

Sarah Flamminio

The Province of Pain

Tenzin took a deep but ragged breath and, with it, his first step up the narrow, dark stairs of the tenement building.

*Step.*

It had all begun in the spring of 1919, with the letter from Tenzin's uncle, *Naik* Irhan Gurung. At that time of the year, it had taken the better part of two months to get from London to Pokhara, but the letter had arrived eventually and Tenzin had been conscripted to read it to the assembled family. The most important news for the majority of those who heard it read aloud in Auntie Pema's house was that Uncle Irhan had been promoted from *naik* to *havildar*, and that he would be sending more money home to Auntie Pema and the rest of the family. The other important news was that Uncle Irhan was sending for Tenzin to come to London now, not to enlist as Tenzin had half-planned to.

*Step.*

Orders were orders, and Tenzin was a dutiful nephew. Without complaint or any real thought of doing anything else, Tenzin went—from Pokhara by its lake, to Kathmandu with its crowds, and then on from Kathmandu to the port of Kolkata and finally from Kolkata to London on a sea voyage that felt endless.

*Step.*

And now all Tenzin faced were three flights of unlit stairs. They felt like an impossible distance. And every step he could bring himself was an irreversible step further away from that beginning of things. He deliberately bit his tongue. Sometimes a sharp new pain made you forget other pains.

*Step.*

Tenzin had finally gotten his sealegs, just in time for the ship to dock in London. Uncle Irhan had been there to take charge of him on the pier, and had whisked him away, not as Tenzin had presumed, to a bivouac not far from a British encampment, but to a large, stately house in the exotic *Maefer* district. Uncle Irhan had explained that he was no longer in the employ of the British Army. Since the War had ended, they had fewer uses for a gurkha with a pronounced limp acquired while fighting the Ottomans. *The more fool they*, Tenzin had thought loyally at the time, although, in fairness to the British Army, they had pensioned off Uncle Irhan as a *havildar*. But a man with an extended family to provide for could not rest on an Army pension, not in London, not in Pokhara.

*Step.*

Although Tenzin had been too young to properly remember his uncle before he went away to serve the Crown, Tenzin still recognized him. He looked older than the photo that Auntie Pema had, but it wasn't a stretch to see that these men were one and the same. And they'd understood each other well enough to start with. Uncle Irhan had a calm, disciplined air to him that Tenzin had instantly recognized and respected.

*Step.*

And so, Tenzin had joined Uncle Irhan in Mr. Robert's employ. Tenzin realized almost from the first week that Mr. Robert's house was peculiar. On his first day, his nearest peer and long-suffering coworker, the bootboy Will, had asked Tenzin what his charges had been before the Law. Nothing, Tenzin had said, honestly puzzled. That got a skeptical look but nothing more. It turned out in due course that nearly everyone in service in Mr. Robert's house *had* been up before the Law. Yet for all that, the servants Tenzin met in the course of his duties were, now at least, an honest and hardworking group as a whole. He stopped biting his tongue. It wasn't helping any more.

*Step.*

Tenzin's immediate supervisor, Uncle Irhan had explained on that endless-feeling first day, was Mrs. Jones, the cook. If she ever had no tasks for him, he was to ask Mrs. Armitage, the housekeeper. In the unlikely event that she had nothing for him to do, he was permitted to ask Mr. Phillips, the butler. These three persons, Uncle Irhan had explained, were the *havildars* of the household, and Tenzin was to respect them as he would respect Uncle Irhan himself.

*Step.*

Other than the chain of command, there were few real rules. Uncle Irhan said that as long as Tenzin followed the Five Precepts in much the same manner as he had in Auntie Pema's home, all would be well. Tenzin was further at liberty to add in whatever the missionaries in Pokhara had tried to drill into him alongside English lessons.

*Step.*

And then there was Mr. Doyle—the only person who Uncle Irhan had *specifically* told Tenzin to avoid. Tenzin met him on that very same first day in Mr. Robert's household, in the servants' hall stitching up a kitchenmaid's hand. For such a hulking brute of a man, he made the needle fairly fly, so fast that the girl seemed almost mesmerized by it and did not notice the pain.

