

THE JEWEL OF VISHNU



CHRONICLES OF A LOST CONTINENT

R.K. SINGH

THE JEWEL OF VISHNU

CHRONICLES OF INDIA'S LOST CONTINENT

Volume One

A YOUNG ADULT NOVEL

R.K. Singh



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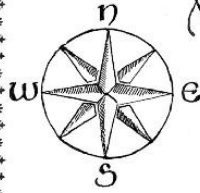
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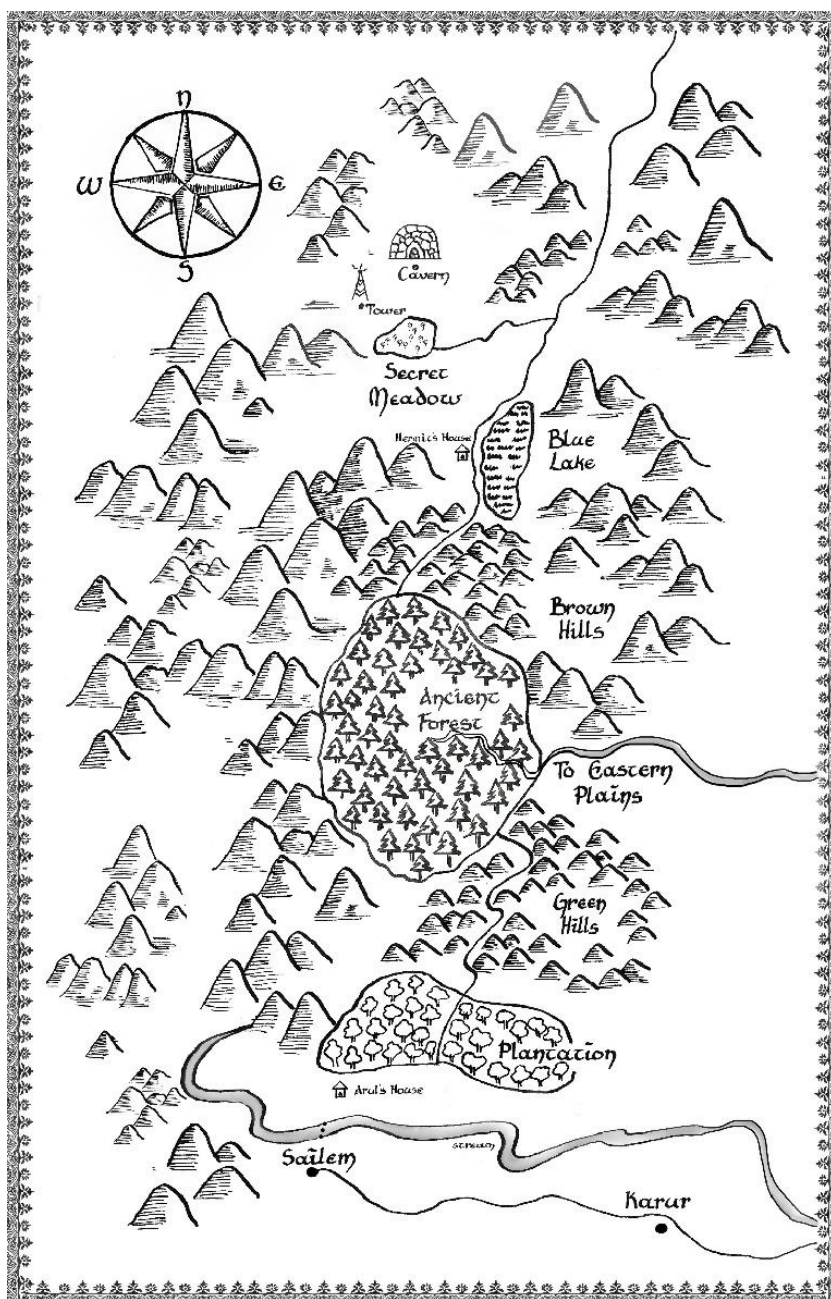
FOR ARYA

*Gurkha, flying a swift and powerful vimana
hurled a single projectile charged with the power
of the Universe. An incandescent column of
smoke and flame, as bright as ten thousand suns,
rose with all its splendour.*

From India's Mahabharata.

