

Diary of a Bhimra Spy
Mockup, Original Kickstarter Draft
6-27-13

Note to self—Naga vagrants in the Kennel carry knives in their hoods, can draw significantly faster than my standard react time. Stuff shirt with something next time I go down there. Also, under no circumstances let them find out I'm working for Ranveer ever again.

I'm going to need a few more hours and another glass of wine before I'll be ready to compose my report. My hand only just stopped shaking long enough to write the journal entry, which I hold to a considerably lower standard of quality. I'll admit the showman in me admires the way my bloodstain paints the page. I know no-one will read this before I die, which means it's all for my own benefit anyway, but you know what? A good spy is always his own biggest fan.

The bleeding seems to have slowed down. I don't know, maybe I'm just running out of blood. But something tells me I'll live.

Far be it from me to question good, honest, gratuitously dangerous freelance work, but what does mister Voice-of-the-Faithful Ranveer think he's going to get out of spying on the Naga neighborhoods? If he wants to know if any of the poor bastards plan to kill him, the answer is yes—absolutely any Naga with a stiff drink in him has a plan to murder Ranveer. Good thing he's protected by his councilman's bodyguard and about a thousand zealot bodies, isn't it? Maybe he's holding out for evidence of some grand Naga conspiracy? As far as I can tell, the long-term goals of our fine Naga citizens are "don't starve" and "try not to get beaten to death by Ranveer's

lunatics.” If there’s anything suspicious about them, it’s that they’re putting up with this much. I guess they don’t have much of a choice—if they start another weekend revolution, they might not like where it takes them. Ranveer’s not the only one in this city who doesn’t like their presence. If it was me, I’d be waiting for my homeland to just invade the city already. Now there’s something Ranveer ought to be scared of—not a bunch of slumrats wondering if they want to spend their last coin on something to fill their bellies or something to numb their skulls.

You know what? I’m thinking all future reports to Ranveer are coming from an “anonymous source.” If Ranveer wants pages of useless information delivered to him on a weekly basis, I see no reason I should run the risk of getting stabbed again to get it to him when I can write more than enough pointless nonsense from the comfort of my armchair. The tricky part will be handing it off to that fellow with a straight face. On a good day, he gives me chills; on a bad day, he almost gives me religion.

Paranoia is the first friend you make in this business. It doesn’t really matter what you were before; there is virtually no job, no area, no circumstance that warrants the kind of constant fear that is a spy’s stock and trade. Every spy I know (and I know more spies than most ever will) has confirmed this for me, and all of us share one rule:

When in doubt, get out.

I don’t know how many times this policy has cost me perfectly good business. It may have even offended some people, once or twice, in an affable non-vendetta sort of way. But the very first time it saved my life paid for all of that in full.

Some of my playmates in the bazaar gang let me know that an up-and-comer by the name of Sumeet was looking for someone in my line of work. Now, I have had many a pleasant, safe, and productive working relationship with market thugs, and I had no reason whatsoever to assume this would be different. He arranged for us to meet in the morning, at a foodseller by the Bull Gate.

He was waiting, alone, when I arrived. He didn't have any food in front of him, and when he sat down, he didn't call for any. He started asking questions about who I was, how long I'd been working in the area for, and who I'd worked with. These are generally not questions you want to ask a spy if you want him to keep his peace of mind, but I obliged him insofar as my wholly fictional answers were very polite.

And this is where paranoia makes for an interesting study. Believe it or not, at this point in the negotiations, I am not paranoid. Now, you might argue that I have every reason to be—this guy's asking questions no-one should ask someone in my position, and this meeting place, especially with him alone, speaks to hidden men with knives. I am aware that there is danger, certainly, but there's no shaking in my fingers, no roiling in my stomach. That's because I haven't seen the one thing that makes a spy nervous: conflict of interest.

Sumeet started talking about what he wanted me to do. He wanted me to follow a man— middle-aged, thick eyebrows, graying temples, dark spots on his face and hands—across town to see where he went. The man would be meeting some armed friends at the statue of Bali by the temple streets and proceeding to some locale in the slums. I was to make a very specific note of the location and its defenses, then report back immediately to the foodseller to give Sumeet his debriefing.

I told Sumeet that I'd meet him in my more typical location, in the central market outside the guardhouse. Sumeet said no, to come back to the foodseller. I agreed and left. Then I went straight home, because at this point my danger sense was sounding off like my beard was on fire. I'd spotted the conflict of interest between Sumeet and myself, and now I knew to be scared.

