

No dispute, the sweep of the desert where the congregation of Thugs stood was far, far distant from any town or tick of man that could descry their presence. *Oh though the torrent of strife that comes for them, towns and men!* but what ushered the whispers and mumbling out of the eldest Thugs was the deferentially muted disdain for the selection of a site so dead that stillness reigns without dispute.

Densely vast, startlingly inert, perceptively immutable, and otherwise indescribable silence is unbecoming to assemblies of men assembled for some omen to begin the journey. Really, the old knew, any sort of sound will do: a far simoon to harry the crags to sand portends the death of ousted noblemen and riches to the Thugs who kill them; a punctual atwitter of any scavenging bird presages the death of shifting courtiers to new courts and riches to the Thugs who kill them; an unnerved shelf of rock submitting to the hard valley below forebodes the death of vigilante heirs and riches to the Thugs who kill them; the braying of a common ass heralds the death of old connivers and thieves and riches to the Thugs who kill them.

But any man that had it in his devices to beseech some inhuman sound from his own gut wouldn't dare the blasphemy. Such invention to commence the season's pilgrimage of destruction and looting had certainly been exercised before, and with much success; in fact it was a very bad omen indeed, signaling at least the internecine slaughter of a fellow Thug, and usually of the inventor himself -- for it was in strict observance of the code of Thuggee that the omen should be inhuman; and the slaughter of the prankster at least ensures that the omen should come from the dead, even if the devotional act, and the timing, was less than literal.

The votaries of the Bhowanee, the goddess of destruction and the patron of the caste of Thugs, were nothing less than ambitiously devoted. To her vital cause in the balance of all things, they were happily bound. For wasn't it her, who had first ordained select groups of men to her station, the premier check of creation? And under what blessing do these men flourish, that she in the desert wind had proclaimed that for their labor they shall keep the wealth that will invariably slink from their victims! An active deity, this one, her incarnation is to be seen in every blue crescent mark on traveler's necks; her rewards are just as haptic, and unlike her cosmic colleagues, her blessings are paid out in proportion to and directly upon completion of the

sacrificial task. Such a perfect transactional worship -- of culling the population for the Bhowanee, and assuming the residual wealth -- that she inspired in her followers an incontrovertible reverence and faith in their spiritual contract.

And so, even with nearly toxic patience for earnest men with riches to reckon, the votaries wait out the silence for some omen to sound.

Still nothing, however, and stellar arcs beyond midnight, the silence was so taxing that some couldn't help but wonder what animal could bound anonymously from their throat; though truly, it was not the threat of a horrible death but the esteem for their goddess and ceremony that stayed any sort of heresy -- a hierarchy such that love places just above fear, for a peculiar inversion of the impulse behind worship in too many spiritual arrangements.

In fact, it wasn't until some of the men had fallen asleep and began to snore that one industrious Thug and his son set off in a holy campaign to startle some death-fearing thing to ominous noise.

Tegha and his father Lohar walked more than a vulture's flap beyond the stretch where their men laid. Toward a creek of an occasional river, they picked a path through scorched rock and bold-but-dead thistle to a mountain drainage: a nearly green repository of one canyon's vulgar machinations to pull water from stone. They guessed, and correctly, if they should have loud company, it should be found here.

Tegha cursed his father's slack pace with the Bhowanee's mission at hand. The boy's steps were each ordained for the work, great and sure; while Lohar's, to the boy, seemed only for the purpose to undermine his eventual collapse. Tegha was certain that the stories about his father were tales, only to further, if unnecessarily, inculcate him to the Thuggee cause. As if his father, that thistle of a man, ever strangled three men at a time with his scarf. As if his notched and angular hands could have ever dragged an ox cart of bullion through a jungle without an ox. As if his father's folded face could ever have courted his mother from the court with distance enough to steal her!

Tegha and all his ambition had long waxed weary of the thousand tales, and thought the telling a pilfering of air. He thought himself the Thug especially chosen, and for him the code of the Bhowanee had made itself legible on the necks of men far more impressionable than the nagging script of any hornbook. "A Thug to the fingernails, this one."

Lohar, falling behind, couldn't be bothered. His son would step on a toad before it could sing for them. Rather, he passed over inverted pyramids of rock without upsetting any into mocking applause. He strained, pulling the

ruins of his hair to wide open the folds of his ears, for any vestige of any living thing. Any living thing at all to fashion into some bugle to start the confounding pilgrimage of pillage and further secure the future for him and his simple son.