Kumari × Kandam





CONTENTS

- Chapter 1 Child of the Mountains 1
- Chapter 2 Roof of the World 13
- Chapter 3 The Council of Elders 19
- Chapter 4 The Guru 31
- Chapter 5 A Secret Plan 43
- Chapter 6 The Plantation of Elephants 49
- Chapter 7 Wildflowers in the Grass 63
- Chapter 8 The Ancient Forest 71
- Chapter 9 Soul of a Warrior 76
- Chapter 10 Kidnapped 84
- Chapter 11 The Desolate Highlands 98
- Chapter 12 Sacrifice 107
- Chapter 13 The Blue Lake 117
- Chapter 14 Eye of the Snow Leopard 123
- Chapter 15 The Hermit 128
- Chapter 16 The Secret Meadow 134
- Chapter 17 Ancient Secrets 142
- Chapter 18 The Cavern of Light 150
- Chapter 19 Yearnings from the Heart 156
- Chapter 20 Enemy at the Gates 163
- Chapter 21 Flight to Sailem 168

Chapter 22 Captured 178

Chapter 23 The Corruption of Sailem 187

Chapter 24 Childhood Lost 206

Chapter 25 Skirmish at the Falls 206

Chapter 26 The Rock Pool 216

Chapter 27 Trapped 223

Chapter 28 Spirit of the Tiger 230

Chapter 29 The Colonel 234

Chapter 30 Edge of the World 244

Glossary 260

Author's Notes 263

About the Author 264

Song of the Navigators

Across seven stars we ruled worlds beyond measure.

Power undreamt of filled our hearts with pride.

Ascending to the threshold of heaven, we challenged the gods.

Celestial weapons we hurled with dark anger.

Brought upon ourselves the rage of the Gods.

The wrath of their greatest warrior, Lord Indra.

We fled our ruin, our cities consumed by unholy fire.

But Lord Vishnu brought us light.

Bestowed upon the Navigators gems of great power.

In shining vimana we crossed oceans of stars.

Finding refuge on a far blue world.

6000 B.C.E

The continent of Kumari Kandam

900 Miles South of India

High Priest Vazhuthi stood deep in thought at the edge of the vast pit, brooding over the power of something so dark. He shifted his compact body, rubbing his shaved head, fear swirling in his eyes. His rugged face was more like a warrior's than that of a priest. Indeed, his vows often caused him to issue commands that were very un-priest-like.

In the far south of Kumari Kandam dwelt the Oru Arrakan, the light-swallowing demon imprisoned in the mountain. Legend told that it could even distort time, although that seemed rather fanciful to the High Priest. Like others in his secret order, Vazhuthi was terrified of the demon, although he did not know exactly what it was. There were things about the dark pit that made no sense to him.

For thousands of years, his ancestor-priests had dwelt far below the mountain, constantly performing ritual puja to keep the demon satisfied. They were the keepers of the Oru Arrakan, guardians of the demon since the beginning of time.

He stared at the huge metal slabs suspended around the pit at regular intervals, utterly smooth and unlike any metal he knew of, perfect after countless centuries.

The darkness that dwelt in the pit was once a power source for the entire continent, yet no one remembered who had built it. The High Priest had no idea how its energy was harnessed, but only knew it had been doing so for thousands of years beyond counting. The old writings spoke of the darkness captured in the stars by ancient Navigators, beings chosen by the God Vishnu to save their people from extermination.

Vazhuthi listened to the low hum rising and falling like waves on an ocean. He furrowed his brow, looking up to the domed roof of the chamber many hundreds of feet above, where points of light glittered from a vast star map. He often puzzled over the strange constellations, so unlike the night sky over Kumari Kandam. What's more, the Royal Astronomers insisted there were no star formations such as these. It was merely the imaginings of ancient artists, they told him. Vazhuthi however, was a deep thinker.

