

## 西西：十字勳章

# Cross of Gallantry

By Xi Xi

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BHUNAH TOOK OUT a handful of peanuts from his pocket and put them on my lap. Taking one for himself, he started shelling it and the skin fell in flakes all over me. Whenever Bhunah sees me sitting at my own door, he always comes over for a talk. He is like a younger brother to me, because, like my brother, he is also nine years old. I have no relatives in this city, and Bhunah always reminds me of my father, my mother, my young brother and sister. Ah, my father, what will he be doing now? Sitting on the rush mat in our house, forever making those leather drums. As for mother, she will probably have a big blanket wrapped round her, and she and my younger sister will be huddling beside the iron pan over the charcoal fire to keep themselves warm; for in my homeland, the weather usually gets cold around this time of the year. My younger brother is probably in the town square, sitting on the steps of the Stone Lion, trying to sell firewood, stacks of it all lined up beside him. I wonder if trade will be good today?

'Uncle Deehan, father says that you are going to slaughter the bull this year.'

'I will do it if everybody says so.'

'Not everyone can kill a bull.'

'Many people do.'

'My father can't!'

'He can.'

'No, he can't! He said so himself. This was what he said. He said, "I can't do it, I am too old."'

'He was being modest.'

'How did you learn to do it?'

'Learn to do what?'

'Cut off the bull's head with one swing of the chopper.' As he spoke, Bhunah raised his hand and cut through the air in one swift motion. He then took out some more peanuts from his trouser pocket, and put them on my lap again.

Bhunah likes to shell a peanut, throw it up in

the air, and catch it in his open mouth. Sometimes he catches it, but sometimes he misses. And when he misses, he picks up the peanut (however covered it is with soil or dust), gives it a rub with his hands or brushes it across his trousers, and pops it into his mouth.

'Father said it will be a grand occasion.'

'What will be a grand occasion?'

'When the bull's head falls at the first swing?'

'Oh, you're still on about killing the bull.'

'It has to be absolutely spot on, doesn't it?'

'Yes.'

'How did you learn to do it?'

'Practice.'

'But how can you cut off a great big bull's head with just one swing?'

'It's a matter of practice.'

'Uncle Deehan?'

'Yes?'

'Can you teach me how to cut off a bull's head?'

'You want to learn how to cut off a bull's head?'

'When I grow up I want to be like you.'

'Good at cutting off a bull's head?'

'Yes, with just one swing of the sword.'

'You wouldn't think like this if you were a bull.'

'Why did you want to bring the bull into this?'

'If you were a bull, would you want to be slaughtered?'

'Uncle Deehan . . . .'

'You still want to learn how to cut off a bull's head?'

'Will you teach me how?'

'Ask your father to teach you.'

'No, I want to learn it from you.'

'You will have to finish your homework first.'

'That's a deal!'

'But you must do your homework first!'

'All right, I'm going back to do my homework right this minute!'

He ran off, leaving behind him a pile of peanut shells on the floor, and peanut skins littered all over me. On my lap were some peanuts still in their shells; beside the peanuts was my kukri. In my spare moments, sitting beneath the shade of the tree in front of my house, I like to take my kukri out and carefully inspect it, inch by inch. In fact there are not many inches to this kukri, but every inch of it is precious to me. This dagger is my only prized possession in this city; it is my only friend. It has been with me for many years; it has travelled with me from home to several countries. And now, in this city, it is all I have left. In my homeland, floods or droughts have caused havoc over the years. Food is short and life is very hard. That was why I joined the army so young.

In the old days, my father was a soldier too. But now he has grown old, and an old soldier cannot earn enough to support his family. So he gave me his kukri and got me into the army. The kukri which my father left me is very old. The patterns on the sheath—the rings of circles on the mouth of the sheath, the symmetrical hexagonal shapes around the middle portion, the grid of criss-crosses at the bottom—are all so faded as to be almost unrecognizable. The brass nail on the sheath has also long disappeared. But this is still a good dagger. Even in my homeland now, it is not easy to find another as good as this one. You can feel its weight when you hold it in your hands. And when you take it out of its sheath, its edge still radiates sharpness. Who would have expected such a good knife from its dark and tattered sheath? Towards the upper end of the dagger, near where the handle is, are etched the uneven marks of ringed corrosion. That strange dent looks like a bat in flight. The upper end of the dagger is tapered; the middle is shaped like the neck of a vase; the lower end spreads out and bends sideways, curving outward, so that if I raise the dagger in my hand, it looks like a blazing torch, its flame blown sideways by the force of the wind. Sitting in the shade outside my house, I like to polish my dagger with care. I will never let it rust. I know this dagger so well. I can count the number of plum blossom nails on it, and the number of flowers the nails have formed themselves into. I