I kept an eye on street news to confirm or deny my suspicions. Two days later, I heard that one of the big market bosses, a man with dark spots and graying temples, transferred an underling named Sumeet to a less vital position in his organization. Also made less vital were all of Sumeet's cronies, who had made the unfortunate position of backing him in a coup that was one well-placed ambush away from success. If I'd backed Sumeet's little power play, he'd still be alive...but I'd bet anything, absolutely anything, that I wouldn't be.

There is one thing a spy can't ever become, and that's a loose end.

It's never a good day when the landlord comes in, and if he doesn't bother knocking first, you've got real problems.

Did I know, by any chance, that I was four days late on my payments? And that this was past his landlordly grace period by four days minus thirty seconds? And that he had three dogs on a chain downstairs he kept half-starved for exactly this sort of situation?

As a matter of fact, I did know all of that. I politely explained to him that I was in the middle of some protracted, highly illegal, fantastically dangerous operations on the east side of town

that should bear fruit before too long. Demonstrating a failure of critical listening on his part, he asked me to clarify that I did not currently have the money. I clarified that I did not.

The upshot is that I'm out on the street. I'd be more indignant if I actually did have a job on the east side of town. In fact, the reason I can't pay him is that I'm neck deep in the worst drought of my life.

It's been a week since I had any work besides Ranveer's fact-finding missions, which means it's been about a week since I left the apartment. I am getting dangerously poor for the first time in almost a decade. It hasn't done much good for my nerves, and if anything, it's been worse for my mental acuity. A man can only lay sprawled out on his rug for so long, conjuring up so many stories of mean Nagas terrorizing semi-innocent slumfolk, before he starts to go loopy from guilt and boredom. And between me and this page, I've had more wine than is in anyone's best interests.

But those days are behind me. Worst-case scenario is I'll be doing my drinking and scribbling in the gutter now. Best-case is that I find some work, and maybe a kinder landlord, before I end up as rat food. In my heart of hearts I know which is more likely.

The problem is that this city's getting too bad for spies to matter much one way or the other. People are starving. Nagas and humans are killing each other all over the slums. Every gang is declaring total war on all the other gangs, on their own neighborhoods, on themselves. Farmers everywhere are revolting or being put down or just plain dropping dead. So what, exactly, remains for a spy to discover?

No-one needs new information. Everyone can pretty much just expect the worst, because that's what's happening everywhere.

So there's this story I can't get out of my head.

Some of my military connects used to talk about this captain of theirs, a real nasty piece of work. Fed 'em naga livers every day to make them brave, withheld rations from troops that talked back, was less than friendly with the prisoners they took. Apparently, after this one gruesome battle to take back some farmland near the border, he came across an enemy soldier that had slipped down an irrigation ditch and broken his leg.

The enemy, groggy and delirious from pain, looks up at him. Imagine the last thirty minutes from this poor bastard's perspective. He can barely move, and he sure as all the gods can't climb out, not least because the sides are slick from the water that had been sluiced out not long ago. He had to sit here below the level of the combat listening to scuffling and screaming--just hoping it wasn't his friends doing the screaming. Now imagine he hears someone approaching from up above. He looks up, and there, standing above him, is all the past half-hour's pain-spiked fever nightmares come true: a scarred and blood-soaked stranger wearing an enemy uniform and a sick grin.

"You want out?" asked the captain to the man in the ditch. Whether he couldn't speak or just didn't see the point, the man in the ditch didn't answer.

So the captain knelt down, drew his blade...and held it down. Point-first. The injured man looked up at proffered sword blade

and wondered hazily what he was supposed to do with it. Helpfully, the captain tapped the sharp metal.

“If you want me to pull you out,” he said, “you’d better hold on.”

I took a job from Vijay today.

A while ago, I’d said this city was going to fall apart whatever anyone knew. It’s a fatalistic thing for any spy to admit that information is useless, because our job is built around the understanding that knowledge is power. I thought I had knowledge, and I felt powerless.

Today, as the first part of my job for Vijay, I actually went out and attended one of Ranveer’s rallies. There was what felt like a thousand people there. I was in the thick of the crowd, and you know, I don’t think a single person saw me.

I showed up a little late, and by the time I got there, all eyes were glued on him.

