Fear not what haunted eyes stalk

By **Jak Alam**

My kin have no fondness for the tropics, as is known to all. Too hot. Too diseased. Too poor. Too superstitious. And furthermore, the men and women of the eastern hemisphere have a certain charred flavour to their nectar of the flesh. That is not desirable to those of us who remain rather conservative in their palate.

I, for one, relish in the variety of flavors, considering myself somewhat of a connoisseur. The East has been an especial feasting ground for me for much of my life. It is a land of the most subtle aromas and delicious culinary rites. It also helps that the cattle are plentiful there. But truly most of all, I am quite fond of seeing the sights. And what wonderful vistas and phenomena there are to witness upon that Silk Road!

I was on a business trip to Yugoslavia around the last week of 1970, when I ran into a good acquaintance of mine, Venno Loosaar. Loosaar, I say without exaggeration, I consider to be a spiritual twin of mine. He shares my culinary preferences, which we often conversed at length about whenever we ran into one another every few decades. On this occasion, he regaled me with details of his recent trip to the Indian subcontinent. A tale so full of sensationalism that it would make Herodotus blush. Loosaar had had the time of his nineteenth century life prowling the region while it felt the brunt force of one of the worst cyclones in the history of modern Asia.

He had made his way through West Bengal and into the then Eastern department of the infant Pakistani state, sightseeing and dining in leisure. He didn't have to hide frequently under the slightest of covers and travel only by muggy nights, as was the case in those equatorial regions; it truly slows down travel time to an irritating extent! He managed to get along just fine in the rather darkened weather of the daytime that only our Greenlandic and Icelandic brethren have the pleasure of experiencing all year around, for which he was able to visit some of the beautiful monuments left behind by our friends in the Pala Dynasty and Sen Dynasty. Quite the sight to behold, he said, though still under excavation and slightly damp. The Mainamati ruins were quite quaint.

He had even taken the time to dig up artefacts and left some too, for a bit of tomfoolery. At a particular site, he switched out some Sasanian coinage minted under Shah Khosrow the Second for some 13th century Abbasid ones at Kutila Mura, because he equated it to a good bit of fun to curve their future nationalistic pride.

He visited countless places, some remarkable, some needing more development, some needing to be destroyed, and some might make do with a team of caretakers who didn't appear to be ghosts from the Bengal Famine. Somapura Mahavihara should be on the top most priority of places to visit for me if I were to venture there in the future, he told me. He was adamant it would be better excavated in due time and would be a great hit with our fellow Europeans with more discerning tastes, for tourism at the very least. The Sixty Dome Mosque was quite superb to visit as well, but might have been a finer sight to behold before the storm. Loosaar seemed quite impressed by the beauty of most of these ruins.

The most fascinating event on his tour occurred when he was inspecting the Lalbagh Fort in Dhaka. Once the home to the Mughal governor of the region and built upon the ruins of the older Aurangabad Fort, it was honestly nothing outstanding, just another place built by the Mughals in their signature pink hue-coloured architectural style. But what had piqued his interest were the rumours about the underground tunnels beneath the complex.

According to one story he heard from locals, during the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857—what a year that was for me in Bessarabia!—hundreds of rebels had apparently fled into the tunnels in a bid to escape their colonial pursuers, only for both parties to never resurface. My friend Loosaar had an unquenchable curiosity paired with quite a bit of daring. Of course, my kin rarely had cause to fear much, being the apex predator of apex predators. But Loosaar was a step above, sense was always chasing him.

When Loosaar made his visit to the fort, the tunnels had been locked shut recently due to further disappearances of archeologists. But Loosaar wasn't perturbed by some metal gates nor local superstitions. For the first few miles, it definitely looked reminiscent of the underground passages he had seen at other Mughal forts. Some were even inscribed with Quranic verses, though the appearance of Islamicate runes after some interval did warrant his curiosity.

Then soon afterwards, the walls were without brick-and-mortar pillars. The passages became more rudimentary and felt far older. The deeper he went, the more crowded the tunnels became with bones of various kinds, skeletal remains of humans and more. He even curiously stumbled upon the bones of an elephant or a mammoth! This is where Loosaar's penchant for overstatement takes over, I suspect. I think the first is more logical than the latter.

He didn't think that anything natural lived down there. These older tunnels reeked of death by our kind, not of starvation, not of accident, not even of perchance.