Yes, there are no star constellations like this in our night sky. But out there, far beyond the sun?

He knew that was impossible because no one could travel that far. The priest shook his head, dismissing the foolish thought. He gestured to his assistant waiting in the shadows.

'I must have the last gem of the Navigators, Vazhuthi said. 'It alone will control the Oru Arrakan. The rulers of Kumari Kandam will fall at our feet.'

'Our scouts have found it, Holiness,' said the assistant, his pocked face breaking into a smile. 'A peasant-boy who dwells in the mountains to the north.'

'How came such a gem to this child?' Vazhuthi said. 'Who are his parents?'

'We only know that his father is a Royal Forester.'

'It matters not. Order our assassins to kill him and take it.'

'And his father?'

'Kill anyone who stands in your way.'

‘What is this village called?’

‘Sailem, Holiness. It is called Sailem.’

Vazhuthi looked at his assistant with eyes dark as a moonless ocean. ‘Kill the whole village if you have to. They are of no consequence.’

The assistant priest shivered and pulled his black robes tighter, stepping backwards and bowing. Vazhuthi closed his eyes and focussed his mind on the gem that he so desired. Yet in the depths of his mind, he felt some unseen power protecting the boy. He did not like unknowns. Unnerved, he left the chamber, his trembling assistant in tow.

That night as Kumari Kandam slept, the bright stars of the Seven Sages wheeled over the extinct volcano. With a sound like distant thunder, another of the twelve stone guardians failed, its hum falling silent forever. Three Guardians now lay dead in the mountain under the stars. The *Oru Arrakan* surged against the remaining Guardians, fighting to escape.

It had always fought to escape.



Chapter 1



Child of the Mountains

The boy shifted on the carpet of ochre leaves, light as the whispering air which wove its way around the trees. The forest shivered and fell silent as the breeze died. Briefly fingering the feathery tips of tarupai grass, he sniffed the cool autumn air with the slightest hint of a smile.

Blood. I smell it in that hollow.

He crept forward up the gentle incline, his copper skin dancing through pools of sunlight, moving with the grace of a hunter. Lowering himself to a crouch, the pungent, earthy odours of the forest rose to meet him. Dark soil and scented mullai flowers somewhere close.

Your Amma was Veliyāl.

Outsider.

You aren't one of us.

He blinked away the memory and picked at a sticky cobweb on his cropped black hair, feeling the raised bump of the scar which he'd received two summers ago. With time the words faded, just as light seeps from the mountains at dusk. The hurt remained, biting harder than the blows of Chozan's heavy arms. Chozan knew how to use the power of words to injure.

Your Amma left because she hated you. Your own Mother hated you!

The boy's face was lean. Alert. Without the cringe of a superstitious peasant from the deep mountains. Rather, his was a face that held nobility. A little hidden to the casual observer, but something a lifetime in an isolated village couldn't quite erase. The boy felt for the reassuring curve of the leather sheath containing his curved aruval knife.

You're a nobody.

Now his body was almost prone. His homespun vest and loose vetti pants brushed the dark earth. A brown and white hare scampered across the forest floor in terror. He gripped his bow and paused, forcing his thoughts from the pain.

I'll use my bow. It won't even notice until it's too late. They'll make me the first sixteen year old forester in the province after this.

He gulped, his heartbeat hammering his chest.

They won't call me an outsider. Then I'll find Amma.

He froze and listened. Watching the forest through intense eyes the colour of mahogany wood.

Amma loved me.

So why did she leave?

Pain churned in his gut. He took a slow breath just as his Guru had taught him, his mind calming and the forest leaping into clarity, his senses heightened.

The musical note of a songbird rising and falling in quick succession. Forest leaves spinning though the air and settling like soft rain.

He raised his head above a fallen log, green with moss, peering into the gully. The stench was

overpowering. Spilt guts and the peculiar smell of lion. The snap of deer ribs echoed.

The boy's head jerked back.