Lohar, a Thug to the heart, he knew nothing else; and so it would be for Tegha.

In the cosmic hush of the desert, many had fallen to flat-out meditation; while others permitted themselves to the most respectfully muzzled discourse on the orders and rewards of the Bhowanee. Of course they knew that this long bout of silence must be endowed with the most consequential import, but exactly what measure of wealth was soon to be theirs only stoked the most dazzling conversation. They spoke of the coming adventures, of men with iron in their necks but goblets of gold in their chests, and of playing authorities to headless chasers; and sportively they vied over the most proficient techniques, twisting wrists for a most economical cinching of the throat, and using sharpened sticks instead of the dead's own gear, belts and daggers, to anchor the best evidence in hidden graves, lest they should be carried off by jackals.

But the most serious of Thugs thought the time before the omen should be passed discussing divine mission -- indeed, the office of silence absolutely demanded such reverie. They spoke of just how provident are the deeds of Thugs, and just how select the souls; how balancing creation by destruction guarantees the spiritual and the material stocks against the ransack of unmanageable mobs. They also without contest agreed that the class that most threatens the material stocks are the rich, and so should be steadfastly culled off first; and indeed, since the Bhowanee is most evident in her rewards, that from choking the rich her manifestation is the greatest. From this they estimated they had already a great lot of the Bhowanee in their chests and purses, and with it they could establish their own nation of the elect.

Upon this glorious plan they dreamt and grew quiet again, and some rose to curse the silence so desperately wanting of an omen.

Lohar, of course, heard it first. The braying of an ass. Only when Tegha turned to fire a rueful glance at his lagging father to call him the like, did he too note the omen. Replete with momentous purpose, he stormed with thunderous steps down the shale past his father in the direction of the noise. Soured, Lohar refused to follow until he listed the bleating of a sheep in chorus.

They descended into a shadowy copse of arthritic trees, weathered but insolently alive amidst the dry of the desert. Lohar could smell the impossible dew, and thought if he could hear the flush of water -- and then he did -- he would find a quaint hovel. There were a few, actually, and Tegha in preparation took to knotting roots into twine at the edge of the small clearing.

The ass could be divined by a four-legged and nodding shadow, while the prating of the sheep revealed its place in a further pen. Tegha had fashioned his lasso and started for the ass when Lohar clutched his son's ankle to drop him.

"Are you for the ass or the sheep," asked Lohar.

"The sheep of course."

"But it is farther and more dangerous."

Tegha showed his teeth and slowly nodded, "is this the Lohar of a thousand tales, our inspiration; is this the man that strangles men at a time, that whisks women from kings? You steal the common ass; I, son of the Bhowanee, am out for the sheep."

"Why, Tegha? Why the sheep?"

"You don't know, Hero, is this a test?"

"Why the sheep, Tegha?"

"I've passed all Thug tests, I've slain two men and a boy my age, I've been invested with the teachings of Thuggee: a sheep's bleating, my father, signals the death of a traveling prince and his entire company. And how happy are the Thugs that take him."

"Tegha, my son," said Lohar, "but an ass will do -- its bray will launch this pilgrimage as well as any noise. Be sensible."

"I will not," said Tegha, "compromise when I can best serve our goddess; it's either for the good of Thuggee or its blasphemy."

"The good of Thugs will be the commencement of this journey, and any sort of formality will do."

"Formality? Sacrilege! The code is ages old."

"The code is ages made," said Lohar, "created by our ancestors and left to us to make."

"Who are you?"

"Don't you understand the convenience of our faith?" asked Lohar.

"You are no proper Thug."

"The code, my son, is only there to sustain us, and our way of life."

"I was not borne of this blasphemy," said Tegha, strengthening the lasso of roots into rope.

"Everything we do is only for the Bhowanee in our stomachs," Lohar continued, "the ceremony and the codes sanctify our appetites."

“Stop this, I charge you.”

“Like marriage for lust.”

“I charge you in the name of--”

“Tegha, the goor we sup on in devotion before a night of slaughter and theft -- is not that the sweetest sugar?”

Tegha grabbed a short stick as a club and said, “by the power of Bhowanee,” when Lohar locked his son’s head in a constricting embrace.

There was a two-legged shadow moving before them. It arrested the beast they were arguing over and led it toward the far side of the pen. Tegha broke his father’s hold and both Thugs skulked about the periphery for a better vantage point. It was the farmer, tending his meager stocks before the sun should start the weather.

