

In the bloody aftermath of an unsuccessful rebellion against Rattan, mad king of Sandakar, Jubal Khan is pursued by King Rattan's Special Directorate thugs. Khan has no choice but to begin organizing another revolt. There is no safety in flight.

Pawn's Gambit

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JR Hume

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Escape From Sandakar

He rose through a gray chamber, an endless chamber walled with smoke. Faces peered out of those walls. Shapes moved. In the far distance someone screamed; the sound sharp and piercing, as if the screamer was at his elbow. He smelled pine. Pine mixed with blood. His skull exploded with pain. The gray chamber vanished, replaced by blackness -- night black rimmed with red. The scream sounded once more, intense and clear, yet far away.

Jubal groaned and tried to sit up. Pain ripped at his temples. He fell back, panting. For a moment the gray chamber reappeared, then slipped away. "Gods," he croaked. Memory began to leak past the curtain of agony. He lay still, listening.

Voices. Men's voices and not nearby. There were no pistol shots, no clangor of sword and shield. The battle was over. He knew damn well who'd won and it wasn't the Pretender, Prince Poonwalla. Rage colored the blackness. *No*, he thought, calming himself. *Now is not the time.*

Slowly, he reached up and touched his helmet. *Fiend of the Pit! I'm not blind. I hope.* The steel helm had been pushed forward and down, covering his eyes and pinching in at the temples. Digging at the front edge with his fingers did no good. In a frenzy he reached back to the metal skirt which extended down from the back of the helmet, protecting his neck. His probing fingers found a shallow dent extending from just behind the helmet crown down into the skirt. He had no memory of being hit on the back of the head. One quick pull with both hands and the helmet popped off. Pain flared and died away, receding to a bearable level.

Pine tree branches covered him. Jubal rolled to his belly and crawled into the open. The ground was damp and smelled of blood. His nose

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throbbled and both cheeks were wet, so some of the blood was probably his. He listened for a moment, then looked around.

Two bodies lay a couple paces up the slope. Both wore Sandakar blue. He flashed a feral grin at his dead enemies and turned away. His assailant lay in a broken heap, trunk snapped off a short distance above the ground. The small pine tree had done what the bravos of Sandakar had not so far managed to do -- put Colonel Jubal Khan on the ground, unconscious.

Beyond the splintered tree stump lay the body of a horse. Jubal crawled to the downed animal.

"Pepin, my lad. Ah...Pepin." He touched the big bay's soft nose. A spear jutted from behind the horse's right front shoulder. A vague memory surfaced: he remembered an impact and the horse stumbling and then...nothing. Tears welled. Guilt clawed at his soul. He had failed Pepin -- failed his men. They deserved better, better than the death he'd given them. Jubal patted the horse once more. Voice cracking, he whispered, "May the gods smile on you, Pepin. Green pastures and mares in heat, lad."

Jubal ripped off a dangling fragment of surcoat and wiped at the blood on his face. What he managed to remove came off in flakes. The gods knew how long he'd lain senseless. He squinted into the drifting mist lying low over the battlefield. What he could see confirmed his worst fears. Prince Poonwalla's army would soon be spoken of in the past tense.

A carpet of dead and dying men intermingled with downed horses lay on the steep slope above his hiding place. Rivulets of blood coursed down the incline, pooling in and around heaps of carrion. The remnants of his regiment had begun the battle on the far side of the ridge. Other than the dead, no one in sight bore the Pretender's livery. All the mobile figures he could see wore dirty blue uniforms bearing the black lion of Rattan, king of Sandakar.

Why had he been spared? Was it some trick of the gods to strike him down to lie all unknowing while the cream of his regiment died? He turned and saw two men, far down the line of the ridge. Clad in the gray of King Rattan's Special Directorate, they moved among the dead, stopping now and again to examine a corpse. One appeared to be making marks on a tablet.

"Lists," muttered Jubal. "The bastards are making lists of the dead." He searched the ground near Pepin's body. His saber lay under one of the

horse's front legs. In a moment he had it. Snarling, he gripped the blade and glared at the distant SD thugs. No way he was going to be taken alive. Grim tales were told about the chambers under SD Headquarters. In the years since Rattan took the throne, many prisoners had vanished into the dungeons, never to return. Fear galvanized him. He willed himself to lie still. "Not yet. Let the motherless scum get closer." Grinding his teeth, he settled in next to the dead horse.

Hoarse voices drifted down from above. Five blue-clad soldiers walked over the brow of the hill, moving in a rough line, seeking wounded men. If Sandak, the man's position was marked by driving a sword or spear into the ground nearby. Downed rebels received a sword thrust. Jubal ducked lower. These soldiers were not his prey. He turned his attention back to the SD men. They were no closer. Their search had taken them to the top of the ridge.

