

Grandfather's Legacy

Part 1

by

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(based on COTY)

(with apologies to The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen)

London - 1936

Mid-day

I didn't like London when I first got here. I like it even less now.

We've been in Oz for a good while now. I'm not sure how long. I don't even know if time runs the same way there that it does in our world. Magic's a funny thing. It does look like we've only been away a short time, though. I'll admit, I was half expecting to find that seven years had passed in a single night, but Oz isn't that sort of fairyland. It's just that after what I saw in the lands of Ev and Oz, every single vile, cruel, harsh, or uncivilized aspect of modern London stands out in sharp relief.

Thank Heaven I'm not going to be here long. After what we saw of the Prufrocks' plans for Oz - and possibly the other fairy lands as well - we've decided to gather what resources we can to oppose them. I believe I can make a reasonable case for involving the RCMP in this. It won't be easy, but if I'm on loan to direct Crown service for the purpose of thwarting a potential danger to the entire British Empire, I believe I can persuade Inspector Moore to loan me some more Mounties to assist. I'll admit, I'm not relying on the strength of the argument here. After what happened in Oz- well. There's something very different going on. I don't know how else to describe it, but. . . Dorothy listened to reason, even though she had every excuse in the world not to. I don't know if she would've listened to the same arguments coming from anyone else in our group. I think- maybe- that Inspector Moore will believe me.

Anyway, that's in the future. Right now the important thing is for us to marshal our resources as quickly as possible. The dirigible takes too long, so Miss Poppins is taking each of the League members home via painting, one at a time. She's at the Tate now with Cranston, looking for paintings of New York City. I'm not looking forward to it, but I don't think I have a choice.

London - 1936

Evening

I AM NOT DOING THAT AGAIN.

EVER.

Grandfather's Legacy
Part 2

Dawson City - 1936
Morning

The infernal woman would take my dog through the painting just to make sure I agreed to follow!

I suppose I ought to thank her. She did manage to find me in time. Still-

Excuse me. I need a few minutes to calm down a bit before I explain exactly what happened at the Tate yesterday.

Dawson City
Later in the Morning

All right, that's better, but she's still not getting her hands on Prince again if I can help it. I don't really know how to describe what happened yesterday, but I'll do my best. It's not as if it makes any sense that I can discern anyway.

Having already dropped off Cranston and Hugo, Miss Poppins informed me that it was my turn to go next. Apparently she'd located a suitable painting in the Tate galleries. I didn't ask her how she knew it was suitable. The less I knew about such things, the better, as far as I was concerned. All that mattered was that it'd be over in a few minutes, and Prince and I would be back in the Yukon for however long it took.

I'm pretty sure Prince is the only dog to be allowed into all of London's major museums and galleries. We'd been to all the others during the time between Glasgow and the arrival of the fairies. Never did get around to the Tate, though - it's a pity, really. Louise would've loved it. She'd have loved a lot of London, I think. . . but that's beside the point. The gallery guards didn't seem to know what to make of a husky who probably outweighed them. They did have enough sense to recognize my uniform. Once that happened we had no trouble at all. They showed us in, made a few fussing comments among themselves, and let us go on through.

I'll give Miss Poppins this: she knows her paintings. They had A. Y. Jackson's Terre Sauvage on display. I don't know how they managed that, as most of his

work's in Ottawa, but there it was. Wasn't as detailed as a photograph, I'll admit. Jackson doesn't paint like that. I don't know how to describe his work, except to say that when he paints a place, you can't help but recognize it. The evergreens, the clouds, the stony white ground all reminded me so much of the territory around Fort Munn that it got me outright homesick for a moment. I believe I almost said something then, but I looked down instead.

Prince was looking back up at me. When we were in Oz, Prince could talk, and I could understand him. That went away when we returned to London - mostly. Maybe it's just that I always thought Prince would've spoken if he could, but ever since getting back from Oz I'd had the very clear feeling I could understand him better than before. Looking down at him in the Tate, I got the impression that he felt the same way. For all that he'd been able to speak, he hadn't really been happy in Oz. It was too warm for a dog like him - warmer even than London - and half the time we were there, we had to fly. He'd liked that even less than I had. I glanced at the painting, and then down at Prince again. "Almost there, old fellow," I said and tried to smile.

Miss Poppins overheard me. "Quite right, Sergeant," she said briskly. "Now, if you would be so kind, I'm afraid I shall need to hold Prince's lead."

"Excuse me?"

"Sergeant, surely you noticed that I held both your hand and Dorothy's when we visited at the National Galleries?" As I was thinking about that, she said, "Prince, here, hasn't a hand to hold. Either I've got to hold on to his collar, or his tail-"

Prince snorted. Miss Poppins went on. "Or, of course, you could outright carry him-"

"Miss Poppins, I could more easily pick up and carry you."

