt at the mention of a rival. Here in this cellar I turned the same skill on other men.

The gaoler, Joao, moved beside the priest. He was a broad man whose belly strained his leather belt, a man who had learned to wrap cruelty in jokes. He smelled of garlic sausage and chapel incense, an unholy combination. When he passed my place he tapped my shoulder with his boot, almost companionable.

"Este," he said in Portuguese, "this one is stubborn."

I kept my face blank. Stubborn is better than broken in any language.

Father Duarte's gaze followed the gaoler's gesture. His eyes were grey and tired, with the faint redness of a man who slept badly. When he saw my hands, wrapped in dirty cloth, he winced and his fingers twitched

inside his sleeves.

“How long since the last questioning?” he asked in that same tongue.

“Two days,” Joao replied. “He still insists he is only a horseman. No names, no forts, no routes. He knows we have others who talk, but still he holds on.”

The priest’s eyes came back to my face. “You understand our language, senhor marata?”

“Enough to know when I am being lied to, Father,” I said in my own Marathi. My mouth tasted of rust and old water. “But you can speak your questions. I have heard most of them already.”

Joao laughed. “You see, he understands.”

“Bring him,” Father Duarte said.

They unshackled my legs and hauled me upright. My joints protested after so long curled under me. I bit back the groan. A Maratha horseman does not whimper in front of an enemy. We bleed, we fall, we curse the gods and get back up. On the black soil of the Deccan that had been simple enough. Here in the Portuguese darkness it took more effort.

The interrogation chamber lay twenty paces away and felt like another world entirely. The smell changed as we went, from rotting straw and human waste to oil, sweat and something sharp that stung the nose, a sour mixture of wine and old fear. They had built the room under a vaulted arch, stone thick enough to swallow most screams before they reached the street.

Ropes hung from an iron ring bolted into the ceiling. A table sat to one side, laid out neatly with tools that had never worked metal. Pliers. Hammers. Wooden wedges. A brazier glowed on the far side of the room, its coals sending up a thin trail of heat that shimmered in the dim light.

This was where the Portuguese forged information.

They sat me on a stool with my wrists bound to its legs. Joao checked the knot, then moved to the table. The priest remained standing, hands tucked into his sleeves, fingers worrying at the cloth.

“Nagoji Sawant,” Father Duarte said, using my name as if it still belonged to me. “You have already told us that you rode with a Maratha force against our allies. You have admitted that you attacked Portuguese caravans and outposts. The Viceroy’s spies insist you were *huzurat* cavalry under Chimaji Appa himself, chosen by your sardars for your initiative. Such men see more than dust and hooves. What we do not yet know is who ordered those attacks, how many men you had, and which forts or roads you meant to strike next.”

“You know more than I do then,” I said. “We raided where we could, when we could, against whoever traded with our enemies. That is the way of the ghats and passes. You have maps and books. You draw lines on paper and call them borders. My horse does not read.”

Joao picked up a pair of iron tongs. “Your horse is dead,” he said conversationally. “We shot it when we brought you in. A pity. Fine animal.”

My throat closed. Kanka’s black mane against my cheek on winter mornings, his easy stride, the way he had carried me through musket fire near Chaul. I forced the memory down. They wanted to see grief; they wanted to use it as a lever.

“Then he died better than I will,” I said, hearing the flatness in my own voice.

Father Duarte studied me. “You are not a fool,” he said. “You know your position. The Viceroy needs names. He needs to know if the army that devoured his northern strongholds is turning its hunger south. He needs to know if Chimaji Appa intends to bring his siege guns to Goa next. If you cooperate, your suffering can end. I can speak for you, perhaps secure you work on a plantation, a life in chains that is still a life. If you do not…”

His gaze flickered briefly toward the brazier.

Those northern forts rose in my mind, one victory after another in those hard years, each fall ringing like a bell across the Konkan. Chimaji Appa followed, and with him the fear I smelled on these priests. They knew what we knew: the war was not over. Chimaji was coming for Goa. Any day now, the ground above this dungeon would shake with the impact of Maratha cannon.

“If I do not,” I said, “you will do what you have already done to others. You will pull at my body until it comes apart. You will hold hot iron to my skin. You will try to make me scream something that fits the shapes you already have in your mind.”