A harsh cry drew his gaze back toward the searching soldiers. A lone man lurched from the ground, stabbed the closest Sandak, ripped his sword free and attacked the next one downslope. Even from his vantage point thirty meters away, Jubal could see that the man was badly cut up. He had no helm. One arm hung useless. Shrieking imprecations, the rebel trooper beat at his foe, driving him back.

The drama could end only one way. Steel flashed. Dark shapes moved and struck. The pale-faced figure collapsed across a dead horse, still clutching his bloody saber. Jubal turned away, fist clenched in impotent fury.

His rage slowly subsided. "I couldn't have gotten up there quick enough to help." The truth of his words eased his conscience not at all. "He took one with him. I shall take two."

His intended victims were no longer in view. During the fight between the wounded rebel and the Sandak soldiers they had evidently crossed to the other side of the ridge. Above him the remaining enemy soldiers started back the way they had come, supporting one of their number.

Jubal cursed and glared around. Low clouds began to roll in from the east. Mist drifted along the ridge. The only men he could see now were litter bearers.

His rage ebbed and died away. The gods were not going to bring foes within reach of his saber. Though not a religious man, Jubal began to

wonder if he was fated to live. A snarl twisted his face. "Fated? An excuse to escape, more like."

Suddenly he wondered if any of his troopers had gotten away. Some probably had. Could he rebuild the unit? Bitter laughter echoed in his head. Who would want to serve under Colonel Khan, fumbling killer of hundreds of his own men? Nevertheless, his thoughts turned from selling his life at a high price to the subject of escape.

No point sitting here like an idiot. He stabbed his notched and bloody sword into the turf and ripped off what little remained of his fine red and gold surcoat with Poonwalla's enigmatic hammer and tong symbol emblazoned front and back. Using the surcoat, he wiped his saber and sheathed it. His hat was nowhere in sight. A few steps away, he found an officer's field cap, a gray one with a stiff visor. The cap was of a style was worn by officers in both armies. His battledress was a pattern used by several regiments, Sandak and rebel alike. He straightened his tunic, snugged the cap down, and started toward the distant tree line.

He moved slowly and kept his head down, as if looking for someone. An idea began to take shape. What he needed was a horse and a suitable body.

The thickening mist reduced visibility to a hundred meters or less. The air smelled of mud -- mud mixed with raw blood, sweat and fear -- with only a trace of gun smoke. Both sides had used up most of their ready ammunition in the first two days of fighting. Neither was able to link up with their supply train after the second battle beside the Selwan River. In today's fight, other than a few rounds at the beginning and scattered shooting the first time his troopers clashed with Sandak cavalry, it had all been saber and spear, knife and fist.

Small clumps of horses dotted the meadow, drawn to their own kind in the midst of carnage. A few stood alone. The first one Jubal approached was a big black equipped with gray harness and saddle. The animal uttered a soft, plaintive call. Dark blood pulsed slow around the jutting stump of a spear.

"Gods." He touched the horse's muzzle, stroked its neck. Muscles trembled under his hand. He wanted to end the animal's suffering. Automatically, Jubal reached for his pistol. His holster gaped empty. In any event, he had no ammunition, which was just as well. A gunshot would draw

attention. He stroked the animal's forehead and shook his head. "Sorry fella." The horse nudged him as he turned away, but made no other noise.

A ragged cough drew his attention. "Colonel Khan," murmured a man lying propped against a heap of dead. It was Coronet Feldspar, 5th Regiment, C-Troop sub-commander. Jubal stepped over the Coronet's booted feet and knelt at his side. Feldspar was battered and bloody; in place of his right hand he bore a bleeding stump. White bone glistened in the midst of torn muscle. A faint spark lit pale blue eyes.

"Colonel," he whispered. His face twitched.

"Coronet." Jubal didn't know what to say. Feldspar, like too many in the rebel army, had been an energetic, not very effective officer. A cub embarked on a wolf's mission.

"I..." Feldspar coughed. "My men..."

"Gone. Dead." Jubal's words were hard, unyielding. The foolish young Coronet wore slashed remnants of the flashy red and gold uniform favored by the rebel army's leader, the equally young and foolish Poonwalla, Pretender to the throne of Sandakar. Jubal had seen the Pretender break away from the fighting in attempted flight, only to die under the hooves of Sandak cavalry, his body smashed into the mud, blood and horseshit covering the battlefield.