"Exactly so. The lead, please, Sergeant."

It wasn't an idea I liked. Prince hadn't come with us into the paintings before, and I didn't know how he was going to react. But like she said, we didn't have much choice. I gave him one last scratch behind the ears, then handed the leash over.

"Thank you. Prince, are you ready?" The dog heaved a sigh; Miss Poppins nodded. "Very well. Sergeant-"

I took her hand, and - we jumped.

It's not a physical jump, really. Not like jumping with your legs, I mean. It's as if the world suddenly twists in a direction you didn't even know it had. When it happens, all of a sudden everything that was flat, like the painting in front of you, becomes as real and three dimensional as you are. The only thing is that

everything that was already three dimensional gets- more. I don't have the words to describe it, but it's as if everything else around you suddenly turned out to have more depth to it, only in directions that didn't exist a second ago. And none of the directions are the same, so absolutely everything that you look at is trying to be complicated in a completely new way, all at once. If you aren't concentrating on looking straight at the painting, it's dizzying. For me, it was worse than that. At the National Galleries I wanted to know what was going on, and I made the mistake of looking around as we jumped. That was a very big mistake, one I tried not to repeat the rest of that day. My stomach didn't forgive me for hours afterwards.

I remembered the trip to the Galleries, of course. Couldn't help but remember. When Miss Poppins started to jump I kept my eyes straight ahead. Didn't want my first act upon returning to Canada to be getting violently sick, after all. I think I might have managed it, too, except for one thing: Prince. Didn't have him right there next to me. I suddenly remembered how badly he'd reacted to the dirigible ride, and turned to look for him.

Even thinking about it makes my stomach want to turn inside out. EVERYTHING moved when I did that - Prince, Miss Poppins, the painting, the next painting over - it turned in a thousand directions at once. The whole place seemed to fly apart like a mirror thrown at the wall, some things flying away and some back at me-

I couldn't help it. I threw both my arms up in front of my face. By the time I realized I'd let go of Miss Poppins' hand, I'd hit the ground. . . the green, grass-covered ground.

Grandfather's Legacy
Part 3

I won't lie. It took a few moments for me to realize what had happened. The fall had knocked the wind out of me. It wasn't until I had enough breath back to think straight that I realized something had gone wrong. There are parts of the Yukon where it doesn't snow until the second week of September, after all. It was several minutes before I realized that Jackson's painting wasn't of one of those parts. Or before I realized just how warm the air around me was, and humid. Or, for that matter, how wrong it smelled. I don't quite know how to describe it, but it smelled . . . brown? Yes, I think that's about the right word. Brown, like fresh, warm soil and wet fallen leaves- and other things, for that matter. If I wasn't too mistaken, there was a smell of sheep on that sweltering wind, or possibly cattle.

As soon as I had identified the smell, I realized I was still lying on the ground where I'd fallen. I got my hands under me, propping myself up- and came face to face with the biggest snake I'd ever seen: a king cobra.

It stared at me, and I stared back. What else could I have done? We don't have snakes in the Yukon. Definitely not snakes as big around as a man's leg, or long enough to rear up their front ends and keep eye contact. It couldn't have been more than half a foot away from me. I might not know snakes, but I know striking distance when I see it.

"Prince?" I said softly, not taking my eyes off the snake for an instant. "Prince, boy-"

The cobra hissed, flicking its tongue at me. My heart sank as I realized that I couldn't hear Prince anywhere. If he was back at the Tate-

I held up a hand a little, trying to ease myself into a position where I could back away smoothly. There's people in the North Country who say that you can talk your way out of bear trouble if you use the right tone of voice. I've never had to do that myself, but it's worked with dogs more often than I can count- even the ones with wolf blood. I very much doubted I could reach my gun before the snake could strike, and without Prince that meant I had no choice but to try words. "Sorry about that, big fellow," I said to the cobra. Its head bobbed a little; I couldn't tell if it was getting ready to strike or not. "I didn't mean to come here, and I don't want to cause any trouble. Just give me a moment, and I'll be out of your way."

Its head bobbed again, and I got my heels under me. For a moment I wondered if Mr. Otani ever had to use jiu-jitsu on a snake.

"What do you think you are doing here, English?"

It was the snake speaking.

Well. That changed things. Apparently I was back in- no. No, I couldn't be back in Oz, could I? Not if the animals used words like 'English'. I shook my head, holding out both hands to show them empty. "It was an accident," I said. "I was trying to get home and came this way by mistake-"

The snake hissed loudly, tongue flicking at me. "Liar. There are no English for many miles."