Joao snorted. “He talks too much.”

“He is a soldier,” Father Duarte said softly. “He knows the game.” He stepped closer. “Tell me this at least, Nagoji. Not for the Viceroy, for me. Do you believe you fight for God, for some higher good, or is it simply for plunder and the honour of your people?”

The question surprised me more than any threat could have. For an instant the dungeon vanished and I was once again on a ridge above the Godavari, looking down at the dust of a marching column, feeling that familiar tightness in my chest that was not quite fear and not quite joy.

“I fight because I was born into a world where men who do not fight are trampled,” I said slowly. “I fight because if my people do not learn to meet guns with courage, someone else’s flag will fly over our forts. As for God, Father, I leave Him to the Brahmins and to you. He seems to favour whoever has the better powder.”

The priest’s mouth twitched, a shadow of something that might almost have been a smile.

“You see,” Joao said, “he gives you nothing. Let me loosen his tongue.”

For a heartbeat Father Duarte did not answer. His jaw worked, as if he chewed on words he could not swallow. Then he inclined his head, a small, weary nod, and Joao reached for the tools.

The next hours stretched and blurred. The first wedge went under what remained of my left thumbnail. After that, pain lost its degrees. Once you have felt your fingers crushed in iron and your joints forced against the way they were meant to bend, the mind floats above the body and watches priests and gaolers ply their trade.

Once, when Joao reached for the brazier, Father Duarte's hand shot out and closed over his wrist.

"Not yet," he said, voice rough. "The Viceroy needs a hand that can still hold a quill."

The gaoler grumbled, but he chose another tool.

Somewhere in that haze Father Duarte said, "Enough." Joao protested that the marata still held back names. The tired priest insisted that a dead prisoner could not testify and that the Viceroy preferred confessions on paper, not corpses.

When they dragged me back to the cellar and chained me in my place against the wall, my hands were raw meat and my shoulders throbbed with each breath. I closed my eyes, not in prayer, but in calculation.

How many guards at the door. How often they changed shifts. Which men wore keys at their belts and which only carried cudgels. Where the buckets were stored. How many steps from the stair to the courtyard above.

I counted, as I always had. Horses, men, paces, opportunities.

The priest's question lingered like smoke in my mind.

Did I believe in anything beyond survival and the honour of my people?

That night, as rats skittered along the edges of the straw and someone sobbed quietly in the darkness, I decided that belief did not matter in this place. Numbers did. Chains did. Ships did.

Rumour moved through the dungeon the next day, low and cautious, like water seeping through a crack.

They were gathering prisoners, men said in whispers. Not for the stake, not for the scaffold, but for transport. Somewhere far to the south the Portuguese needed labour. Somewhere beyond the horizon they were building something that required bodies that did not ask questions.

I listened, back pressed to cold stone, and for the first time since they dragged me into this fortress I felt a thin thread of hope.

Ships meant movement. Movement meant chances.

The Portuguese had taken my name and tried to break my body. They had forgotten the simplest lesson of the Deccan monsoon.

Storms do not ask permission.

Chapter 2: The Slave Ship South

They woke us under cover of bells. The great church above rang for early Mass, a flood of sound rolling down through stone into the cells. I counted the strokes. When the last echo faded, bolts scraped at the dungeon door.

Joao entered with three guards at his back.

"Up," he shouted in rough Konkani, a version rounded by Portuguese tongues. "Those marked go to the docks."

He moved down the line with a leather strip of symbols, tapping one man, skipping two, cuffing another awake, all the while humming a hymn under his breath. The tune was the same one the church bells had played.

When he reached me he did not bother to look at the marks on my cell wall. He knew where I sat. He had spent too many hours standing over me, hands busy with iron and rope.

"On your feet, marata," he said. "The Viceroy has found a use for you."

The guards unlocked the shackles at my ankles. For a brief moment the weight of the iron vanished and my legs swung free, terrifyingly light. I stood slowly, every joint complaining. The beatings and the wrenched limbs from the previous days had left my body bent and aching, but I forced myself not to limp.

Ahead, two places along the chain, Keshavrao shuffled in step, his familiar narrow shoulders stiff, his black hair hacked short in the Portuguese style. Even now his right hand twitched at his side, still reaching for a sword hilt that was no longer there.