can also remember the exquisite patterns carved on the face of the dagger, the dotted lines forming into leaves and the entwining creepers which give this tough blade an enduring charm. The two small knives that come with the sheath were already a little rusty when the dagger was given to me. But I have always kept them well oiled. And now, they are as bright and smooth as razors. This dagger will stay with me always. If I should return home in future, all I will take with me will be this one dagger which has followed me everywhere like a shadow.

BHUNAH IS ONLY nine years old, but he is a strong and robust boy. He has thick black hair and a sun-tanned complexion typical of his Mongol blood. When he goes jogging with me, he can go half way up a mountain before pausing for breath. He could run further, but I won't let him, because jogging, like all other sports, has to be taken slowly and needs to be reinforced with regular, daily practice. No one should overdo it. When we jog, I deliberately slow down to keep him company. It makes him very happy, for he thinks he is running almost as fast as I am, although in fact he is still quite a lot slower. These days, he works really hard, and I can see that he is constantly improving. One day, he will be a very fast runner, better even than I am.

If my brother were with me now, he would be like Bhunah. He would jog up the mountains with me. In my spare time, I would take him on hikes; we would climb mountains and he would learn to tell the trees by their names, he would know how to star gaze and predict the weather just by looking at the clouds. My brother would also grow up to be a strong young man. Bhunah is luckier than my brother; he can live with his parents here. And life here is definitely better than life at home. The question is whether, having grown up in this city, one should go back home? And if not, what could a Nepalese youth do in this alien, foreign city? I don't know the answer. As far as I know, everyone who has come here from my native land is a soldier. We first enlisted with the army and then we got posted with the garrison to different places. If I had not been a soldier, would I have come to this city? And if so, how? As a tourist? A student? On business? In this city I have not met anyone from my country who is an engineer,

teacher, doctor or even a common clerk. Those who have come from the few big cities near my homeland are all standing guard in front of the shops. Only the very rich among my countrymen have been exceptions to this rule. What will Bhunah do, if he grows up here?

Maybe my brother is better off staying at home. During the Yerma Festival, he will sit against the wall with the sacrificial fruits and flowers all arranged in front of him in circles, and he will let his sisters make a red mark in the middle of his forehead. And they will say, 'We plant thorns on the door of the God of Death, may our brother live to be a hundred years old.' Many years ago, my elder sister planted such a red mark on my forehead and I became a strong and healthy lad. But my poor sister, she married a man in the country while she was very young. They now live in a thatched hut of clay and she toils in the fields with my brother-in-law. They do not even own an ox. I have seen my brother-in-law tilling the soil, using the plough that he made, while my sister, all in black and with a big plaid behind her, was holding a bamboo sieve with both her hands, scattering the seeds against the wind. She is only two years older than I am, but I feel she looks like a middle-aged woman.

A letter from father tells me there's been a flood in the country. The fields have been destroyed. They will have another poor harvest, and it will be difficult to make ends meet. People who live off the land live at the mercy of fate, they depend on the whims of the heavens above; they have no choice. They cannot move into their parents' place in the city. Everyone has his share of trouble to bear. If we were not poor, I would not have become a soldier.

Now my livelihood is not a problem any more. I do not need to worry about my meals and accommodation here. In fact my life in this city has actually turned out better than I expected. I send all my salary home, in the hope that my family will live a better life. Some day . . . but I don't want to think about the future. What sort of future does a soldier have? It is not like being in business; it is unlikely that I will earn enough money to buy a small house for my parents, younger brother and sister. The future? I'd rather leave the future to tomorrow.

'Uncle Deehan?'

'Yes.'

'I didn't do badly today, did I?'

'You did better than last week.'

'I practise every day.'

'It's good if you can keep up your practice every day.'

'I will try very hard.'

'Good boy!'

'I want to run as fast as you.'

'You will with more practice.'

'Really?'

'Yes, really.'