And then came a malignant breeze that would only disturb those with the most keenest senses, Loosaar knew when someone was being a peeping tom as he was quite a veteran of that activity. He said he could feel its airy tendrils groping around the edges of the shadowy caverns like a person feeling their way through a dark cave.

He stalked the deeper recesses of that pit, and the deeper he went, the less the underground seemed to be composed of nature's abundance, the walls covered in a viscous sooth like substance. Black beyond the ability of natural pigments. He was just about thinking he'd stumbled into a coal mine. He was not the greatest admirer of fossil fuels.

And a booming cacophony of several jumbled languages greeted his ears. It made him look up and there he saw a creature clinging to the ceiling, hiding amongst a mass of bodies in gaseous states, he surmised it served as a shell to its true visage if you may. And it gawked at him with what he thought were several retinas.

It snarled like a cornered hound, its true visage shifting amongst the corporeal gaseous cloud. Making noises that sounded like a great many things but not one coherent voice. A conglomeration of tongues. It was trying to speak. It had sentience. And so he did what I would have advised against.

He spoke with the creature, it bore a primitive visage. Less human in appearance, unlike our kin, and considering it hadn't acquired an humanoid appearance upon his introduction, he surmised that it had no shapeshifting qualities nor modern sense. It reminded him of a creature we had once encountered together under Mount Kilimanjaro, the poor creature was under the delusion of being an angel, maybe even Micheal of the Abrahamic cloth. At the time, we theorized that it was one of the failed experiments of the Adversary.

He guesstimated that this creature was one of the Adversary failures too. On the other hand, it spoke of being of our kin. A successor to the Adversary's challenge to the Progenitor's Creed. And had been imprisoned here by the sorcerers of the court of Shashanka.

Loosaar didn't argue and he apparently befriended the thing. "You would understand if you had seen it!" He told me despite my protests that he should have killed it, ended its inexact survival in those hidden tunnels. But he was of the opinion that he was a charming fellow and to my astonishment, Loosaar reported that it requested his aid in escaping its confinement, and he had no argument against it! He found the wards that chained him to that subterranean prison and disabled them.

Next he knew, his new friend turned into a gaseous mass that blew straight past him and out the tunnels that led out of there.

That night, while prowling for food, he found the locals to be less friendly than usual, scurrying home with shifty gazes and shops closing earlier than usual. One gruff shopkeeper told him to find his way home sooner rather than later as there had been a suspicious number of murders that kept the grave diggers tied up in extra shifts.

But luckily for him, ladies of the night can't take a day off during the cyclone season nor for a spate of brutal deaths. The same could be said of the West Pakistani elites and their parties, so he enjoyed himself in the extravaganza of a festival, something not everyone, especially those living by the Bay, could afford to do. Anywhere from 300,000 to 450,000 was regarded to have perished in the Bhola Cyclone. Loosaar reckoned that he had been responsible for at least 2,000 of them at the time, but as I've said, he does have a habit of exaggerating.

Outside of his cultural activities in the region, he also conducted some business deals. During times of calamity, it is not unheard of for pieces of historical significance to go missing. So Loosaar, in a savvy bid to make the best of his trip, acted to acquire relics relevant to Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and Muslim religions on behalf of collectors in England who would have the artistic inclination to enjoy them. He admitted that his “acquisitions” took certain liberties with the negotiation terms of his clients.

In one instance, he had to skin a Brahmin priest for his compatriots to finally depart with the location of some priceless Hindu idols and manuscripts. To which I was of the opinion that breaking off some fingers would have sufficed and the Brahmin would not have died of shock and been able to keep living his upper class life, albeit with missing fingers. He admitted he may have gotten a bit carried away in his zeal. Another time, he merely had to bribe an officer of the EPR to let him scrounge through the damaged remains of Sultanate-era mosques. Half of them had already been looted by the locals before the storm, he told me, but unlike them, he was a professional and knew the worth of things.

Who could argue with his methods as long as they produced results? Those in the colonial trade of curiosities held to ethics as loosely as humanity clings to peace.

He spoke of the fine stock that he found himself amongst over there. This, I needed no description of, having made the food tour in Bengal once or twice myself. Prey was so plentiful and easy to catch that it made fishing seem a harder sport to indulge in if your diet required fish. One particular meal he reminisced about consisted of two young boys, aged fourteen and twenty-one. He found them both barely conscious on the banks of a river on a particularly hot and humid night. Both were so happy to be saved and fed by the Estonian samaritan that they willingly followed him to his quarters, a small cottage that he had propositioned from a zamindar. There, he heard from them their tale of tragedy.