They chained us in a line, six men to a length of iron, wrists manacled, collars clamped around our necks. The metal was slick from the sweat and grime of countless prisoners before us.

"Rao," I said softly.

His head twitched, but he did not look back. A guard walked between us, club in hand.

The climb from the dungeon to the world of light was like being born through a tunnel of stone. At each turn the air grew a little fresher and the smell of filth retreated before new smells. Oil. Bread. Sea.

We emerged into a courtyard of whitewashed walls and glaring sky. The sudden brightness stabbed my eyes. Shapes resolved themselves slowly. Musketeers stood along the walls, hats tilted, matchcords coiled at their belts.

Father Duarte stood near the gate.

He was dressed for travel, a broad hat shading his grey eyes, a leather satchel over one shoulder. When our line of prisoners shuffled past, his gaze moved along the chain until it found me. For a moment our eyes met.

I expected triumph, or at least satisfaction. The stubborn Maratha, broken at last, being led to whatever slow death awaited in the southern plantations.

Instead I saw something else. His jaw tightened. His hand rose, almost involuntarily, and made a small sign of the cross, not the hurried gesture of a man warding off contamination, but something slower, more deliberate. A blessing, perhaps. Or an apology.

He did not speak. He did not step forward. He simply watched as the guards pushed us toward the gate, and then he turned away, disappearing through a side door into the fortress.

I filed his face away in the part of my mind that kept accounts. Men who hesitate are men who can be used. Men who feel guilt carry weight that slows them down.

Someday, I thought, that hesitation might matter.

Beyond the far gate the sound of the sea thudded against the edge of hearing.

They moved us through narrow streets where the houses leaned inward like gossiping women, balconies almost touching above our heads. Goan Catholics in clean cotton stepped aside as we passed, hands over mouths and noses. A few Hindu merchants watched from their doorways, faces carefully blank. Their eyes told a different story. They measured us, weighed the value of the bodies in chains, and filed the calculations away in minds that already carried too much.

The smell of salt grew stronger. So did the stink of tar, fish and unwashed sailors.

When we reached the harbour the full weight of the Portuguese world pressed in. The masts of ships clustered against the sky like a forest of stripped trees. Ropes creaked, gulls screamed, and the heave of water against hulls set up a constant low groan that settled in the bones.

One ship loomed closer than the rest, her hull black and high, her stern built up like a little fortress of carved wood and painted saints. Men moved along her rails, hauling on lines, shouting in a mixture of tongues. On the wharf below her a platform had been erected, and on it a man in a broad brimmed hat checked lists against the lines of chained prisoners.

“To Angola,” someone whispered behind me. “Africa.”

“Not this one,” said another voice, older and bitter. “The Jesuits need bodies for their lands to the south. Some place beyond Ceylon. They will work us until we forget our own names.”

Joao tugged at our chain. “Faster,” he grunted. “The tide waits for no man. Not even maratas.”

We were herded up a gangplank slick with sea and tar. The ship towered over us, the smell of old voyages clinging to her planks. As my bare feet touched the wood, the planks flexed under my weight, shifting subtly as the water lifted and dropped the hull. For a moment an old, absurd thought surfaced.

Horses would hate this.

On deck the air was full of movement. Sailors darted around us, some dark skinned men from other parts of the empire, some pale Europeans whose faces burned red in the sun. Above, canvas cracked as it caught the breeze. The world of land, with its forts and fields and familiar dust, already felt far away.

They drove us below.

The hold had been prepared for us. Wooden shelves had been built along the sides, each shelf divided into little pens by upright planks. Someone had scratched prayers into the wood above my head, in a script I could not read. Another prisoner, another ship, another journey that ended somewhere in chains. We were pushed into these spaces, four or five men to a compartment, until the air was thick with bodies. Iron rings had been bolted into the beams overhead to take the chains that linked us.

Keshavrao and I ended in the same section by accident or indifference. When the guards moved on, rattling chains and cursing, he turned his head at last.

“Sahib,” he whispered.

I had never liked that word from him. In camp I had insisted he use my name. We were both sons of the Deccan; the distance between us was one of experience, not blood. Now, though, in that cramped, stinking space, there was comfort in the old military habit.