You'll never be a forester.

Hands trembling, he raised his head for a second time. The tawny sabre-tooth lion was too engrossed in its kill to notice. It placed its muscled front legs on the deer's neck, plunging giant canines into the carcass. A fresh outpouring of blood joined the dark stain, surrounding the deer like a maroon flower.

The faint metallic scent of blood brushed the boy's nose. He ran his finger down his bowstring and inched it up, reaching back to his leather quiver and gripping an arrow.

When he looked back at the beast, it was staring at him with bright gold eyes.

Vishnu help me...

A low growl reverberated through the trees, challenging him. He felt it pulse through his body like a drumbeat. His stomach knotted.

Run. That's what your Amma did.

Too late. The sabre-tooth lowered its enormous head and took a step forward. Leaves crackled underfoot as it edged closer, its eyes never leaving him. Not even for an instant.

The lion began to circle.

Arul fumbled to nock his arrow, struggling to still his shaking hands.

It's smart, circling around me.

The first arrow went wide, skidding off a tree and leaving a dark furrow, a wound in the forest. The beast froze, glancing at the arrow, its heavy shoulders giving it a strange hunched appearance. Now those same shoulders tensed for a leap that would bring it into killing range. It snarled, lips tight over its bloody canines.

Foot long curved daggers.

The boy dropped his bow, his fingers rigid. He shivered, yet sweat trickled down his face in crystal beads.

I'm dead if I don't think.

He sensed blind panic raging up from his core, his eyes fixed on the lion's feet, away from those terrible eyes. That was his Appa's training. Father's wisdom. Forester wisdom.

Quick as lightning Arul snatched a rock and pegged it at the beast. As it flinched, Arul leapt off the rise and rolled away. He came to his feet in one smooth motion. Looking ahead he saw a bright splash of light edged with green.

The end of the forest.

That was all he needed to see. He exploded into a desperate sprint for safety, moving as fast as he ever had.

Too slow.

The creature watched the running boy for a second, then exploded from behind the rise in one gigantic leap, its growl rising to an ear-splitting roar. Glancing over his shoulder, Arul glimpsed a blur of tawny fur, closer than he would have liked.

Faster.

Focusing on the exit, Arul mustered every bit of willpower to drive his legs on. He sprinted down the forest path, feet skimming earth, fallen leaves exploding in spinning clusters. The creature closed on him, the thump of its paws growing louder.

Arul's strength bled out, his lungs burning.

Amma, help me.

A faint vibration sped from his amulet, from its jewel set into a gold disk. Heat surged into his chest. Flooded his muscles. And something more came.

Something that felt like starlight.

Like a deer in full flight, he cleared a fallen tree without slowing. Flashing through shadow and light, weaving around huge buttressed trees with catlike agility.

Fifty feet...twenty feet...

His eyes flicked from the ground to the nearing exit. Something metallic sliced through the air towards him at a frightening speed.

No time to crouch.

He screamed, his spent lungs near collapse.

The object rushed past his head with a foot to spare, its metal tip glittering like the edge of a razor. It hissed through the air as it passed in the blink of an eye. Then a sickly noise of metal slicing into flesh.

A piercing howl ripped through the jungle. That moment burned into Arul's memory as long as he lived.

He screamed again.

Better to die than to live as a Veliyā. Outsider.

Again energy surged from his amulet. Softer this time. For a fragment of time, he thought he heard a woman singing to him. A light in the corner of his eye.

Amma?

Seconds later, he shot out from under a giant tree into a field of emerald grass. Sprinting blind into the sudden light, a powerful arm lifted him off his feet. Sky and grass spun, his eyes rolling back in his skull. Darkness took him, rather peaceful in a strange way. He thought he heard a deep voice, as if in a dream.

It sounded awfully familiar.



He drifted on a black sea between sleep and waking. From somewhere inside that darkness, a ghastly fog arose. The familiar nightmare of the sea.