'I don't believe you. You are the fastest. You have to tell me why you are the only one who can run so fast.'

'There are other fast runners too.'

'Don't try to fool me, you are the fastest.'

'Your father also runs very fast.'

'Father said he really looks up to you, because you always come first at running uphill.'

'That's because I always start ahead of the others.'

'That's not true! I have seen you run before! Everybody starts together but in no time at all you've reached the top of the mountain. You move like lightning. Doesn't it exhaust you?'

'You get used to it after running for a while.'

'Why am I out of breath after running less than half way up the mountain?'

'If you practise every day, you won't get out of breath.'

'Is it all a matter of being able to make your breath last the distance?'

'With controlled breathing and more practice, you can run faster.'

'Did you say my father can run very fast too?'

'He can run very fast and he can really run uphill.'

'He said he is no match for you, do you know why?'

'Why?'

'He said it's because he likes to drink beer and drinking too much beer has slowed him down.'

'It doesn't matter if you drink once in a while.'

'Uncle Deehan, you stay away from beer and cigarettes because you want to keep fit and run fast, right?'

'No, I stay away from beer and cigarettes because I don't particularly like them. Also, I want to save up more money to send home.'

'If I drink beer, will it slow me down too?'

'Kids should not be drinking beer.'

'Uncle Deehan?'

'Yes.'

'I've had enough rest now. Let's run again, all the way to the peak.'

'All right, let's go.'

The breeze is cool and refreshing. I know the hills and tracks around here well. Every day I make several trips up and down the mountain. I can almost recognize every single tree and the position of every stone. If I were not with Bhunah, I would have reached the peak a long time ago and would have made it back to the foot of the hill again by now. If I were not with Bhunah, I would have left this well-trodden path and would have headed up into the more difficult terrain. I would find my way through the thick scrub and the wild rocks. I really surprise myself sometimes. I am becoming more and more like a hunter. Only a hunter leaves the beaten track for the wilds, because he knows the most precious species are always hiding there, where few men venture.

'UNCLE DEEHAN! Uncle Deehan!'

'Is that you, Bhunah?'

'Can I come in?'

'The door is not locked. Just give it a push and come in.'

Bhunah pushed open the door and like a whirlwind he jumped in. I had on a long-sleeved shirt and was buttoning up one of the sleeves.

'Uncle Deehan, you've arrested a lot of people today.'

'Yes, some.'

'Father said he caught five altogether.'

'He told you already?'

'He said you caught more, is that right?'

'I don't remember.'

'Father said you caught seven all by yourself.'

'It was a joint effort. Everybody had a hand in it.'

'Are there many people trying to sneak in?'

'There are more these days.'

'And they are difficult to catch?'

'It depends.'

'They were saying that you did a great job this time. You arrested seven all by yourself. They said you're a brave soldier.'

'Has your father come back?'

'Yes, he has. That's why I know you caught so many people today.'

'This happens every day.'

'Uncle Deehan, are you hurt?'

'It's nothing, it will be all right.'

'There's blood on your hands.'

'Oh, it's only red spirit.'

'Why are you wearing a long-sleeved shirt? Quickly, let me have a look! Are you hurt like my father? Why don't you go to hospital? Father went. He was bandaged there and came back. He said those people were really fierce; some of them with knives even. Are you hurt? Show me.'

'It's nothing. My skin was slightly scratched. I've already put some red spirit on it. If I were really hurt, I would have gone to hospital, wouldn't I?'

'Did they really have knives?'

'Some of them did.'

'Did they use their knives on you?'

'Yes.'

'Did you fight them with your dagger?'

'No.'

'Why didn't you? You had a good dagger with you, didn't you?'

'There was no ill feeling between us.'

'But they stabbed you with their knives!'

'They did that because it was a matter of life and death for them.'

'But it was dangerous not to fight back with your knife!'

'I didn't want to hurt anyone.'

'But they could have hurt you, even killed you!'

'Danger is part of a soldier's life. You can get killed any minute.'

'But we are not at war.'

'It's exactly because we are not at war that I could not use my dagger.'

'They were difficult to catch?'

'Some more difficult than others.'

'Father said they were like foxes, very hard to catch.'

'But they're also like lambs, unable to really run away.'

'But unlike lambs, they had knives.'

'Many didn't have knives, many were still children; and there were some women too.'