“Rao,” I said. “You are still alive.”

He gave a small, breathless laugh that turned into a cough. “For now.”

We spoke little at first. The hold filled with the noises of settling misery. Chains scraped. Men shifted to ease cramps that could not truly be eased. Someone at the far end of the deck began to chant a hymn in a coastal tongue close to my own, voice rising and falling as if it belonged to the creaking of the hull.

Through a hatch far above, a square of light showed strips of sky. A gull crossed that square, a white streak against blue, and the ship began to move.

“Do you know where they send us?” Keshavrao asked after a while.

“South,” I said. “That much is certain.”

“I heard one of the guards say they need men to cut cane,” he muttered. “Fields of sugar, as tall as a man. Sun that burns the skin off your back. The priest promised them that work in distant lands counts the same as service to their God. We will sweat for their salvation.”

In camp he had been the one who joked, who found some rough song to carry us through long marches. The dungeon had scraped that away. I remembered him riding bareheaded near Chaul, singing over the crack of muskets, daring the Portuguese to shoot the song out of his mouth.

“We are not there yet,” I said. “As long as we move, there is a chance.”

He shifted his weight, chains clinking. “The sahib still counts chances.”

“It is what I know.”

Time on a ship is different from time on land. In a fort you can measure days by the sun on the walls, by the calls of guards on the ramparts, by the rhythm of work and rest. In the dark belly of a vessel there is only the change in the pitch of the hull, the moments when hatches open for food and air, and the slow erosion of the sense that the world is anything more than wood, iron and salt.

They brought us rice and dried fish twice a day. The water was stale and tasted of wood and old journeys. Men fell sick quickly in the close, damp air. Coughs turned wet. Wounds from the dungeon festered. The little space that each of us had claimed narrowed as the weaker sagged against the stronger.

Sometimes, when the hatches stayed open a little longer, Portuguese voices drifted down from above.

“Wind is with us,” one man said once. “If it holds we round the cape before the worst of the storms.”

“If the storms do not find us anyway,” another replied. “This run is cursed. The last ship took lightning in the mast. They say God sends warnings.”

“God sends opportunity,” a third voice cut in, amused. “These bodies in the hold are silver if they live to touch the soil we have claimed.” He named a number of cruzados per head, as if we were sacks of pepper. “Pray for their health, not their souls.”

Their laughter filtered down with the light.

Below deck Keshavrao shivered.

“If there is a storm,” he said, voice low, “will the ship break?”

“All ships break,” I said. “The question is when and how.”

He was silent for a time. Then, very quietly, he said, “If the chains break too, I will follow wherever you jump, sahib.”

The words settled over me heavier than iron.

I had never meant to collect followers. On the dusty roads and river crossings near Nashik I had led men because someone had to ride in front, to show that Portuguese guns could be faced even away from their forts. Those who followed did so because they trusted my calculations, not because they saw anything in

me worth adoring. Now, in a dark hold that smelled of vomit and fear, one boy's loyalty wrapped itself like a rope around my chest.

I reached across the narrow gap between us and rested my bandaged hand on his forearm.

"If there is a chance," I said, "I will not leave you."

His fingers closed briefly over my bandaged hand. Neither of us mentioned that promises made in chains are the easiest to break.

Above, the timbers creaked in a new rhythm. The ship rolled more sharply, the water slapping her sides with a sound that had teeth. Somewhere, a sailor cursed. Somewhere else, a prayer rose.

The Arabian Sea was beginning to remind us who owned this ship.

Chapter 3: The Choice in the Storm

The first warning was not the shout of a sailor or the crack of thunder. It was the change in the way the ship moved.

Even in chains I had learned the rhythm of this hull. She rolled and heaved with a certain patience, rising over long swells and settling again, her creaks and groans almost like a breathing beast. One night, as the air in the hold grew thick and hot, that rhythm snapped.

The roll sharpened. The floor under us tilted harder to one side, then the other, so that our chains jerked and bodies slid against one another. A few men cursed. One began to retch. Above, heavy boots thudded across the deck with new urgency.

"Storm," Keshavrao whispered.

I let the word hang and listened. Ships speak when they are in trouble. The strain of timbers changes. The voices of the men who serve them shift from boredom and casual insult to clipped orders.