Drowning. The ocean rising to a deafening crescendo, tearing at his mind. Reaching for him. *He stared dumbfounded at the onrushing wall of water, towering like an angry blue giant above the green plains. Sunlit flecks sparkled off the surface of the gigantic tsunami, while deep inside its green-blue colour faded into midnight black. Towns and entire mountains were swallowed whole, as though some divine being had focused all of his rage into this moment.*



With a choking cry, Arul sat up. He was dripping with sweat, shivering violently, nausea swirling in his stomach. His eyes jerked wildly around the room, unable to focus. Light and dark blurring, he rubbed his hands over his slick face, trying to force himself from the nightmare. A sparrow flashed tan and brown past the open door, distracting him from the lingering terror. He stared out of the door into the wall of green.

Autumn had begun to probe its chill fingers into the alpine valley like creeping shadows. Whereas the sun had shone forth a fierce summer heat only a month ago, now it had cooled to a wintery disc that gave little comfort.

The snows would not be far off.

He was home. A thatched hut built around a bamboo frame with palm-leaf walls, the smell of earth, spices, and dried grass comforting him. A few well-worn implements and cooking pots hung from pegs set into the crossbeams. Above, a sloped thatched roof hung dark, trickling slivers of grass through the still air. Let in by gaps in the reed walls, slivers of light shivered on the mud floor. Dazzling drops of sunlight in an otherwise dark interior.

Arul lived in the isolated mountain village of Sailem, deep in the western mountains of Kumari

Kandam. Its folk tended cattle and goats, and cultivated grain that thrived in the cool climate. He had loyal friends, and he treasured the long days wandering fields and forests.

He felt whole.

Almost.

Arul had never known his Mother. He was told that she had vanished when he was a baby. People made up stories about her disappearance. *Perhaps she ran away. Maybe she was taken by a wild animal.*

No-one knew for sure. His Father never spoke of her, and other villagers avoided the subject. It was an unseen wound which hurt him inside. Yet even deeper than this, Arul sensed something calling to him. Something in his blood singing from a great distance away. Sometimes he dreamed of it, sparkling like a cloak of diamonds against a dark sky.



Arul sat on his rope bed awhile, feeling it creaking, his mind drifting. He rubbed his face and forced his mind back into the waking world. Cool earth pressed his feet reassuringly, though his mouth was dry and his body drained. He stood and swayed on his feet, tottering past the circular fire-pit, staring at the dancing flames that licked the blackened cooking pot. Sambhar bubbled and filled the hut with an aroma of onions and spices. His stomach rumbled, and he realised that he was hungry enough to eat the whole pot. He and his father were reduced to eating one meal a day like the rest of the village. Hunger was constant.

Then he remembered.

What did my amulet do to me out there?

Amma's gem.

He shrugged. *Probably imagined it. I was panicked. Yes, that's it. Panicked.*

But he didn't quite believe himself.

Something more happened.

His rickety bed creaked in protest as Arul sat down and shook his head, his mouth drawn tight.

I'll never become a Forester at this rate. I can't even kill a lion.

A shadow fell across the glare of the hut's door. Arul looked up to find his father, Ori leaning against the doorframe. His short muscular frame moved fluidly into the hut.

'Appa!' Arul cried, shielding his eyes against the glare. His Appa wore the outfit of a Royal Forest Warden. A red talaipakkai covering his close-cropped hair, matching vest and loose vetti trousers. Like all foresters, his Appa wore a curved aruval, larger and better fashioned than Arul's. His job was to patrol the vast estates and forests of the King of Ailas, like his ancestors before him.

Arul's Appa flashed a cheeky smile, revealing a set of startling white teeth set in a weathered face. Yet the space behind his weathered face seemed to hold a deep sorrow. Sunken eyes that never smiled.

Arul's head swam as he turned his head, looking for the dull glint of his Appa's throwing spears. There seemed to be a few missing from the bamboo rack. He swallowed hard as the memory of the sabre-tooth attack washed over him.

His Appa let out a sharp breath. 'Arul, why did you take on the lion without me?'

Arul stared at his feet.