It occurred to me that the snake had an accent, even though it was speaking plain English. I don't mean the hissing way it had of pronouncing its esses, either. I mean it had a distinct accent, just like a human. I couldn't quite put my finger on it- but there were more important things to think about. "I'm sorry, but it's true. There was magic involved, and the magic went wrong."

I don't know how it managed to pull it off, but somehow the cobra contrived to look suspicious.

"Not mine," I said quickly. A thought occurred to me: if this was Oz, and the snake

knew the word 'English', then it had encountered the Prufrocks. "I'm a friend of Dorothy's-"

"I do not know this 'Dorothy'," said the snake. There was that accent again.

"Dorothy Gale, of Kansas- the princess?" It still looked suspicious. "This isn't Oz?"

Its hood flared briefly. "You are in Rajmahal, English," it snapped. "In the country of the Nagas."

Rajmahal- that was an Indian name. Well, that explained the accent, sure enough. "And a lovely country it is, too," I said, starting to ease myself up to my feet. "At least, what I can see of it."

"We do not appreciate visitors," the snake said quietly, lifting more of itself up to match my height without any seeming effort. Great Scott, how long was that thing? Or was it simply getting bigger as it spoke?

"I'm sorry," I said carefully. "I never meant to come here."

Its head dipped briefly. I realized it was looking at my uniform. "So it would seem. But you did come. The king must be told."

"The king?" I asked. Was it a royal snake, I wondered? Or more like the royalty of Oz?

The cobra dipped its head again, nodding this time. "His Majesty, Sankhapala," it hissed. "I am Sagara, his minister."

Probably a snake, then. "Pleased to meet you, Sagara," I said as formally as I could. "I'm Sergeant Bill Preston-"

I've never seen anything move as fast as that snake did. "Preston?" it hissed, rearing up to nearly twice my height and flaring out its hood like some ancient shield. "Your name is Preston?"

I tried to step back- who wouldn't?- only to stumble over something. Sagara had gotten a coil behind me. "Uh- yes! Is that a problem?"

Sagara hissed so viciously that I grabbed my revolver. "I knew I recognized your smell!" he said, bringing his head down to look me in the eye. "You dare to come here? You dare?"

I kept firm hold of my gun, but didn't draw it yet. "I don't know what you're talking about," I said steadily. "I've spent most of my life in Canada. I've never been to India."

Either Sagara was holding back the urge to strike, or he was trembling with rage.

He stared at me, tongue flicking in and out like a metronome. I took very little comfort in the fact that he was by now big enough to make a reasonable target.

"I swear to you," I said, "on my honor as a Mountie-"

Sagara hissed again. "You were a fool to come here, Preston. An absolute fool."

"It was an accident," I repeated. "Believe me, I don't want to be here."

"Nevertheless," Sagara said, "you are here. The king must know. All the Nagas must." I could've been wrong, but for a moment it looked like he was smiling. "It is not often we get such a chance as this."

That didn't sound good.

The snake slid backwards, though his eyes were still on me. I could still feel the coil he'd slung behind my legs, and stayed exactly where I was. Sagara lifted his head, hood stretching out further than I would have thought possible, and let out a great hiss. The top of his head began to glow.

I am quite serious. At first, I thought it was catching the sun's rays somehow, but no- Sagara's head had something on it I couldn't make out that had a light all its own. It was a brilliant red, quickly growing so bright that I had to block the light out with one hand. Even then, the light seeped through my fingers. It was saying something in a language too full of hissing to understand, but I thought I could make my name out once or twice. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and waited.

The light stopped. The hissing went on, but it seemed to be coming from all around me. I dropped my hand.

"Open your eyes, Preston," whispered Sagara, "and see the gathering of those who have come to judge you."

Grandfather's Legacy
Part 4

We stood at the center of a circle of open space defined by Sagara's coiling length. Beyond that scaly line were... snakes. Angry, hissing snakes of every size and shape and possible permutation- little spotted things, cobras differing from Sagara only in their size, snakes striped in yellow and black, pythons, and snakes I couldn't put a name to. I saw all the snakes of India that I had ever heard of, and more- you see, not all of the gathered, hissing crowd were entirely snake. Beyond the ordinary snakes who clustered nearest to Sagara I could make out serpents nearly as big as he, but with the arms of a human being. I saw another creature I suppose I will have to call a snake, but only because I can't think of a word for

a beast with a man's head on a serpent's body. There was at least one man-sized cobra who must surely have had at least three heads, if not more, and there were creatures that looked like nothing so much as the lamias my mother had told me existed in the myths of the Greeks. There were two of them, serpent bodies as thick as Sagara's rising perhaps a meter off the ground- but only that far, because that was the point at which they suddenly ceased to be snakes and gave over to human shapes. Those two looked like Indian women of extremely high caste. They were even dressed in saris and jewels, each one wearing a large ruby squarely between her eyebrows. You could almost call them beautiful, but there was a kind of hardness about their expressions that cut all such thoughts off before they could take root.