Now those voices were raised. Portuguese words rattled overhead, sharp and fast.

"Reef the sails… haul, haul… tie that down… move, you son of a dog…"

Then, farther off, a deep boom rolled across the water. Not a cannon, but thunder, the long growl of a sky gathering its strength.

The hatch above us slammed open. Rain hammered down in a sheet for a heartbeat before a canvas awning was dragged into place. Grey light poured into the hold, turning the filth on the floor into a glistening smear.

A guard appeared at the top of the ladder, bracing himself with one hand on the frame, the other gripping a musket.

"Quiet down there," he shouted in Konkani. "No shouting. No prayers. If any of you break your chains and try for the deck we put a ball in your gut and throw you over."

No one laughed at his bravado. It is easy to make threats on solid ground. At sea, when the hull itself complains under your feet, every man knows he is at the mercy of things greater than muskets.

The ship lurched again, harder. Men cried out as they slammed into each other, iron biting into ankles and wrists. The guard swore, lost his balance, and disappeared from the square of light. His musket clattered down the ladder and landed not far from me, spinning on the boards before coming to rest against a beam.

For an instant the hold went very still.

Muskets are like horses. They draw every eye in a space. Even men who have never fired one recognise the shape of power.

Then the hull heaved once more. Someone shouted. A chain yanked tight. The spell broke.

"Leave it," another guard bellowed from above. "Get back to work. The pigs below are not our problem if the mast goes."

The musket lay between us and the ladder like something washed up by a strange tide. Too far to reach. Too close to ignore.

"Sahib," Keshavrao murmured, "if the ship breaks…"

"If the ship breaks," I said, "no musket will save them."

Water began to seep along the floor, first as a thin trickle, then in thicker threads that followed the slope of the boards. The air grew colder as wind forced itself into the seams. The smell of the sea, sharp and raw, fought with the stink of the hold.

The storm did not descend at once; it built in layers. First the tilt of the deck, then the drum of rain, then the cracks of closer thunder. Only when the first real wave hit us broadside did the men in the hold understand what it meant.

The ship rolled so violently that for a few heartbeats we were almost weightless. Stomachs lurched. Chains snapped taut, then slackened. Bodies slammed into wood and into each other. Somewhere to my left a man screamed as his arm bent under another's weight at the wrong angle.

Cold water surged across the floor, soaking my legs to the knee.

"Hold to the beams," I shouted in Marathi. "Hook your arms over the wood above. Do not let the chain drag you."

It was useless advice for some. The space was too tight, the iron too confining. Still, a few men nearest me copied my movement, looping their forearms over the rough timber above their heads whenever the ship lurched, taking some strain off their wrists and ankles.

Keshavrao tried and nearly lost his grip as another wave hit. I grabbed his forearm and steadied him, the iron between us clanging.

“Listen to me,” I said, pitching my voice low and close. “Storms break ships. When wood breaks, iron bolts pull out. Chains go loose. The men above will think only of their own skins. In that chaos there will be one moment when we can move without them seeing.”

His eyes were wide in the gloom. “Move where?”

“Towards air,” I said. “Towards anything that floats.”

Another crash of water. The hull groaned like an animal in pain.

“And if there is no such thing?” he asked.

“Then we die here in the dark,” I said. “You have seen the dungeon. That is what awaits us at the end of this journey in another land. Tell me which death you prefer.”

He swallowed. His Adam’s apple bobbed against his collar.

“With you,” he said, “I prefer the one that involves a chance.”

The storm grew teeth.

Soon there was no rhythm left in the ship, only violent, unpredictable lurches. The world narrowed to wood, iron, cold and noise. Lightning flashed through gaps around the hatch cover, turning the hold into brief, harsh portraits of fear. Men clung to each other, to beams, to whatever they could find.

Above, voices rose in panic.

“The mainmast… hold her steady… cut the rope… it will take us over…”

A new sound joined the rest, a long, splintering crack that vibrated through the hull. The ship shuddered as if struck by a giant hand. Something heavy crashed on the deck above. More shouting, this time with the edge of terror men do not bother to hide.

“She is taking water… pump, for the love of God…”

Water poured into the hold in earnest now, not in thin sheets but in surges that smacked into our legs and bellies. The cold stole breath. Chains grew heavier as they dragged through the flood.