Jubal's heart softened somewhat as tears streaked Feldspar's cheeks. At least this aristo had gone down fighting.

"Sorry...so sorry." gasped the Coronet.

"Some may have escaped," said Jubal. "I'll find 'em if I can."

Feldspar grunted in pain. The light in his eyes faded and he relaxed. A soft nose pushed at Jubal's shoulder.

He jerked to the side, nearly falling over the Coronet's legs. His assailant sniffed at the dead officer and considered the colonel with grave brown eyes. It was Dido, Feldspar's chestnut mare. Jubal took up the dangling reins and stroked her neck.

"How are you girl?" He muttered soothing words as he inspected the mare. She had a cut on her rump and a few nicks on both sides of her neck, but nothing that looked serious enough to make him pass her by. Besides, he was familiar with the animal and she with him. That was a strong

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argument in her favor. She was also large enough to carry him comfortably and he knew she had the stamina for long marches.

Now he needed a body.

Ten steps from poor Feldspar, Jubal found what he was looking for -- a youngish corpse in Sandak colors and accoutered in a manner suggesting relative wealth. Instead of sturdy issue battledress and harness with plain steel buckles, the dead man wore tailored trousers and a jacket fancied up with leather straps and silvered hardware. Whoever he was, the young man offered three other advantages. He was of slender build and below average height. He also had a revolver, which Jubal took for his own.

Grunting, Jubal hefted the body into position across the saddle and strapped it down. Dido glanced back at her burden and snorted, but made no further comment. She fell in step willingly as Jubal led her toward the trees, detouring now and again around the gory refuse of battle.

On the way, he spied a Sandak lion banner lying across the body of a man who had probably been its bearer. The body lacked a head.

"There's a clever blow, Dido. One of our lads, I'll warrant." It was a reasonable guess, since his was the only cavalry engaged with Sandak dragoons on this field. The survivors of the other Pretender cavalry regiment had vanished during the night march from the Selwan to the hell he was leaving behind. He probably should have decamped with his troopers as well.

Too late wisdom.

He pulled the banner from its supporting crosspiece and draped it over the corpse. Dido looked around and nudged him. "Look properly downcast, my lady. We are the bearer of sad tidings to this dead lad's father." He gathered the reins and led off toward the trees.

No one bothered them. Inside the forest he encountered a clump of hastily erected medical tents. The wounded he could see all wore Sandak uniform. Soldiers bustled about, carrying groaning men on improvised stretchers. Civilian teamsters piled the dead on two-wheeled carts.

Jubal walked past tents where surgeons plied their grisly trade. He kept his face down and bore west, toward the river. There were many mercenaries in Rattan's army. It would be a sign of the gods' extreme disfavor if he were to encounter one who recognized him. As it was, they were nearly clear of the camp before a guard called for him to halt.

The soldier was a mercenary -- infantry by his gear. "Where ya goin'?" He pointed with his short spear. "They be collectin' the stiffs away south."

Jubal responded in his native tongue. He doubted if more than one in a hundred mercenaries knew it. This fellow wasn't the one. He shook his head and grunted, "Bah. Blasted idjit."

Pretending confusion, Jubal replied in Trade Tongue, known far and wide as Lingo, for reasons he'd never heard. "Pardon, sirrah." He pointed toward a cluster of distant tents. "I take this poor bairn to his father. Would thee deny an old man his grief?"

The guard stepped back. He answered in like manner. "Go on then. May the gods favor ya."

Once clear of the camp, Jubal walked west, following the same forest track he'd ridden the evening before. Twice he passed Sandak squads going the other way. The men were covered with dust and dirt. Some bore crusted bandages. Few even glanced up as he and Dido walked by.

An hour later he dragged the corpse off Dido's back and laid it out along the trail. Sooner or later someone would find it. Safer, probably, to have dumped the dead man deeper in the woods, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. For all he knew, there really was a grieving father who would want to see his son's remains.

Three hours later, he splashed across the Selwan and climbed up the shallow incline to a part of the previous day's battlefield. He hoped to collect some supplies. Save for carrion birds, skulking feral dogs and a few loose horses, the area was deserted. Both armies had outrun their supply trains, so the usual gaggle of camp followers who scavenged the dead hadn't been around. And the armies themselves had moved immediately away from the area. He saw no living men. Sandak squads must already have swept the field. Like those back at the ridge, they would have collected their own wounded and finished off any rebels too badly hurt to get clear. With luck, he should find some rations, extra clothing and possibly even ammunition.