'Is it because you want the village kids to see you as a hero? You risk death to be worshipped?'

'I don't want Chozan and his gang to call me an outsider. I'm not. I was born here!' Arul said, bitterness edging every word.

'The blacksmith's son? So that's what this is about.' His Appa sat next to him on the bed. 'Chozan is not too bright if you hadn't noticed.'

Arul smiled and nodded.

‘Yet you want to be admired by *him*?’

Arul shrugged. ‘That was stupid of me, wasn’t it?’

‘It was. In any case, that creature was as big as they come,’ said his Appa in a deep voice, sounding like a rumbling waterfall.

Arul eyes filled with confusion.

‘I trust you didn’t knock your head in the forest,’ his Appa chuckled. ‘The sabre-tooth lion! They don’t usually come down to the lower forests unless...well unless...’ He pinched the stubble on his jaw and gave Arul a thoughtful glance.

‘Did you carry me all the way from the Ancient Forest? That’s two days walk!’ Arul said, his voice rising in pitch.

‘Of course I didn’t carry you, Son. I rigged up a bush sled and dragged you. That was hard enough! You were mumbling and crying out about the ocean and the stars. And...’

‘And what?’

His Appa’s voice fell to a whisper. ‘Well...you called out to Amma.’

Arul dropped his head. ‘Oh.’ They sat silently for some time, sharing a common grief.

‘We’re not going on any more hunts up there until its safe. Understood?’ His Appa said, the iron in his voice unmistakable.

Arul let out a deep breath. ‘Yes, Appa. But do you think it was an earthquake that drove that lion off the high passes? Or hunters?’

‘Hmm...?’ Ori looked out of the door to the trees of the jackfruit plantation. Arul followed his gaze. The white-capped peaks of the Meru Ranges lay above the trees, part of the vast mountain range that dominated the west coast of the continent.

‘I mean...um...they’ve never left the high passes in your life, have they Appa?’ Arul asked.

‘Not in my life, or in living memory,’ his Appa ventured. ‘Something odd is going on up there, I just know it.’ He tapped his nose and smiled. Arul’s brow knitted as he watched his Appa stand, stepping over a glossy black wolf before ducking through the low door.

‘Jaya!’ Arul exclaimed with a grin. The young wolf raised his head and looked straight at him with pale gold eyes that seemed to be saying, *you ought to have taken me along into the forest.*

Arul rose and sat next to Jaya, his eyes focussing on an orange butterfly flitting over the grass, rising and falling in jerking motions. Arul’s fingers ran over Jaya’s thick fur and soon he felt the wolf’s heartbeat matching his own.

Calm.



The sun slanted gold and orange before Arul remembered his hunger. He walked to the trough by the side of the hut and revived his senses by splashing his head with cold water. Tiny forest birds flitted between the tall trees of the nearby plantation, calling to each other with elaborate songs.

Sailem was a good place to call home. If you excluded Chozan.

Surrendering to his hollow stomach, Arul hurried inside. He helped himself to a small bowl of fluffy rice and hot sambhar soup, shovelling lentils and vegetables into his mouth with his fingers. It wasn’t much, but it was more than most villagers ate. The heat and spices washed over him, and for the first time that day he felt content.

The terror of the morning’s events faded as he sat outside the hut in the afternoon sun. Clouds of insects drifted across the grass with a pleasant droning sound. Arul dozed off and on as the sun begin its descent towards the towering peaks in the west, their tips smudged with the faintest pink. Freezing winds

blew great clouds of powdered snow off their peaks, trailing into the gold sky like plumes of steam.



Some distance down the valley from Sailem, near the Village of Karur, a bent figure put down his well-worn axe and straightened his back with a grunt. He stared up the valley at the mountains, watching them change colour with the setting sun. Parthiban had cut wood in this valley his entire life, yet he smiled anew at this painted scene. Reluctantly his gnarled hands hefted his axe and went back to chopping a spindly tree. His threadbare clothes and ancient appearance made him barely distinguishable from the surrounding forest.