My kin don’t usually bother to think about what their dinner thinks of them as they gaze into the jaws of their demise. After all, why fret about taste when it is fit to just quell the hunger, as the conservatives preach. But Loosaar has the heart of a collector and appreciated a good melodrama. The theatrics of the meal is something he thoroughly enjoyed. As Loosaar best put

it, why bother being eternal when you can't enjoy living? Sustenance is important, yes, but what was the point of just surviving and not sampling all of life?

The older boy walked around with a limp and when he inquired about it, he mentioned offhandedly of being injured in a mudslide. But after applying some fine vintage Bourbon and cooking up some succulent meat, the boys were more forthcoming with their story. They spoke of how they had fled to higher ground when the water receded. Their father died when their boat capsized, and their mother, sister, and themselves survived. They found refuge at a school which was being used as a shelter, but their mother was next to go. She fell prey to the beastly nature that comes out of men in times of calamity. She was taken with other women from the shelter, and the dry rice was also plundered. Their infant sister was crushed in their stampede to escape those thieves and rapists. They never saw their sister's body after that, no matter how much they looked.

Safe to say it was a traumatizing experience for the young fellows. Loosaar admitted to the poor state of relief efforts in the region from the central government in West Pakistan. Banditry was ripe and he impressed upon me the dual nature of the Bengalis, a hospitable host at one time and barbarian in the next. Their religion made no difference, he said, they were of the same uncivilized thread.

Though their artwork did fetch good prices. He preferred those of Zainul Abedin, Safiuddin Ahmed, and Qayyum Chowdhury. Though he found Mubinul Azim's work a touch overrated.

As boys go, the brothers were of a fine pedigree by his estimation. The elder brother's maiming by several strangers passing by merely elevated the flavour. When my friend found them, they were barely hanging on from the onset of starvation. Praying to the prophet and their Abrahamic God for salvation in the afterlife.

Fortunately, they had found someone better.

While the boys took their rest, he went out for a short walk, as he sometimes likes to do before his dinner. It was a beautiful night and the rain had stopped. Loosaar exclaimed how great it felt to feel the dirt between his toes. To soak in the energy of such fertile soil. The history of the land and its people made for such a heartfelt embrace that he felt like a native returning home.

It was a beautiful night, the fresh air and the aroma of death filled the distinct cavities of senses so ancient that some speculated we might not have developed out of human species but an entirely different evolutionary clade altogether.

He went to the elder brother first. A kerosene lantern illuminated the room where the boy was fast asleep in his bed, his dark skin luminous in that faint glow, malnourished and lanky but too little meat never made the humor any less tasty, as I say!

Loosaar fell upon the man, still in a boy's body, and fastened his fangs to his neck, finding the carotid without erring. He fed greedily. He fed until the boy's skin lost its lustre. Until the body was shriveled and small like elder age had already come for him. The blood was rich, luscious, vivid, ripe with pain and suffering, with that distinct char, and a faint tinge of hope.

By the time he retracted his fangs, his second course was in the same bed as the first. He surmised that the young boy felt scared to be alone in his own bed, so he had climbed into the safety of his brother's.

Young virgins of the Latin and Nordic stock are considered to be the crème de la crème but Loosaar oft argued that the virgins boys of Anatolia and Bengal pedigrees were a punch above those preconceptions. He had saved the best for last. The innocent ceased up in terror upon seeing the disheveled face of his deceased brother, and cried out as he met the same fate. It was tart and sublime, Loosaar remarked to me as he told the tale; the terrified flux from the creature before the bite was something he had not planned on. But it was a happy mishap.

Half a pint of blood per day is sufficient to survive, two pints is bliss, but two humans in one night is gluttony bar none. "But why not be a glutton on such a lovely night?" said Loosaar. Why not indeed? Gluttony is its own bliss.

And so he thought that he would end the night with a freshly opened 1937 Gélas Vieil Armagnac he had been gifted by a colonel's wife in Dhaka, most easily impressed by Europeans. But his nightly plan took another turn when the brothers rose up from their deathly slumber.

At first, Loosaar thought he might have turned them. But they still had their dry, shriveled exterior. And the shadow they cast on the wall was a gaseous cloud. Their gaze reminded him of

something ancient. Loosaar was about to carve out their insides when they spoke with the voice of that creature he had released.

It spoke of the joy of meeting him again. And he eased off, though he couldn’t shake the aura of their eyes, eyes, something that wasn't of this world, but he waved it off as a side effect of feeding too much. So they both sat down to talk.