“We will drown down here,” someone gasped.

He was right. If the ship sank with us still chained to the beams, the sea would fill our mouths before we even reached the surface.

“Look,” Keshavrao shouted in my ear. “The ring.”

He jerked his chin toward the iron ring that held the chain above our heads. It was bolted into a beam with thick nails, but with each violent roll the wood around it creaked and splintered a little more. Dark cracks spread around the bolt, widening as the hull flexed.

“When it goes,” I said, “we move.”

We did not have to wait long.

Another wave hit. The ship climbed, shuddered, then seemed to fall out from under us. In that sickening drop there was a sound like a tooth being pulled from rotten gum. The ring tore free from the beam with a spray of splinters. The chain that held our section dropped, yanking our collars and wrists, then sagged.

Men screamed, not in pain but in wild, sudden hope.

“Quiet,” I snapped. “You want them to hear?”

The noise above would hide a great deal, but panic makes men loud. Loud men attract attention.

I wriggled my hands as far as they would go along the slackened chain, bringing my wrists closer to the bolt hole in the beam. The wood there was ragged and soft. With enough force, perhaps the iron could be slipped, not from the cuffs themselves, but from the weakened timber.

“Help me,” I said to Keshavrao. “On three. Pull as if you are trying to tear your own head off. One, two…”

On three we both jerked backwards, putting all our remaining strength into the chain. Muscles screamed. The edges of the collars bit into our necks. For a moment nothing moved. Then the rotten wood gave another fraction, the hole widening.

“Again,” I hissed.

We pulled, again and again, timing our efforts with the wildest rolls of the ship. On the fourth attempt the bolt tore free entirely. The length of chain that linked our collars dropped to the floor with a splash.

We stumbled, suddenly unmoored. Our wrists were still shackled, our ankles still chained in pairs, but for the first time since Goa there was open space above our heads.

“Others,” Keshavrao said.

I nodded. “Quickly.”

We moved along the beam as far as our ankle chains allowed, grabbing at iron, yanking at rings, kicking at weak points in the wood. Some prisoners were too far away for us to reach. Others had rings buried in

sound timber that would not yield. In a few compartments we were able to free the line that held the collars, giving those men the same fraction of liberty we now possessed.

Liberty was a generous word. We were still in a dark box, chained at wrists and ankles, with a storm trying to tear the world apart above us. Yet the feel of slack iron at our throats did something to the spine that torture had not. It made men stand a little straighter, even with the deck pitching underfoot.

“The hatch,” I said. “We need air. We need to see.”

The ladder swayed with every lurch. The fallen musket still lay at its foot, water washing around it in little currents.

“If we take it,” Keshavrao said, “they will shoot us.”

“If we stay,” I said, “we may drown before they can load.”

I sloshed forward, every step a battle against the water and the drag of the chains. My fingers closed around the stock of the musket. It was not loaded. Sensible men do not leave a primed weapon lying about. Still, weight is weight, and a length of hardwood with a metal barrel can break a wrist or a skull more cleanly than bare hands.

“Stay behind me,” I told Keshavrao.

I began to climb.

The ladder felt narrower than any siege stair I had ever mounted. My shackled ankles limited my stride. The musket bumped against the rungs as I went. Around me the hull creaked and shuddered. Water slapped the underside of the deck in heavy blows.

Halfway up a figure appeared in the square of light, backlit by a flash of lightning. For an instant he was only a silhouette, musket in hand.

“Back,” he shouted, the word broken by fear and the tilt of the world. “Back, or I fire.”

He tried to bring the barrel down toward me. The ship chose that moment to lurch. He flailed for balance, one hand leaving the ladder.

Years of riding into gaps in enemy lines had trained my body to move in such instants before my mind could think.

I drove the butt of my own musket upward with all the force I could muster. It connected with his wrist. Bone cracked. His weapon spun away. He cried out, reaching blindly for support, and missed.

He fell past me, hitting the rungs once, twice, then the floor of the hold with a wet, final sound. The water took him, rolling him against the planks like a piece of discarded cargo.

The ladder was clear.

“Now,” I shouted. “Move. All of you who can climb, move.”