*Step.*

Uncle Irhan had maneuvered himself and Tenzin outside on the pretext of a smoke, although Tenzin did not yet smoke. Uncle Irhan lit a cigarette for him and passed it. "*You will not speak to that man unless it is absolutely necessary,*" he had said in Nepali. "*He is a blight on this house.*" Tenzin had nodded acceptance, but had been unable to stop himself from speaking. "He was helping that girl." Uncle Irhan gave him a warning look, and Tenzin said nothing more. Tenzin had certainly not said that something unexpected had stirred within himself when he first saw the man. A strange feeling, of something long-forgotten, stirring again.

*Step.*

At first, Uncle Irhan's only strong prohibition had been easy enough to hold to. Mr. Christopher Patrick Doyle worked by himself in another building somewhere else in London, not in Mr. Robert's house. The servants called his workplace the Annex, and they did not want to talk about it. Occasionally, the man took his meals in the servants' hall, but for the most part he was not there.

*Step.*

Tenzin's work kept him busy, fetching and carrying for the household *havildars*. It was, in all honesty, work that he was vastly overqualified for, but Tenzin had accepted it all philosophically.

It was much less work than in Auntie Pema's household. And the gods entrusted one with small tasks at first. Great deeds would come in their own time.

*Step.*

Tenzin had not set out to disobey his uncle. Although curiosity was one of Tenzin's double-edged virtues, there was so much to see and learn in London that he had not had much time for thinking about Mr. Doyle. So when Will had squirmed when Mrs. Jones had tried to hand him a packed lunch to take to Doyle at the Annex, Tenzin had seized the opportunity—not to defy his uncle, but to smooth things over with Will. Tenzin had been winning too many of their off-duty card games.

*Step.*

And that had been the first of Tenzin's many visits to the Annex.

*Step.*

It would have been easier to stay in Mr. Robert's house. It would have been such a short walk from the punishment in the gymnasium to the office of Dr. O'Shea, the flighty, sad house doctor with perpetually wet eyes and an apologetic manner. Tenzin's shirt was sticking wetly to the wounds on his back and a mad part of him wanted to strip off his jacket and shirt there in the stairwell, as much as he knew he could not.

*Step.*

Tenzin could easily imagine the soft gasp of horror from the doctor, could imagine lying down on the cool examining table and having his injuries seen to.

*Step.*

But Tenzin would not have been Tenzin if he had not been stubborn. In the gymnasium, with the blood still hot and sticky on his back, he stood very still and listened carefully. The pain sang high in his ears, but Tenzin heard his uncle's words clearly too. *"He does not care for you. Not in the way you think. He would not lift a hand to save you, if it came to that. I did not want to hurt you. This was for your own good. Someday, you will understand that."*

*Step.*

It would have been the height of foolishness to argue then, and Tenzin was no fool. He simply asked if he was free to leave, and upon being told yes, he had carefully put his shirt back on and then his coat on over that. He had left the house and walked—almost without feeling the pain at first. His uncle's words seemed to ring through him, along with the pained look on Irhan Gurung's face. Though Uncle Irhan had spoken those words like truths, they were not truths. They were the words of a frightened man. And in a strange, disorienting moment, clear despite the pain, or perhaps clear because of it, Tenzin felt as though he were older than his own uncle, older than London and Pokhara combined.

For a bare moment, Tenzin thought that he saw human lives as the mountains saw them, both dispassionately and strangely distinctly all the same. There was an unnerving lightness in his own mind, a lightness that said that Uncle Irhan had acted in fear. And Tenzin could not bring himself to hate a man who acted in fear, no matter how much that same fear was currently costing him. For Tenzin himself had only to bear the sweat, the blood, the pain, but what Uncle Irhan bore was worse and something that time might never heal.

*Step.*



Aleksandra Waliszewska

It did not really hurt so badly until he stopped walking, waiting for traffic to pass. That first step after stopping had been fiery agony in his calves, but he had forced himself onwards, struggling to keep his balance.

*Step.*

And at some point, well into grimy Whitechapel, Tenzin realized that he had reached a point of no return. He would either get to Doyle's rickety tenement building, or he would collapse on the way and who knew what would happen next. The pain was too much, his strength was too little, the dice was cast.

*Step.*

At least there was a battered metal railing to hold on to as Tenzin dragged himself up another treacherous, uneven step. Trying to use the railing to spare his legs made his back hurt worse. There was really no winning. The sound of his own breathing was harsh in his ears. Doyle would know what to do. Tenzin had watched Doyle sew up Polly's hand all those months ago. And Tenzin had been curious, so later he had asked and Doyle told him stories about the hospital at Etaples during the War.