I don’t think I’d ever seen Ranveer the way the man on the street did--he’d never tried hard to make it so. I’d always thought he was a creepy, intense little bastard, but I’d thought that’s because he was trying to be. It was only when I saw him in full inspiration mode that I realized I’d only ever seen him in a state of complacent, peaceful relaxation.

When Ranveer was done speaking, I understood exactly what was wrong with the city and how it could be fixed. It was two cups of wine and a few hours of slapping myself and thinking very hard before I got rid of the certainty. When I did, it felt like I’d just had a gangrenous limb sawed off.

I used to feel that if this man put his mind to it he could cause trouble. Now I see that's both right and wrong, like saying if fire puts its mind to it, it can burn wood. Ranveer is trouble down to his meat and bones. All he has to do to make things ugly is continue to exist in this city.

If I were to have him stabbed in the back in a dark alley, I think I'd call that self-defense.

I went through fifteen sheets writing my two-page report to Vijay. My first draft was too severe, the second draft was too personal, the third was too pessimistic, and the rest? Weren't my best work.

I was describing, to the most dangerous man I'd ever heard of, one of the grimmest things I'd seen in a decade of professionally spectating grim things. Ranveer's rhetoric has rusted whatever remnants of peace and stability you could find in the west side. The slums are absolutely rotting with hatred towards everyone that's not the slums--and if someone doesn't do something, they'll do something terrible.

If someone doesn't stop Ranveer, they'll do something terrible.

My report explains this. It explains that Ranveer wields great and terrible power; power, frankly, to rival or exceed that of the royal family. He decides when the dam bursts, one way or another.

If I give Vijay this report, he'll do something to remedy the problem. And something terrible will happen.

Halfway to delivering my report it hit me: he knows everything I'm going to tell him. I mean, he'd have to. A man with his kind of power and status doesn't hire criminals to tell him what's going on in his own city. I'm not his first line of intelligence. If anything, I have to be his last resort.

I might throw the whole document away. This job didn't exist to educate him; it existed to educate me. And now he's going to give me another one.

I returned from the slums this morning nearly naked and covered in gashes. My advance payment from Ranveer, the bread I had brought with me, my knife, even the medicine I'd been given from a priest--all of it torn from my bag by a thousand greedy hands.

I was supposed to find out everything I could about a man named Jaydeep. Well, at the very least, I'd say I've found his measure. He's a son of a bitch.

I don't know how he picked me out of the meandering throngs of beggars and downtrodden. Maybe I'd missed a spot not shaving, or hadn't ground enough dust into my clothing. Maybe I looked a little too hopeful. Or maybe this swaggering, stubbled, flea-bitten prince really did know his people well enough to pick out a stranger. He's got good eyesight. I didn't even see him until his men had knocked me to the ground.

I'll say this much, he wasn't a very curious man. He didn't ask me any questions. He just cut me until he got bored.

The most surreal thing, when I'd recovered from the pain and the shock and from staring up into the sun, was how I got up to find the slum dwellers still lounging in the cool shadows like nothing had happened.

Vijay took my shaky report, put a handful of coins in my bloody hand, and told me my next job was simply to watch a certain slum street at a certain time. I started to tell him what had happened the last time I'd been in the slums, and he just said: "Remember that some people are born and die there."

There was probably a good retort to that. But I was bloody, tired, starving, and talking to a man who could have literally had me killed with a gesture. And the coins in my hand were heavy.

I took no chances. I matted my beard with mud, traded my bloody tatters for dirty ones, played tricks with my face to transform the cuts into sores. Drunk or sober, my own mother would have thrown stones at me when I was done. I'd made myself the lowest thing I could think of, because where I was going they passed with the safety of princes.

With my coins I bought enough food to keep me standing and enough strong drink to keep me from shaking.

It was a long, slow, painful walk to the street Vijay had named. I drew many stares; perhaps I had made myself too terrible, or perhaps, and this is the anxiety I'd thought I'd severed years ago, there was some slip in my disguise that I was blind to. I heard the name "Jaydeep" whispered, but forced steadiness into my pace and pulse.

I knew, from the moment I laid eyes on it, that I had found the intended place. This is where Vijay had wanted me to be...but I appeared to be a few minutes past the appointed time. The Nagas who lived on this street had already been nailed up to walls and left, dusty and disemboweled, as mute leavings of Jaydeep's civic duties.

I didn't bother writing a report. I returned to Vijay empty-handed, and without a word of remonstrance or note of surprise--with the faintest crook of a smile, even--the bastard paid me and gave me another job.