The corpse puppets didn’t move a muscle except for their necks that stiffly moved in synchronicity to communicate that tenebrous voice. The creature asked what AD and BC meant. He couldn’t understand why wherever he went, he saw this system of dates unknown to him.

Loosaar explained to the best of his abilities. About the Gregorian Calendar, About Brahmanic development of Hindu thought in Bengal, About how a fellow named Gautama Siddhartha found out that he was poised to suffer the inevitable limit of mortal existence someday, The advent of the Magician from Nazareth and the Fall of the Roman Empire, the rise of Islam, and also lively dramas of politics and European colonization. He forgot about the Mughals, electricity, and the printing press, among others. With such an exhaustive list, I sure wouldn’t forget the Mughal in terms of priority, at least. But Loosaar might not share the same opinion on that matter.

It was a lot to process for the creature that called itself Mara. Loosaar found that point quite fascinating, while I would have merely thought of killing the unholy aberration. It was rendered incorporeal long ago by those who then bound it underneath the red walls of that fort. But as the creature relayed, it once housed a prison for our kin and divine men who had the bad luck of crossing the nobility. It told of the madness it suffered being stuck there for so long. Metamorphosing into so many forms, aching for intellectual nourishment, driven to blindness by the same repetitive patterns in the molecules of the environment it was confined to.

It asked Loosaar if he knew anything about where its body could be. Loosaar knew nothing and said so. And if he did know about something like that, others would know too, and the body would have been destroyed long ago.

Upon being asked why that would be, Loosaar told it frankly: any child of the Adversary was considered a grave threat to the theological and genetic survival of our kin.

This seemed to distress the creature, but Loosaar was more concerned with the growing odor of rot pervading the room thanks to the humidity. He told the creature that he really needed his beauty sleep and the smell of rotting flesh would interfere with that. So, he would be discarding the bodies before bedtime if that was alright. The creature argued that it had the right to stay as his guest, by the laws of our kin. But Loosaar argued back that he had never invited the creature to his abode and thus he was under no such obligation.

The octaves rose in the tone of the creature, like it were forcing the boys to experience puberty in their death, it told him of its final decision.

Loosaar felt like something was tearing open the very walls that shadows were perched on, poised to attack him. The creature Mara drew its two rotting bodies together in an absurd fleshly amalgamation, but was interrupted by Loosaar, who promptly grabbed the kerosene lantern and threw it. Flames engulfed the creature and then the room itself.

Loosaar escaped and saw the flames claim the creature, which tried hard to crawl out of the cottage and broke apart pillars in its haste and, well, you can certainly imagine what happens to a house without its pillars for support.

When I inquired if he was sure that the creature was dead, Loosaar was as confident as ever. Even encountering the evil progeny of the Adversary could not take the skip out of his step.

He was somehow able to sleep outside without worry of the morning sunlight scorching him. Which was quite the possibility, considering that the weather took a turn away from storms after that night. And the weather kept improving, dashing his hopes to continue his travels. He returned to a safe haven for our kind, his recent experience not really burdening him but taking the carefree joy out of his tour in Bengal. Some time was to pass until Loosar made a business appointment to the Balkan, where we ended up reuniting.

It was at this point when he had finished recollecting his adventure that he put forward a proposal for us both to make time for another excursion into East Pakistan during the monsoon season. After hearing his astonishing tale, I was quite enthralled by the idea, so I quickly took him up on the offer, but before we could discuss any further, a scuffle broke out in the drinking establishment that we were guests of on that New Year’s Eve of 1970. Some Hungarians had

gotten into an argument with the Czechoslovaks on the ideological morality of the suppression of the 1968 Prague Spring. At some point, a few of our younger kin started getting invested in the rhetoric. What followed was a fistfight that hurt property more than our kin involved, that was succeeded by gunfire from the human Titoist security forces, which really then started a feeding bacchanalia. It was quite entertaining.

One of our kin took to feeding on the blood of an injured Marxist to the sheer horror of a pursuing officer, who watched as blood gushed all over the ground.

Loosaar was less impressed with the indignation and immoderation of the young ones. He had a train to catch to pursue matters in Albania, so we shook hands and agreed to discuss further details at a location we both agreed to meet. Milan!

As he walked away under the bulbous Balkan moon, I saw a dark gaseous smoke crawling across the walls, billowing out of the silhouette of his footsteps.