*Step.*

Once, Tenzin had thoughtlessly asked why Doyle wasn't Mr. Robert's doctor. Tenzin declared that Doyle was probably just as good, if not better, than Dr. O'Shea, who was so quiet, nervous and strange. But Doyle was the one person in the household that Uncle Irhan had pointed out and said not to speak to, not if Tenzin could help it. At the time, Doyle said it was because Mr. Robert preferred Dr. O'Shea's bedside manner. Later, not much later, Tenzin found out more of the truth.

*Step.*

Doyle knew how the human body worked. But that was not quite the same as being a doctor.

*Step.*

Doyle was the man Mr. Robert employed when Mr. Robert did not want to get his hands dirty, Doyle himself had explained to Tenzin. Every organization like Mr. Robert's needed a Doyle, a man who knew exactly how badly you could hurt someone and leave them alive and well enough to pay their debts.

*Step.*

Tenzin knew his breathing was wrong now, but there were only three more steps and a door left to go. The edges of his vision were blurring, he thought, though it was hard to be sure in the gloom.

*Step.*

A persistent, sick feeling was rising in him, an idea that was creeping in and refusing to be dismissed. What if... what if he knocked and there was no answer? What if he knocked and Doyle told him to go back to Mr. Robert's house, to let Dr. O'Shea patch him up? What if it had all been a lie? What if Uncle Irhan had been right, that Doyle had simply used him, had made a fool of him, had taken...

*Step.*

His body had moved, even as his mind spun through its doubts. Tenzin shut his eyes for a long moment, focusing on the pain in his calves and in his back, holding it like a flame, letting it burn him, letting the pain clear the doubts. Still, he shuddered uncontrollably.

*Step.*

Tenzin remembered his first sight of Doyle, in the servants' hall all those months ago, watching the needle fly in and out of Polly's hand. He remembered the intense concentration on Doyle's face, the look that said that *this* was the most important work he would do that day. Tenzin remembered the feeling that he'd had then, the faintest feeling of recognition. Remembered how he had tried to organize that feeling over the months that followed, at first trying to make it so that Doyle resembled one of the missionaries in Pokhara. Gradually, painfully, Tenzin realized that it was not so simple.

They had known each other before. With every day that passed and every stolen night spent together, Tenzin became ever more sure of it. Doyle might not believe in such things, might never admit to them, but Tenzin knew. And with the last of his strength, he raised a hand to knock.

The door opened before his fist could strike it.

For a moment, Tenzin saw those sharp, familiar eyes as they narrowed with concern. That battered, ugly face transformed for an instant with worry and care into something ageless, familiar and strangely beautiful.

"Oh fuck."

Then the world went dark.

Well before Tenzin opened his eyes, he remembered where he was. Everything here smelled like Doyle—a blend of carbolic soap, boot polish, old blood and the occasional cigarette. It was not the sort of smell that many people would associate with a place that was good or safe, but Tenzin was glad of it anyway.

Tenzin's back and legs were on fire, but the fire was in a neighboring province. It was the sort of thing you saw the smoke of and knew it did not immediately concern you. That lack of concern had to be from drugs, Tenzin thought. Doyle would have seen to that, as he had also seen to the pillow beneath Tenzin's chest, considerately propping him very slightly up so it was easier to lie on his stomach and spare his back. All in all, things could have been much worse, despite a slight chill prickling the fire of his back for something of a contrast.

The flat felt empty. Doyle was not there, Tenzin knew that without even opening his eyes. There was no sound of Doyle: and Doyle was loud even when he was trying hard to be quiet. Doyle and stealth were not really on speaking terms. The best one might hope for in that regard was a waiting silence, which Doyle *did* know how to do, and did very well in the course of his disreputable work. It was a heavy, waiting silence, the kind that invited others to fill up the space with their own words, their painful truths and their insulting lies. In those moments, Doyle almost didn't breathe. It was an art, but it was not the art of stealth the way Tenzin could be stealthy when he wished.

Not for the first time, Tenzin wondered about their other lives together. Doyle could deny it and call it foolish, but Tenzin knew the truth. This was far from their first time trying to build a life together, and if Tenzin had anything to say about it, it would not be the last time. Perhaps next time they might even reincarnate a little closer together in space and time. It was very careless of Doyle to be so far away and older. But that was very like him, somehow, that Doyle would insist on going first, on being older, bigger and stronger.