Still, I know a lady when I see one. I bowed. They didn't acknowledge it, but I thought perhaps I saw a little bit of a change for the better in their expressions. One of them raised a hand, calling out to Sagara in some human language. The cobra dipped his head to her; so did all of the other snakes. A moment later they did the same thing towards the other snake-woman. When Sagara lifted his head, he turned to me and hissed, "His Majesty's daughters are pleased. This is most unexpected."

"Why?" I started to ask, but a motion caught my eye. The taller of the two snake-women had clasped her hands in front of her and bowed her head. Her sister slithered backwards, almost seeming to draw half the other snakes back with her, forming an open path wide enough to ride a horse through.

What came down that path could never have ridden a horse; then again, it wouldn't need one. Even without Sagara's murmur, the Naga King was unmistakably royalty. Like his daughters, he was human above, serpent below. The lines of his face were as aristocratic as anything you might see in the House of Lords, dusky though his skin was. Where his daughters wore saris he wore the sort of ornaments I had only ever seen in the museums of London. Strings of gemstones, heavy gold earrings, wrist bracers and arm bands- he looked like nothing so much as one of the statues in the British Museum, down to the lethal-looking hooked spear in his hands. His black hair was pulled up atop his head in a complicated, braided pile- even that was like the statues, though not quite the same. About the only thing that seemed the least bit different was that he, like his daughters, wore a ruby between his brows. His was at least the size of the end of a man's thumb.

The Naga King didn't seem to see me as he arched an eyebrow at Sagara. The enormous cobra nodded, drawing his coils out of the way, and the King slithered into what remained of our open space. Then, and only then, did Sankhapala turn in my direction. "Is this the one?" he asked in English, his words as clear and civilized as any man's.

"I believe so, your Majesty," answered Sagara.

The rule I was taught as a child is: a gentleman neither grovels nor kowtows. Bow, yes, grovel, no. And in the presence of royalty one must always remember, one knee before the sovereign, two knees before God. I took a deep breath, bowed my head, and went down on one knee.

There was silence then, even from the snakes. Funny how loud the noises of the world around you can be, when all the other noises stop. "Your Majesty," I said, "my name is Frank William Preston, and I'm a sergeant of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. I don't know who you're looking for, but I very much doubt it's me."

He laughed, but not in a good way. That was a laugh that said 'I don't believe you' more clearly than any words I've ever heard. "My minister is very wise, Preston," said the Naga King. "I have known him many lifetimes of men. He does not lie."

"I'm not saying that he does, your Majesty." I kept my eyes down and my voice steady. "But even a wise man can be mistaken-"

The hissing started again. That's not a comforting sound, not when it's coming from everywhere around you. "I know the smell, your Majesty," whispered Sagara. "I would know that smell anywhere."

"Hmm," said the Naga King, sounding thoughtful. "Perhaps... "

I still waited. It suddenly occurred to me that of all the situations I'd been in these past several weeks, this was the worst yet. Alone, without so much as my dog-surrounded by natives with no reason to like White men- mistaken for someone who had obviously antagonized them- and without any ghost of a chance that anyone else knew where I was. Not a comforting thought, by any stretch of the imagination. I'd been in worse spots before and come out alive, but not by much.

While I was thinking this, something caught me lightly just under the chin- a spear butt. "Rise," said the Naga King. "I would like a better look at you."

"Yes, your Majesty."

It might've been my imagination, but the circle of snakes seemed to have gotten smaller around us. Then again, it may have had more to do with Sankhapala himself. Up close, the Naga King was bulkier than his minister, though his serpent half wasn't nearly so long. It was all I could do not to turn to face him as he slowly circled around me; I kept my eyes on Sagara instead. It was easier than looking at the rest of my surroundings. The King's minister had lost any traces of expression and simply watched with dark, glittering eyes as Sankhapala circled - once, twice, three times.

At last, the Naga King came to a stop. "I cannot tell," he said, fingering his spear. "The smell is right, yes, but it is not the same."

Sagara looked at me, flicking his tongue. "It is the same name," he insisted. "I tell you, this Preston is the one-"

That tore it. Absolutely, positively tore it. Constable Deadman I could understand. Mr. Otani I could almost handle. But having my name, and apparently my very smell, recognized by a bunch of hostile snakes on the other side of the globe ENTIRELY from anywhere I had ever been? That was more than any man ought to be asked to take. Ever!