'Father said the women didn't have knives, but

they scratched with their nails and bit with their teeth. There are teeth marks on your hands. Were you bitten by them?"

'That's their only defence. They had no other way.'

'Uncle Deehan, see, your arms have been scratched all over!'

'It's nothing. They will be all right in a few days.'

My arms were not too seriously hurt. There were just scratch marks left by a woman's nails. After I had applied red spirit, they were all right. That woman was so skinny, but she had great strength. I found her hiding behind the rocks, curled up in the undergrowth. First she retreated backwards, until there was no more space for her to retreat into, and then she lay there like a wounded lamb. She knew that once we found her, there would be no hope of escape. She would be taken away and, after a while, she would be repatriated to wherever she had come from. I could see despair in her eyes. She was so disappointed and frightened. And then all of a sudden, she shot out from the undergrowth and got down on both her knees at a short distance from me. She bowed and kowtowed, started kowtowing to me non-stop. I did not understand her language, and I could not tell what she was actually saying. But what she wanted was quite clear. Similar incidents had happened to me many times before. They would kneel before me, amongst them young children, young women, old women, and even young men, and they would entreat with the plaintive look of despair and with tears all over their faces. All of a sudden, she reminded me of my poor sister back home. But I cannot be soft-hearted. I am a serviceman. I am a soldier. My duty is to catch illegal immigrants on these woods and hillsides. I am an enforcer of the law. I must carry out my responsibilities as a soldier, obey the orders of my superiors, arrest all who break the law, and help maintain law and order in this city.

If they run into me, they don't stand a chance. I know the terrain here. They are only intruders in a foreign land. None of them is my match when it comes to running, how can they get away? Even if they are not arrested by me, there is really no escape. There are troops everywhere, and like me, all the soldiers have undergone intensive training. They are good at combing the mountains and the

rough country and they know the geography around here like their own back gardens. Ah, what good will it do them to kowtow to me?

Having decided what to do, I shot forward like an arrow, and in one movement I reached out and locked both her hands behind her back. There and then, she became like a beast in an arena; she scratched at me and bit my hands. But I know how to ward off such attacks and, one by one, I arrested them all.

The ones with knives are more difficult to handle. Of course, if I drew my dagger, they would not stand a chance against me. I can cut off a bull's head with one swing of the chopper. It would be child's play to cut off their heads. But I am always in control. I never allow myself to use the dagger. If I had used it, my kukri would be all covered with blood. I really have no grudge against these poor people. I assume that they too must have parents, brothers and sisters at home, that they are just a bunch of poor oppressed creatures driven to desperation by fate? And I am only a man who arrests, I am not a killer. But if they have knives with them, I have to handle them more carefully. That's why some troops arm themselves with assault rifles when they go on patrol. With rifles, of course, you've only got to aim at their faces, and these people have to give up.

Even without a rifle and without using my dagger, I still managed to arrest them one by one. I was not hurt. One girl made several scratches on my arms, and left a long mark with her nails, but these scars will heal. Today, I arrested seven illegal immigrants altogether. I suppose it was seven, because they said it was. Bhunah's father got five. He was slightly hurt. He must have returned home from hospital by now. In the barracks we were hailed as two brave soldiers.

I READ MY father's letter under the light. He said he had received the money I sent him, that they were all well at home and that I needn't worry about them. But the letter also said my brother-in-law had an accident while working in the fields. His hoe scraped one of his toes and he lost a lot of blood. When my sister saw what happened, she passed out. My brother-in-law became very weak and had a high temperature; it was not known whether the rust on the hoe would give him tetanus. They would write again if there was

further news.

A lot of people came into my house just now. When they left, I did not close the door, and Bhunah popped his head in. I folded the letter properly and put it inside my pocket. Bhunah walked carefully into the house. He came in very slowly because he was holding a paper cup in his hand, and in the cup was a piping hot drink. Beside the cup he was holding, he also had a paper bag between his fingers.

'I'll treat you to a hot dog, Uncle Deehan.'

'You bought these at this late hour?'

'There's hot chocolate in the cup, your favourite drink.'

'Your pocket money will not go very far if you spend it like this.'

'I can go without breakfast for a week, but I must come here to offer my congratulations.'

'Where is your father?'