Pressed by the same perse horizon, Lohar unraveled his scarf and readied himself for the kill and pilfering. He recognized that time has a heady way of suddenly shortening the prelude to an event, and he knew they could wait no longer. Coming up from his knees he began his charge when Tegha grabbed his father’s scarf and yanked Lohar down.

Three more shadows had passed into the pen, with hoes and scythes carried behind them to appear as magnificent scorpions. And with danger fomenting by the imperiled dawn of so many things, Lohar and Tegha hunkered down in the thistle and roots with unnerving agitation.

They watched as the farmer issued chores to his sons by hands as well as words, gesturing toward areas of need with one and patting the shoulders of each son by the other. Lohar with interest, Tegha with wondering, watched as the farmer demonstrated how to mend a fence to his youngest; and how in turn the boy took to the task in determined emulation.

The day was yet unfledged but threatening, though still the light was too weak for the two Thugs to assess the strength or even the number of the men before them, though Lohar knew that all were boys but one, and he past virility. Still, he considered that their kindred allegiance could very well endure any test with which he might task them, and that pinning down one would only collapse the rest and their hoes and scythes onto him like jackals.

But locked in the trees, the braying and the incessant bleating only mocked their impotence, and when the mewling of an infant child was suddenly heard, Tegha could not endure another degree of the rising sun. The cry came from a hovel they had not yet espied, and only the cry and then the increasing light of dawn revealed to their surprise its closeness and opportunity.

Finally, Tegha readied himself for the infant’s kidnapping, wrapping the cords of roots round his thumbs for the attending mother, and

fashioning his scarf into a sack for the babe. There were two windows, and while Lohar could approach one with a whistle, posing as one of the farmer's sons, he could slide through the other to close in on the mother without alarm; the sound of her last gasp eclipsed by her own infant's sobs.

Tegha began to whisper as much to Lohar when his father stopped the shifting globes of his son's eyes with a deadening stare and said, "no."

"It is a most perfect omen."

"It is a child," said Lohar.

Tegha scowled and listened to the infant. "Imagine, if you are a Thug," he said, "what the distant wail of a child would portend. Formality, this one? Not at all, a distant infant cry in the desert would stir the most jaded Thug to rapture and renewed purpose. What pilgrimage would we have then?"

Lohar didn't answer, he was listening. Tegha took the cue and continued, "what riches could we gather, how many princes would we determine for the Bhowanee?"

Lohar could make out the outline of a small, horn-backed woman rubbing the infant back to sleep. A small, a very small woman indeed, less than four easy paces' distance.

"I'll make it easy for you," Tegha whispered, "how's this -- you need only to toss bits of this rock against the frame of the nearest window, that will be enough to call her in that direction." Tegha examined Lohar's deadened visage, his father's eyes peering out of a mask of gray skin toward the infant's shed. "Here," said Tegha, placing the gravel in his father's hands and whispering with dire import, "if you are my father, and for the sake of the Bhowanee, aid me thus." Tegha stood for the deed.

He took two steps into the clearing before Lohar rose to twice his own height and snatched him back; folded him over with the force of reversed time and dropped his son heavily into a womb of roots and thistle.

He then turned, and to their horror he floated out into the very midst of the farmer and his sons. He inhaled the breath they gasped at his sight, raised his hands to divinity, and eyes sunken, shrieked their bottled fright; he snapped to awful silence and whipped his head round to the old man and to each boy, held them in terror's stead, and, with a life-exacting, piercing stare, he foiled the dawn before them with the dark, laical doubling of the Bhowanee.

He grabbed the rope about the neck of the ass, led it out of the pen, and with his other hand snatched his son by the shoulder from out of the

roots and the thistle, and led beast and progeny back to the desert, where his men would be waiting in ominous silence.

The ass, though, content to be led, couldn't be bothered to bray the entire distance. Hardly, however, did it matter, since when Lohar and his trailing company reached the sweep of desert where the congregation of Thugs had been standing, there was only sand and the occasional dispatched garment. Lohar, believing in nothing but that the Thugs had already left, began the trek to the town from whence they originally came, finding on the route a weary Thug meditating flat-out on a dead tree. Roused, he told them that the eldest Thugs had interpreted the silence to mean that they should return to their beds, and that they should attempt again on the next desert moon.

The Thug asked the wherefore of the ass, and Lohar told him he was composing a farm. Lohar bid the Thug farewell and resumed his return, in stride with the common ass and with Tegha lagging behind. Closer to town, the boy thought the old man's neck could need some straightening, while Lohar wondered if his son could ever manage a scythe or a hoe.