Come midnight, I was to visit a house in the market. I would be expected.

The place was one of dozens of nearly identical shacks along the city's southern border. I would never have picked it out except for one detail, one I was told to watch for: a banner of Ranveer's hanging like a flag of victory from a windowsill. The night turned the banner's red nearly black.

A stooped, silent old man beckoned me to the doorway, motioned me to enter. Inside, the light of a single candle painted shades of harsh ochre across a spread map and four grim faces. I recognized none of them, but I knew them for guards, or soldiers, or someone else that killed. And someone stood behind them, barely visible in the gloom.

I've one more task for you, said Vijay.

I squinted into the dark and saw him : shabbily dressed, unkempt of beard, without jewelry or mark of station.

This was wrong. This was badly wrong.

For the first time, Vijay and I had a conversation. He sat me down and asked me personal, understated questions about my life and my beliefs, which didn't make me as nervous as you'd think. Frankly, his line of inquiry was too petty to be a trap. Maybe he was just trying to lower my guard. Maybe the humble

clothing and companionable darkness was an attempt to put me at ease.

Maybe he shouldn't have brought four trained killers.

Finally, after many questions from him and lies from me, he asked me an earnest question: if I had his job, how would I go about fixing the city?

I told him I had no idea. He laughed and said, well, it was worth a try, as he was similarly confounded. But as it happened, he did have a few ideas he'd been turning over that he didn't feel he could discuss with any of his colleagues just yet. He wanted to hear my opinion.

He didn't, obviously. He wanted to watch my face and make sure I didn't flinch at the prospect of terrible things.

Vijay's plan was to bring together everything that threatened the city's stability together and allow them to rule.

His vision was of a council.

The Naga Empire was growing more and more impatient with how poorly its immigrants were treated, so we would appoint a Naga council member.

The people loved Ranveer, who preached change and destruction and brutality--so we would give him a seat on the council as well. His duties would be different than those of the Naga; both would have tailored seats that allowed them an appearance of full control while minimizing how much damage they could actually do.

Everyone thinks they're getting the better deal, everyone's happy, the city wins.

A third member would be in charge of all the zamindars, and by extension, would oversee all the farms Bhimra owned. He would keep them in line, ensure their peasants were under control, and mandate what changes were necessary to maximize the harvest. Obviously this would by no means guarantee success on any front, and this position may indeed be no less illusory than the first and second--but at least now there would be someone to blame.

So who would have the greatest power? A fourth council member whose priority, above all else, would be keeping order. A position fit for the king's highest military officials, perhaps.

Vijay asked me if I saw any flaws with his plan. After a minute of thought, I told him yes, I did. The council's main purpose was to create an illusion of control. Wasn't that illusion already assigned to the king and queen by centuries of tradition? Wouldn't the people assume, as they had always done, that the king and queen that they already violently disliked were really the ones in control?

Yes, Vijay said. That was a problem.

I've never had a firm grasp of history--where was I going to learn any? But Vijay, he's a walking university. He taught me more about Bhimra's past in one hour than I'd picked up in my entire misspent life.

He spoke of famines, plagues, warfare, dead children, burned temples, the torture of foreigners and infidels and anyone unlucky enough to come from the wrong family. What he spoke of ended with the rise of the new kings thousands of years ago,

but for much of the account he might as well have been reading from my reports.

Our line of kings were born from those troubles. With sword and spear they drove the many tribes and families of Bhimra into a nation of caste, law, and order. They are regarded as heroes and great men...just as the leaders they usurped, in years before, had been regarded as heroes and great men.

Vijay made his point with the air of a man approaching a felled animal with a knife. He stood back and waited to see if I kicked and bit or gave up with dignity. I knew that either way, the result would be the same.

He gave me my instructions.

The streets drain to the palace gates. Only the children want to be excited to see the king and queen speak, but in every crowd I look at, and all the crowds I hear, burn with an energy that's the death of cynicism. Even deeper than their hate for the royals is their love for the royals. It's family love, and it will outlive their hate--but not its consequences.

Through the window of the spare room, I see a little girl playing with a doll gowned in what pass for royal robes. The figure bounces up and down against the dust, and it's dirty as hell now, but the little girl is thrilled.

Why me?