"Excuse me!" I called out, putting up a hand for attention. It wasn't necessary- the King and his minister were already staring. "Your Majesty- Sagara- would someone PLEASE tell me exactly what I stand accused of? I've said it already - I've never been to India. I've never seen a Naga before today. Why, where I come from, we don't even have snakes!"

The Naga King looked like he was about to choke on his own tongue. Sagara, whose hood was flaring out again, regained speech a little faster. "Majesty," he offered, "perhaps you are right."

"What do you mean, Sagara?" The King leaned on his spear, looking to the cobra quickly.

"Perhaps it is not the same smell, after all." His tongue flicked out again. "One who wields the kind of power that could trap your son in bondage could not possibly be so stupid-"

My turn to choke, I guess. I've been called a lot of things in my day. Stupid's not one of the more common ones.

Sagara canted his head, continuing. "-as to lie so baldly to your face. Perhaps this one is not the Preston who offended us, but only of the same blood?"

The Naga King turned, eyes narrowed, and peered at me once more. "It may be so," he said. "Or- perhaps he thinks the years have been long enough to make our memories go astray?"

"Perhaps." Sagara's hood folded out of sight. "Send for Samadarshi, Majesty. He will have the truth from this man."

That's not a good thing to hear, under any circumstances. Considering the sheer number of poisonous snakes around me, I couldn't see where anything good could arise out of that sentence. "If you think I'm going to let your people get any closer to me-"

"Be still, Preston," said Sagara. There was an odd sound to his voice. It took me a moment to realise that it was as close as a cobra could get to laughing. "You stand in no danger - yet."

"But if I don't tell you what you want to hear, this Samadarshi of yours is going to bite me, I take it."

"No." It was the Naga King this time. "Our ways are not those of England, Preston. We have borne this wound a very long time. We can bear it a while longer, if doing so gives us the truth." He glanced to the banded snakes assembled closest to his daughters, nodding once. "We do not punish those who have done no wrong."

"Then we agree on something, at least." Assuming, of course, that he was telling the truth. "And I'm not English."

The King arched one eyebrow, extending his spear towards the crowd. One of the banded snakes, hardly thicker than my thumb, coiled itself about the spear's butt and made its way up towards the King's hand. "No? Scottish, then, perhaps?"

I started to answer him, but the words froze for a moment as I realized what he'd said. I'd spoken to the preacher at Shettleston, and put in a request for Census information, but hadn't yet had an answer. Same name, same smell- why, that might mean-

"No," I said at last, as steadily as I could. "No, I'm not Scottish. Though... one of my ancestors was."

The sound that went up from the crowd all around us was as unnerving as any I've ever heard. It might've been a collective sigh of relief, or it might've been something altogether less pleasant. Either way, it wasn't anything comforting to hear. Still, the Naga King inclined his head to me. "I see," he said as the black and yellow snake twined itself about his spearhead. "Some distant ancestor of whom your family no longer speaks, perhaps?"

I shook my head. "My grandfather," I said, "the father of my father. He came across the sea to Canada after a venture of his failed, and he came from Scotland."

The Naga King nodded. I might be wrong, but he looked pleased somehow, as if I'd given him something of what he was after. "And so it unfolds... Samadarshi?" The striped snake lifted its head, tongue flickering. "Speak to this man, and tell him of our people. Say to him what became of my son." The King lifted his eyes from the yellow-and-black snake to me, adding, "Men are skilled liars, or tellers of truth, but no man can keep the truth from his eyes when Samadarshi speaks."

I didn't say anything. It wasn't like I had much of a choice.

Grandfather's Legacy

The snake on the King's spear stretched out towards me for a moment. I caught a glimpse of something red glimmering on its head as it spoke. "Hear me, foreigner," it said. "My name is Samadarshi, and the words I speak are true. I tell you now of the fate of the King's son, and of the one who put this fate upon him. Woe to the one responsible! For the King has sworn by his right arm that such a one will not leave his presence alive."

I glanced at the King for a moment, but his expression was neutral. Then Samadarshi resumed speaking.

"Many, many years ago," the banded snake said, "Kauravya, the son of King Sankhapala, set out to travel to a faraway country and claim for himself a bride. Though he traveled with the retinue of a Prince, his companions' presence weighed heavy upon him, and when night fell he slipped away to make his prayers alone. No one among the Nagas heard anything of the Prince Kauravya for many summers after, but the place where the Prince was last seen stank of magic."