Rattan was known for bearing grudges. If his intelligence officers determined that Jubal had escaped the battlefield, then the Sandakar king would send one of his death squads to put the matter right. The hair on Jubal's neck crawled just thinking about it. He planned to escape west, right

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over the Bleak Hills, to Cagaan, and then travel south along the coast to Batawan. After that -- he had no set plan.

The Bleak Hills were the northernmost bastion of Cappabar's central mountain range. Evil warlocks and bandits infested the Hills, if one believed the stories told about them. Jubal figured on bandits and hoped there were no warlocks.

At Cagaan or Batawan he might be able to take ship for the Western Isles or even Majure. If a Special Directorate death squad got on his trail, those places wouldn't be far enough to run, but at the moment Jubal could think of nothing else. Thoughts of the bloody disaster he'd led his troopers into filled his mind. And now he was leaving his dead behind. He shook himself and dismounted. Only the gods knew why he hadn't died along with his men.

He tied Dido in the shade of a red-leafed oak and began hunting supplies. Several times he had to shoo off buzzards and feral dogs.

As he worked his way through a stand of pines littered with Sandak infantry -- a poor lot with scarcely a ration box or groat among them -- he heard a curse. Someone else was harvesting the dead. Jubal slipped through the trees toward the sound.

Whoever it was seemed to be talking to himself, although the mumbling could indicate more than one speaker. Jubal fetched up behind a large boulder and listened. No, he decided. There was only one speaker -- a man. A man arguing with himself. The voice was familiar. Jubal stepped around the boulder.

The scrounger's battledress hung on a tall, spare frame. At his side swung sword and pistol. He was dragging a bag as he walked and talked. When Jubal hove into view, he yelped and stumbled back.

"Still holding up both ends of the conversation, eh, Virgil?"

"Gods and martyrs! My bleedin' heart nearly gave out!" The man extended a hand. "I'm damn glad to see you, Colonel. Bring any of the lads along?"

"No." Jubal flashed on the wreckage back on the ridge. His own survival brought small comfort. "Some may have gotten away. Not many. I thought we'd lost you here -- yesterday."

Virgil parted his hair and displayed an angry red welt. "You did. Or nearly so. Some sod laid me out good and proper. I woke up this morning, lying under a clump of brush. Can't even recall what hit me."

Captain Strange was a legend in the Regiment. Though trained as a healer, he had long since succumbed to the spell of demon drink. Tossed out of the Healer's Guild for intemperance and other venal sins, he signed on as a soldier and rose to command A-Troop of the 5th. Jubal knew him to be a top-notch officer -- when he could be kept from the sauce.

Virgil hefted his makeshift bag. "The pickings aren't good. I think Sandak squads swept the field while I was out. They must have been in a hurry, though, because it looks to me like they killed a good many of their wounded, along with all of ours, of course. There's a field hospital set up about a kilometer north. Those are the only Sandak blokes I've seen."

"Sounds like the bastards. They were already at work when I got away from this morning's disaster." Jubal told what he knew of the final demise of Poonwalla's army.

"I met no one else who escaped. Though a few must have."

"It's likely," agreed Virgil. "I did see two riders -- within the last hour. Both rode south as if hell-spawn were on their tail."

"They are. Or will be. Rattan's SD goons will hunt down all they can. You and I can expect a workmanlike effort, I think. They'll want all of Poonwalla's officers. We better step smart or our heads will adorn a pike beside Sandakar's main gate."

"Aye. You're right..." Virgil fell silent, listening. Jubal stood up. The muted thud of hooves drifted across the river.

"Cavalry," said Jubal. Both men slipped behind a clump of brush in the shade of a large pine. The noise swelled. A squad of mounted men rode into view on the far side of the river.

"That's the same road I took through the forest," said Jubal. "Glad I didn't dally along the way."

"Too right. Those lads are scouts."

The Sandak squad trotted north, following a rough track on the far side of the Selwan. Soon the lead elements of a large body of horsemen hove into view. This unit also turned north.

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"It's the Lions," said Virgil.

"What's left of 'em." Jubal bared his teeth and cursed. "They should have been with us! Stiff-necked bastards. We killed better than half of their number. Looks like two beat-up companies is all they have left. Here's another bunch. More mercs."

"Aye. Deacon's Skull Splitters. Another good bunch that would have fought on our side but for Poonwalla being in command. They don't look so good either. I wonder where they're headed?" The column showed no sign of halting, though many riders cast covetous glances at the unplundered dead lying across the shallow river.

"Our supply train is off to the north somewhere." Jubal cursed again. "Better pickings there than here." He thought of the regimental pay chests. "Much better."

Soon, the cavalry force vanished around a bend in the river.