I'll leave the rest of the money Vijay gave me in a sack under the bed. If I come back tonight, I'll see where it gets me; if not, the

owner of this place will find it soon enough. He'll never know where the money came from. He'll never know what it paid for.

Maybe I'll leave this too. If I do, and I don't make it out, it might find itself into the hands of someone who can read. That wouldn't be good news for Vijay--or anyone else, for that matter.

Could Vijay find me if I just took this money now and ran?

Yes.

I really shouldn't have drunk so much.

Sunlight's burning. The crowd is yelling outside. It's getting past time I left.

I don't know if I want to confess here or not. I don't even know if I feel guilty. I want to think the royals deserve it, that everything I've seen is their fault--they let the Naga in, they didn't keep peace in the slums, they let Ranveer become the monster he is. Part of me wonders why it's not him I'm paying a visit. Part of me wants to pay him a visit anyway.

Long ago I decided I wasn't a good man or a bad man. But to kill a king, you've got to be one or the other, don't you? Or else what's the point?

I just broke the skin of my own finger chewing on it. Fact is I've never been more scared in my life, and I've been plenty scared, plenty of times. Being scared is my job--unlike murder.

My only consolation is that no-one will remember me when I'm gone. Really, that's all I've ever wanted out of life: to get out clean.

Someone dug a spear into my chest. I don't know if I'm going to die or not. I don't even know where I am anymore.

I had to break a door down to retrieve my journal and my money. By the time I'd filled the sack, people outside were screaming. News had spread--and with the news would come mercenaries to keep order. Vijay had explained.

What he hadn't explained that I wasn't part of any order they wanted to keep. That much I had to figure out on my own.

I was afraid I was going to pass out, or trip and fall on my way back out--but I didn't. I don't know who saw me or what they tried to do about it. I don't even know if they knew I was there, or if they were going there for different reasons, or if they recognized me. That was not a moment to calculate risks. That was a moment to burn every resource and get as far away as bloodless legs could carry me.

I don't even know if I'm in an abandoned house, or someone's squat, or if the owners just aren't home. This was it--this was the last doorway I could reach on my own power. My head's still pounding and it's been an almost an hour since I stopped running.

I don't feel very good. I'm sweating all over. The spare shirt I tied over my wound is soaked through by now and I don't have another one. I think I keep passing out. My body regrets today more than my principles do.

There's no safe place in this city to rest. I wish I had a choice.

If this is your house, and you find this--and you can read--I beg your forgiveness. Please, help yourself to the giant sack of coins on the floor. Just don't touch the pale and shivering lump of human wreckage, bleeding all over your kitchen. He's had a rough day.

Don't touch him--unless he's already dead.

So, I'm not dead. An important update, one that I hope won't be obsolete by the time you read this.

And I do mean "you." Everyone who writes a journal thinks about someone coming along and reading it at some point--like anyone will give half a fig about what your stupid problems were after you're dead and buried. I used to flatter myself that my journal, at least, was interesting. Now I flatter myself that it's important.

Perhaps it's wrong to think so highly of myself. Well, it was probably wrong to stab the king and queen to death, so I'm already coming back as a cockroach or something--I don't know, I'm not a priest and it's a little late to get religious.

Yes, I killed the king and queen. I'm not the first or the last person to claim I did that, and I'm probably the only one of them that didn't want to. I didn't want to in that dark midnight meeting, I didn't want to while we were walking up to the palace, and when I was standing there, with their backs turned to me, holding a knife, I can't think of a single thing I wanted to do less.

Vijay put me in a situation where murder seemed like the only logical thing to do. He showed me this vast and powerful picture of his own design, this diagram with only one empty spot—a spot that only I had the agency and power to fill. Even though

that was against my best interests. Even though that was against my meager, ragged principles. I carried out my duty like a man in a trance.

Then Vijay tried to kill me. That broke the spell somewhat.

What else was he going to do, though? I was a loose end. That's what you do to loose ends. If I were him...well, if I were him, I would have left this city ages ago.

You. I wish I could address you directly, but I don't know who I'm going to give this to yet. I didn't really plan on surviving this, and certainly not under these circumstances, so forgive me for being a little vague. But whoever you are, I want you to know this:

Things are going to get bad, whatever Vijay thinks. Things are going to get very bad. You are going to see atrocities worse than anything you thought your fellow man could commit. You are going to see chaos, deception, brutality, and death. And you're going to have to ask yourself what you are prepared to do about it.

Whatever you do, remember: you always have a choice.