Given that I was facing a forty-foot-long cobra, a half-snake, half-man specimen of Indian royalty, and an otherwise normal snake who spoke flawless English, I thought the comment about magic was a little rich. Then again, stranger things happen in Oz.

"It happened, one night, that a dream came to Ulupi, daughter of the king," the snake continued. The taller of the two princesses bowed her head. "She dreamed of her brother Kauravya, who spoke to her as one who calls from afar, and this is what he said to her:

"I beg of you, my sister, heed my words. My time is brief, and our father the king must know what has befallen. I am trapped beyond the reach of all our people's power, through the actions of men."

There was an angry muttering quality to the hiss from the crowd, but it didn't go any further than that.

"Kauravya said, 'Hear me, o Ulupi! On the day I set out to find my bride, a man who fancied himself a hero met a man who called himself an ascetic. It was a meeting of men only, and would have gone unnoticed, but the ascetic knew of our people. He offered the hero his aid in a mighty deed: the theft of a Naga's ruby.'"

Here he dipped his head towards me, and I saw that I had been right. In the center of his head, where I would have assumed there to be nothing but scales, he somehow wore a tiny ruby. The story stopped as he hissed, "To take the gem from the brow of a living Naga is no mean thing, Preston. It is through these gems

that we call upon many powers. We may pass unseen among men if we choose, or call the rains, or bestow children on those we favour- or withhold them from those who have angered us. Even the words which I speak to you now are made acceptable to your ears by virtue of the stone."

He seemed to want a response; I nodded, and he went on. "Kauravya was mighty among our people, but he was only one, and the men who sought to take from him his ruby were mighty after their own fashion. He spoke of this to Ulupi, and of the spells the ascetic had used to trap him. Trapped he was, O foreigner! For they had taken his stone from him, and bound him about with many spells, so that he must surely do whatever he who held the ruby commanded of him.

"Where then may your ruby be found?' asked the daughter of Sankhapala, but Kauravya the prince only shook his head. 'O my sister,' said the prince, 'I have passed beyond the lands of our people, and beyond all reach of our kind. The gem was stolen from the hero even as he had stolen it from me. It has passed over many lands and many waters, and I have passed with it, though it was never my wish to do so.'

"The princess asked then, 'How is it you speak to me?'. And her brother said: 'He who holds the stone now is a man of great learning. He speaks the tongue of the people of Rajmahal, and other places besides; he knows of the ascetic's spells. He has bought the gem, and keeps it now among his treasures, so that I must give prosperity to his business and abundance to his wife and children. He has set on the gem another charm, so that he may order me as he likes even from afar. It is this charm, O my sister, which gives my words strength to reach you now- for I have a little power left, and for this time only I have wrested the charm from his control.'

"In that moment the prince Kauravya stretched forth his hand and touched his sister's forehead. 'Thus may my captor be known,' said he; 'this is the smell of him, and this the look of him. He dwells in a land I have only heard named as Scotland. And though he does not speak or write his name where I may hear, I have heard his servants call him by the name of Preston.'"

We were in India, and it was September, but I don't believe I've ever had such a cold feeling creep over me as I did at the banded snake's words.

"Sankhapala's son said no more than that," said Samadarshi very quietly. "When he spoke the name of his captor, the charm slipped his grasp. Ulupi woke then, and brought her brother's message to her father and his ministers. It is in this way that we know of the prince's fate." He uncoiled some of his length from the spear, rearing up his head, and his tongue flickered for a few moments. "The scent of you is very like that which the Prince conveyed to his sister, and though your garb is different, the look of you is much the same as well. And you have already

given us your name, which is the same as his. . ."

"So tell us," the Naga King broke in. His expression was carefully neutral, but the thickest man alive could have seen the pain and the anger in his eyes. "Tell us, now that you have heard Sankhapala's words: are you the man my son spoke of?"

I wanted to tell him something. I don't know what. Something that would at least have done some kind of good, or given him some kind of news- but if I said anything like that, it would have been a lie. "No, your Majesty," I answered. "I'm sorry."

The King was silent. The other Nagas were probably watching, too, but-well, they didn't matter. Harsh, I know, but they didn't. King Sankhapala was the only one who mattered.

He looked at me for a long time, his head held high and his jaw grimly set. He might have been a marble statue for all the movement he showed. There wasn't anything I could do but return his gaze- I'd given him the truth already. I didn't have anything else to give.

Without warning, the Naga King threw down his spear- and I do mean down: it landed in front of me, the haft crosswise to my feet. "So it is," the King said through gritted teeth, Samadarshi wrapping himself around one forearm. "It seems I must believe you."