"Come on," said Virgil. "Let's see what we can find. When I woke up, my Kip was grazing not ten steps away. You have a horse?"

"Aye. Feldspar's mare. He has no further need of her."

"Right. Him and most of our lads." Virgil touched his scalp. "Come on. I need a new hat and some traveling rations. Let's not stray far from the trees. That field hospital ain't far enough away for my liking. And other unpleasant types might be following the Lions."

No one wandered down from the Sandak hospital and the river road remained empty. The two rebel officers left the battlefield with a handful of groats and even a few silver coins. More important, they had enough dried and canned rations to last a week or more and each had collected a carbine, a couple extra revolvers and upwards of a hundred rounds of ammunition.

"Which way shall we go?" asked Virgil as he swung aboard Kip, his big gray gelding.

"West." Jubal glanced around one last time and urged Dido into motion. Virgil fell in behind. "I figure the SD will concentrate along the roads leading north and south first. No one will expect us to head across the Bleak Hills."

"Too right, they won't. The natives there ain't friendly. Then there's the lack of water and the abundance of rocks and sand. You sure about this?"

"No. I'm open to other ideas. You got any?"

Captain Strange chuckled. "My plans usually involve beer and women. You're the sneaky one. I'll try the Bleak Hills if you think that's best. Just don't pass up any taverns."

"We'll be lucky to find anything wet between here and Cagaan."

Twenty kilometers to the east, in the shadow of the ridge Jubal had escaped from a few hours earlier, four men gathered around a small campfire. Three wore Sandakar Special Directorate gray. The fourth man stood by himself, picking flesh off a roasted chicken. He listened as the SD men rattled on and on about Rattan's huge victory.

Finally, he held up a greasy hand. "Knock off the propaganda, Major. Did your army kill all the rebels or do you have work for me?"

"Quiet, fool!" snarled Major Ganch. "Your insolence will one day earn you a lingering death in the cells below Directorate HQ. This could be the day."

"Spare me. I rode through your camp. If Rattan has an intact platoon, it's not here. The rebels nearly put paid to your precious king." Tobias tossed the stripped carcass into the fire. He licked his fingers and waited for Ganch to calm down.

"What do you want of me?" he asked, in a conciliatory tone. No sense biting the hand in charge of payment. "Did some of the rebel leaders escape?"

"Several are missing. Some may yet be found among the heaps of dead." The major drew out a notebook and flipped it open. "We are fairly certain that Colonel Khan, 5th Brigade commander, escaped just as the battle was ending. Your task will be to bring him back." Undisguised blood lust glowed in the man's eyes. "Alive, if possible."

Tobias mimicked Ganch's words. "Alive, if possible." He held up his hand, fingers spread wide. "Five times my regular fee. The Colonel won't be alone and he's a dangerous man." Tobias glanced at a nearby pile of bodies. "But you already know that. A trapped wolf is half as deadly."

The major snorted in derision, but decided not to argue. Promising a hefty fee and paying it were two different things. He decided it was time for Tobias to disappear into Directorate dungeons -- after he brought Colonel Khan in.

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"Of course," he said smoothly. "There are substantial risks."

Tobias made no further comment on the risks, substantial or otherwise. "Do you have any useful information? Like, which way did he go? Was he afoot or on horseback? Alone? Wounded?"

Again, Ganch controlled his anger. "We believe he escaped on horseback. Alone. Wounded? I don't know. Probably. I think he'll head south, away from Sandakar -- toward Peloban or Jalawan. He could take ship from either place and try to hide in the islands of the Cluster."

"Aye, that he could. He was once a privateer -- or so I've heard." Tobias looked around. The last light of evening made the mists cloaking the ridge crest glow a faint orange. Heaps of dead littered the battlefield, nearly invisible in deepening night. He shook himself. A field of battle is always a melancholy place -- to any but twisted SD thugs and their ilk.

"All right. I'll find him. But he won't go south."

"If he goes north, he'd have to chance our area patrols. East is the ocean. West -- well, the Bleak Hills are death to travelers. He has to go south."

Tobias didn't argue. Ganch was a fool, though a dangerous one. "Look for me when you see me." He swung into the saddle.

"You'll need expense money," said the major. He tossed a small leather bag to the bounty hunter. "I'll want an exact accounting."

"Sure, Ganch." With an insolent wave, Tobias rode into the night.

"Bastard," muttered an SD goon.

"I'll enjoy cutting on that one," said Ganch.

"And gouging out his eyeballs," said the other goon.

The major laughed. "Bamboo splinters and hot irons."

First goon licked his lips. "Let's find a prisoner."

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