A key in the lock, Doyle setting some things down and taking his shoes off like a civilized human being. Muttered cursing at some inanimate object. Footsteps in the corridor, before the bedroom door was opened. "Awake, are you?"

"I'm tired of sleeping," Tenzin said, aware of how feeble his voice sounded to his own ears. Some things could simply not be helped.

"Good, then you can eat this soup," Doyle informed him.

Soup? That was a new one to Tenzin, who opened his eyes with mild curiosity. Sure enough, Doyle had set a tin bowl of soup on the nightstand, on top of a small pile of books that Doyle kept to while away the occasional sleepless hour before bedtime. "And what are you eating?" Tenzin asked, curious despite everything.

"Fish and chips, because I'm not half-flayed," Doyle replied. "Let me help you up. This will hurt."

It did, although Tenzin knew that Doyle was being as careful as he could, gently assisting Tenzin into a sitting position on the bed. For far too long, the room spun around Tenzin, until he shut his eyes to stop it.

"Easy now," Doyle murmured.

Worry was an unfamiliar note in Doyle's voice, Tenzin thought, taking a deep breath and forcing himself to open his eyes once more. The spinning was less intense than it had been before, but he was still grateful that Doyle took charge of the soup and carefully fed him. Under other circumstances, Tenzin would have managed a protest or taken the spoon himself, but for this short time, he allowed the help. The soup was moderately warm and typical of English food for convalescents—slightly salted and entirely unspiced. Tenzin could probably survive it for a day or two before he would have to hobble to the kitchen to take matters into his own hands.

When the soup was gone, Doyle gently helped Tenzin lie back down again, still on his stomach, before Doyle unwrapped his own meal and began eating the fish and chips straight out of the paper.

Slowly, without any thought of being stealthy, Tenzin stretched out a hand to steal a vinegar soaked chip.

Doyle made no move to defend his food and they ate in companionable silence.

“What about work?” Tenzin asked.

“It’s taken care of,” Doyle said firmly. “You’re not to worry about it.”

“I don’t worry about it,” Tenzin countered, almost automatically. “I just...needed to know.”

“Now you know that I’ve taken care of it. Go back to sleep.”

“Can’t.”

“Are you in pain?”

Tenzin would call it more discomfort than pain. “No, just can’t sleep.”

“Why the devil not?” Doyle sounded annoyed.

Tenzin considered. “Not sure.”

“You are the absolute limit.”

“And yet, I am here,” Tenzin smirked. He could still do that, no matter how much the rest of him hurt.

“Here you are,” Doyle agreed. “And on that note, how did your uncle know that you were here yesterday—and before?”

Tenzin had not really previously considered this question. “I suppose...he must have followed me,” he admitted slowly. They had not been careless, but on a certain level, Irhan Gurung must have felt a change in the wind, something out of step in the way that Doyle and Tenzin interacted in Mr. Robert’s house. It was mildly vexing. Not that Tenzin had ever intended to lie to his uncle’s face. If a question had been asked, Tenzin would have answered it truthfully. As it was, he had not needed to speak at all. The issue had been forced.

Doyle took a deep breath before he spoke, as though anticipating Tenzin’s resistance. “I don’t want you going back to the house. To work. Not if your uncle is going to be trouble.”

“He won’t,” Tenzin said calmly.

“How do you know?” Doyle demanded. “I’ve known your uncle for longer and probably better than you. I haven’t seen it personally, but I’d guess he’s slit throats for lesser offenses.”

Tenzin did not reply. It was more than he could do to explain to Doyle how he knew, how he was certain in his very bones that his uncle had done all that he knew how to do when it came to his own flesh and blood. The two of them were all that was left now, and that counted for something that felt indefinable at the moment. Tenzin’s stomach was full of soup and his head was starting to fill with clouds. “I’ll make him tea,” Tenzin decided sleepily, but with supreme confidence. Proper tea. With spices. Not English tea.

“Tea?” Doyle snorted contemptuously. “I think it’ll take more than that to get back into his good graces.”

“Trust me,” Tenzin murmured sleepily.

“Dangerous proposition,” Doyle replied from far away. He kept talking, but Tenzin Gurung was already safely beyond hearing, dreaming of cardamom, of cinnamon and ginger in tea brewed over a spirit stove and a quiet voice, approving despite everything.