I let out a breath- hadn't known I'd been holding it. "Thank you, your Majesty-"

One of his hands came up in a sharply truncated gesture. "Do not thank me! I have done nothing. There is no lie in you, Preston. That is all." He turned towards his daughters, and I couldn't see his face any more. But there was a line to his shoulders that I knew much too well. Men don't take it well when their only chance for revenge slips through their fingers.

Grandfather's Legacy
Part 6

Not wanting to intrude further on the King, I turned to Sagara. The cobra had receded a little, but noticed me looking at him. A man would've raised his eyebrows, but the royal minister only tilted his head, almost like one of my dogs. "What happens now?" I asked as quietly as I dared.

"Now?" Sagara's hood widened a little. "I do not know. But you will not be punished. Everyone here knows you are not guilty."

Well, that was something. Unfortunately, 'here' was still India, lack of punishment or no. "If I might be so bold, I seem to remember you saying there were no English

for many miles. Do you know the way to wear they are?"

"I do." His tongue flickered on the air a moment. "But I will not tell you the way."

"Why not?"

"It is as I also said before, Preston. . . we do not appreciate visitors." He glanced to the King a moment, but Sankhapala was still conferring with his daughters. "Particularly not visitors who are close kin to wanted criminals."

"Excuse me?" I swear, I could feel my own hackles going up at that. "You've got no proof!"

"You have the face," Sagara pointed out. "You have the smell. Your ancestor is of Scotland, and shares the name. For many humans, that would be reason enough to see you dead."

"But you said I wouldn't be punished." I looked to the King as well- he was coming back to the open space. "I haven't done anything!"

"It is true, you have not," said the Naga King. "But your ancestor did."

"Again, your Majesty, I mean no offense, but you haven't got any proof it's the same man!" I wouldn't have thought it possible, but I was liking this situation even less than before. "Strong evidence, maybe, but you don't even have a first name. There's a lot of people in Scotland named Preston."

"Ones who look like you? Or share your scent?"

He had me there. If there'd been a dog involved I would've taken the smell as evidence of kinship and not thought about it twice. "Well- no, probably not-"

Sankhapala nodded. "Then we must assume that you are kin to the one who holds my son. We have no choice, Preston. The Nagas are just, and our law is not lightly to be cast aside."

Worse and worse. Comprehensible, sure, but worse and worse nonetheless. "And what does your law say about a situation like this?"

The Naga King shrugged. "My son is held prisoner, very far away. You can write, yes?"

"Well, yes, but what has that got to do with anything?"

"We shall bring you paper and pen and ink, then," decided the King. "You will write to this man, your grandfather, and tell him that my son must be released. One of my daughters will disguise herself and give this message to the English. You will stay among us as our guest until the Prince Kauravya returns to us- it

is only fair."

I couldn't believe my ears. Prisoner? Here? In India? "But your Majesty," I exclaimed, "my grandfather's dead! He died when I was two years old!"

Sagara hissed, but it was the King who spoke. Eyes narrowed, he said, "Then the obligation passes to his heirs-"

"My father is also dead." Even as I said it, I realised what was coming next. "And I don't know the first thing about magic rubies, or anything else. Everything I know about my grandfather comes from my father's stories, and all he ever said about my grandfather's time in Europe was that Saul Preston left Scotland in disgrace after a business venture soured on him."

The King's lips pursed. "Mere ignorance of an obligation does not cause it to vanish- are you trying to tell me that you cannot undo this debt?"

"He most certainly can not." It was a woman's voice. And it was English, beyond all shadow of doubt.

"Miss Poppins," I said, feeling the smile of relief starting entirely of its own accord, "you have no idea how glad I am that you're here right now."

She sniffed, stepping carefully through the smaller snakes and around the end of the Naga King's tail, but there was something of a smile to her eyes. "You're not the first to say that, Sergeant," she observed primly. "All things considered, I doubt you'll be the last, either."

Sagara's hood had snapped out to its greatest width yet. If there were such a thing as the white of a snake's eye, I believe I would've seen it then. That's how startled he looked. "Ranee?" he asked, disbelieving. "You know this man?"

She smiled up at him. Actually smiled. "Of course I do," she said. "I would hardly come all this way and interrupt your council for a stranger, would I?"

From the sound of his voice, the Naga King was just as surprised as I was. "This is . . . very unexpected, Cousin."

Cousin?

Cousin?

I have no idea what else the King said after that. I really don't, and I've been trying to remember, but I just can't get past that one word. I'm sure he must've said something else, and I know Miss Poppins said quite a lot to him, but I can't for the life of me recall any of it. I just know that she eventually turned to me, and Sankhapala turned as well, her hand in his. "I think perhaps something can be arranged," he said, "although it does not sit well with us."