'He's at home, they are very noisy, drinking. I was here just now but there were so many people, so I did not come in. Luckily I had not bought the drinks and food first, or else they would have gone cold by now.'

'Thanks for the chocolate and the hot dog.'

'I salute you, Uncle Deehan. Congratulations on getting the Cross of Gallantry.'

'Thank you, Bhunah.'

'Oh, where's your Cross? Where have you put it?'

'In the drawer.'

'Why don't you put it on display? Father certainly won't put his medal away in the drawer. He'll show it to everyone who comes inside the house. They are all very envious. This is a great honour. Everybody says so.'

'Bhunah, have you finished today's homework?'

'All done, Uncle Deehan! Why don't you show me—your Cross of Gallantry? Is it the same as my father's?'

'The same.'

'Father said the ceremony was very grand, was it?'

'Yes, very grand.'

'Father said London is a big place, there are lots of pigeons in one of the squares, some Houses of Parliament by a river, and there's a big clock somewhere that strikes, and when it does the sound it makes is exactly like the sound of ferry

bells here. Is it true?'

'Yes.'

'Father said the parks over there are very big. Inside one of the parks, you can row boats, and there is a big church with stained glass, right?'

'Yes.'

'Father said there were others who were awarded medals, and that there were different kinds of medals; the highest kind of medal is called the Victoria Cross. Is it true?'

'Yes.'

'It is such an honour to be awarded a medal!'

'Bhunah, do you have to go to school tomorrow?'

'Yes I have to, but the house is packed full of people. I can go back a bit late. I cannot go to bed even if I go home now.'

'This hot dog is very big. Shall we share it between us?'

'I bought it specially for you. We're celebrating!'

'We'll each have half, like brothers.'

'Good, half each.'

'Do you want some hot chocolate too?'

'We'll both have half?'

'Yes, each of us will have half.'

'Uncle Deehan, it would be so nice if you were my real brother.'

'Aren't you like my own brother now?'

'Uncle Deehan, I don't know why, I really admire you very much.'

'Don't say such silly things.'

'It's true, I really admire you, you are the fastest at running uphill, you can cut off the bull's head with one sweep of the chopper and now you have been awarded this medal.'

'Your father is the one you should really admire.'

'Uncle Deehan? When I grow up, will I be able to get a medal too?'

'All soldiers have the same chance of getting medals.'

'When I grow up I want to be a brave soldier, and I want a medal too.'

'Bhunah, it's getting late now. You should be going to bed.'

'I am so envious of people who have the Cross of Gallantry. Uncle Deehan, tell me, what are the people who have been awarded the Victoria Cross like? They must be great men, right? When I grow

up, I shall be a good soldier, a brave soldier, and I want a medal.'

'Bhunah, it is getting very late now, go home and sleep.'

Finally, Bhunah went home. I locked the door, took out my father's letter and re-read it once more. My poor sister, her problems have got worse. I hope my brother-in-law will be all right. I opened the drawer and put the letter inside. On opening the drawer, I saw my Cross of Gallantry. It is a medal for bravery. I am a hero because in one day I arrested seven illegal immigrants. Bhunah said when he grew up he wanted to be a heroic soldier and he wanted the medal for bravery. Why does anyone want to be a soldier? If I had the choice, I would rather be a doctor or a teacher. Why can't I sell stamps over the counter in the Post Office, or be a driver in a public vehicle, or a carpenter making tables and chairs?

Today, I did not polish my kukri. I unfastened it from my waist and put it on the table. For how many more years will this dagger be with me? I don't know. Will I some day give this dagger to my child, just as my father handed it to me? I

hope there will never be blood on this dagger. I even hope that this dagger will disintegrate with my body when I die. Or be used for nothing but chopping wood. My brother sells fire wood in the town square, sitting on the steps of the Stone Lion. Can the dagger be used to chop wood? I don't know. I have not tried. When it is Festival time, sister will put a red mark on my younger brother's forehead, saying as she does, 'We plant all thorns on the doorsteps of the God of Death, may our brother live to be a hundred years old.' Now, at Festival time, there is no one to put a red mark on my forehead. My sister is so skinny, standing there, thrashing husks against the wind in the open fields, dressed in black. How strange that the girl hidden behind the rocks was so like my sister! She made two blood-stained marks on my arms, one longer than the other, a vertical and a horizontal. They formed the sign of the cross.

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