I scrambled the last few steps and burst onto the deck. The hatch opened just aft of the mainmast, near the middle of the ship.

The storm greeted me like an enemy who had been waiting.

Rain hammered down in sheets. Wind ripped at what little cloth I had left. The deck tilted. I grabbed a rope to keep from sliding into the frothing black water below. Above, what remained of the mast loomed at an angle, torn canvas snapping like flags of surrender.

Men fought everywhere. Not each other, but the elements. Sailors wrestled with lines, knives in their teeth, trying to cut away rigging that threatened to drag the ship over. Others pumped at hand levers that fed water from the bilges back to the sea, their faces white in the lightning flashes.

No one looked at me.

To them I was just another piece of loose cargo tossed up from below. Their world had shrunk to ropes, timbers and the next wave.

Behind me, at the hatch by the mast, Keshavrao’s head appeared. His eyes were huge in the storm light.

“Sahib,” he cried. The word was whipped away by the wind.

Another wave loomed, higher than the others. It reared up on our starboard side, to my right, a wall of water lit silver for a moment by lightning. For that instant everything was clear.

The broken mast. The men at the pumps. The open sea beyond, white capped and hungry. Keshavrao’s thin hands on the ladder. The chain still linking his ankles. The iron still binding his wrists.

A coil of rope lay by the starboard rail at my right, half loose at my feet. A shattered spar floated just off the ship’s side, momentarily caught in the eddying water.

Calculations raced through me faster than words. Leap now, reach the spar. Keshavrao follows, chains drag him under. Wait to free him, we both get smashed against the rail.

The wave fell.

It hit the ship with a force that tore screams from every throat. Water crashed over the deck, hammering us flat. For a moment I was nowhere, only a body in a cold, roaring universe. Then the ship lurched up again, and I found myself on my knees, fingers clawed into that coil of rope.

Keshavrao still clung to the hatch, half out of the hold, half in. The water had drenched him, slicking his hair to his skull. Blood ran from somewhere on his forehead, thin in the rain. His right hand still twitched at his side, reaching for a sword that would never come.

“Sahib,” he shouted again. “Do not leave me.”

He had said, in the dark below, that he would follow wherever I jumped.

The storm offered no time for noble speeches now.

I threw one end of the rope toward him. It slapped wetly against the deck, then slipped, the coils sliding toward the scuppers as the ship tilted yet again.

"Tie it," I yelled. "Around your chest. Quick."

He fumbled with the rope, fingers clumsy with cold. Another wave loomed. The ship's bow plunged into it. For a moment the world became only grey and white.

The rope went taut in my hands.

For an instant I thought he had managed it, that I could haul him up and over the hatch, that we would stand together on the deck and leap in our own time.

Then I felt the wrong kind of weight on the line. Not a man's body tied with intent, but the dead drag of something pulled by a force greater than any arm. The rope burned across my palm.

The ship dropped. The wave receded. The rope peeled my skin and vanished over the side, whipped away by retreating water.

Keshavrao was gone.

For a heartbeat I stared at the empty hatch, the broken ladder, the absence where his face had been. The rope burns on my palms throbbed, the only proof he had been there at all. The storm did not pause to mark his passing. The next gust tore at the stump of the mast. The next wave reared.

The spar I had seen floated closer, riding the foam just off the rail.

In the Deccan, before we rode into Portuguese fire, my troop and I had made a pact. If a man fell, the others rode on. We would mourn later, in camp, with liquor and song and stories. On the field there was no room for hesitation.

This was my field now.

I wrapped the remaining coil of rope around my chest twice and knotted it as best I could with numb fingers, leaving the free end trailing. It was a poor excuse for a plan, but sometimes the gods look kindly on men who refuse to freeze.

I staggered to the rail.

The sea clawed at the hull. The spar rose on the swell, close enough now that I could see the splinters at one end, the barnacles clinging to its underside.

I took one breath, tasting salt and fear. I thought of Keshavrao's narrow shoulders in the hold, of his quiet "with you, sahib" in the dark.

"Forgive me," I said, to the boy I promised not to leave, to the horse who died better than I would, to whatever gods listen to men who jump into storms.

Then I hurled myself over the side.

The sea closed over my head like the hand of an angry god.

End of Sample Chapters

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