"I know, cousin, I know," she told him soothingly. "But really, keeping him here won't do you any good."

The King sighed, shoulders slumping. "I had thought, perhaps. . ." He trailed off. "It has been so very long since we lost my son, dear Mary. So very long."

"That's true, but he really can't help you. He's a policeman, not a magician."

As the Naga King murmured his reply, Miss Poppins' words sank in. A policeman, not a magician, eh?

"Maybe there's something I can do after all," I said, stepping forward. "Your Majesty?"

The King looked up; Mary merely glanced my way. "Your Majesty, the situation your- ah-" I didn't know what to call Samadarshi, exactly. "-storyteller described. Your son was taken from India, held captive against his will and forced to serve this man Preston in Scotland, am I right?"

He nodded slowly.

"That sounds like slavery to me. That's been illegal in Britain for a very long time."

"What does this have to do with my people?" the Naga King asked suspiciously. Sagara watched me intently over the king's shoulder.

"Only this, your Majesty: what you're talking about is a crime against a subject of the British crown. And that's exactly the kind of thing I'm supposed to put a stop to." I tapped the stripes on my tunic's sleeve. "It's part of the job."

"Sergeant," Miss Poppins murmured, "under the circumstances-"

"I know, Miss Poppins. I'm out of my everyday jurisdiction, and even on my extended jurisdiction I've got League matters to attend to first. But His Majesty himself said it before you got here: they've carried this wound for years. If they can carry it just a little more. . ." I looked the King square in the eye. "Then as soon as my current obligations are discharged, I'll do everything in my power to find out what happened, and set things right. If it was really my grandfather who did this, then I owe these people that much."

"And what if it was not your grandfather?" Miss Poppins asked softly.

I kept my eyes on the King's as I answered. "Then it's a matter of duty. I swore to uphold the Crown and its laws, and serve its people, and that's what I'll do." I don't know what prompted me to do it- such a thing never occurred to me once in Oz- but I held out my right hand to the King.

He looked down at it. He looked up at me again. And, very slowly, he took it and

shook it.

"Very . . . very well, Sergeant Preston," he said, remembering my rank at last. "We will trust you."

That was more or less it. Miss Poppins made her farewells to her cousin (I still don't believe that), then took me firmly by the hand and returned us to the Tate. I caught a glimpse of a painting with a title along the lines of 'Rajmahal Hills', but my head was still spinning as we landed, and I didn't care to look for long. "Miss Poppins?" I said, my eyes shut. "Where's Prince?"

"Why do you ask, Sergeant?"

"Because we're going to take the dirigible back to Canada. I'm not doing that again."

She was silent for a while.

"Miss Poppins?"

"I'm sorry, Sergeant, but that's not going to happen."

I opened one eye. The room had stopped trying to throw me to the floor, so I opened the other. "What do you mean? Tom's still here, isn't he?"

"Yes, but that doesn't matter. You aren't going back to Canada by dirigible. We haven't got time."

"I don't care. I'm not going to risk another experience like that." I didn't even want to look in that painting's direction. The Jackson painting in front of me was bad enough.

"It isn't a matter of choice, Sergeant. Not if you're the man I think you are."

I turned from the painting to stare at her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Prince made the jump rather better than you. I'm very sorry, Sergeant, but your dog is already in Canada."

"What?"

"When we leapt into the painting, you let go of my hand," she pointed out. "That's how you wound up in the wrong painting entirely. Your dog, it seems, has rather more sense about such things. Although he did get extremely upset when he realised you were missing."

"And you just LEFT him there?"

"I really didn't have a choice, Sergeant. A panicked, angry husky jumping from

painting to painting until we found the right one would've put you in even more danger when we finally found you. There were far too many places you could possibly be for me to risk taking Prince along to each and every one, so I convinced him to sit and wait until I came back."

I could've forgiven her that. I really could have. But then she had to go and ruin it by adding, "Besides, if I'd brought Prince along, the two of you would be halfway to the dirigible hangar by now."

Then she smiled- wretched woman- and held out her hand expectantly.

I suppose all's well that ends well; Prince and I are safely back in Dawson, and we're going to see Inspector Moore soon. I've assembled my diary notes of the last several weeks for him. I'm going to leave these pages out, though. The rest of what I've done and seen will be hard enough to believe without adding strange implications about my grandfather to the mix. Frankly, I liked matters better when I thought my grandfather's time in Scotland was a mystery because he'd been a Catholic...

Well, we'll see. Nothing's been proven yet. We've got things to do for the League, and I've got arrangements to make for Oz. We'll find out about this magician named Preston eventually.

But I'm not going into one of those blasted paintings again.

Ever.