It was dark when he arrived at Karur, pulling a ramshackle cart of neatly cut firewood. Villages such as Karur and Sailem needed wood year round for cooking, although he much preferred Sailem to the dirty and overcrowded Karur. Karur stank of rotting rubbish. And worse. As usual, Parthiban planned to take his cart house-to-house, selling his logs. Tonight though, something had caught the attention of the village.

Three strangers on horseback had arrived with an escort of royal soldiers. Gold buttons sewn into their richly woven robes reflected firelight like mini-suns, grand in comparison to the snivelling village elders who rushed out to greet them. They were immediately recognised as Royal Scouts from the great capital of Ailas.

Messengers of the King himself.

Parthiban watched the villagers help the visitors dismount and usher them inside the rundown pañcāyattu, the village hall. There was much bowing and smiling, but none of it by the strangers. The Royal Scouts were aloof and haughty, deeming it unnecessary to engage in small talk. Their escort of soldiers took up positions outside the door, fearsome curved aruvals held low, almost casually.

Parthiban sighed and tugged at his cart. Only once in living memory had Royal Scouts chosen someone from the valley to study at the Royal Academy. Parthiban scratched his bald scalp, but couldn't quite recall that youngster's name from all those seasons ago. Heaving with effort, the old man pulled his rattling cart down the dirt street, shaking his head.

Pari. Yes, that was his name. Is that the same person as the old teacher who lives up in Sailem? Parthiban shrugged, unable to figure it out. But there was one thing he knew for sure. He had a terrible feeling that trouble was coming to the valley.



Chapter 2



Roof of the World

Deep in the Meru Ranges on the slopes of a remote mountain, the ants began to migrate, scurrying in vast columns up a giant pine soaring hundreds of feet into the azure sky. They carried precious white eggs, searching for a safe haven, but the snowline was far colder than they could survive and huge numbers froze, covering the ice like grains of black sand.

Desperate as they were, the ants couldn't know that even a tree this colossal would not survive what was coming.

Nothing would.



Some days later on the outskirts of the mountain village of Sailem, Arul sat with his best friend, Keeran on the banks of a mountain stream. The noisy brook originated high beyond the snowline and flowed past the village. From there it swiftly descended through the valley on its route down to the eastern plains, where it joined the mighty Palar River.

The teens flicked pebbles into the icy stream out of boredom, plopping them into the clear water as it flowed over rounded boulders the colour of slate. Arul's looked at his Keeran dipping his toes in the clear water.

Keeran was close in age to Arul, but much taller. He was from the Pirāmanar caste. Priests that believed in non-violence and would not even speak harshly to others, which Arul didn't understand. The jungles surrounding Sailem were full of violence and cruelty. It that was nature, Arul reasoned, that must be what the Gods willed.

Keeran stared idly at Jaya. The wolf sat perfectly still, his eyes tracking schools of tiny fish that flitted about in the stream. 'Why on earth did you call him Jayaditya? The Sun. I mean, he's as black as night.'

Arul looked at Jaya, who ignored them and continued to watch the fish. 'Well, when Appa brought him out of the forest when he was a pup, I thought his eyes had some kind of light in them. Like the Sun. I think his Amma was killed by some other wolves so he would have died out there for sure.'

Keeran nodded. 'Lucky for him.' He dipped his hand into the sparkling cold water. 'Do you think the Royal Scouts will really come to Sailem?' His amber eyes swivelled to Arul. Keeran's gawky face gave the impression that he still had some growing left to balance out his features. He was often annoying, but they had always been best friends.

'Well, if they choose one of us to enter the Royal Academy, imagine how proud everyone will feel. How much it would lift the status of the village!'

'But what exactly do you study at the Academy? Nobody seems to know,' said Keeran. Arul shrugged. 'Who knew what students learnt at the greatest centre of learning on the continent?'

'Well, I don't want to go and live in the freezing mountains way down south,' declared Keeran. He grinned. 'Anyhow, the Scouts will take one look at you, and they'll run straight back down the valley!'

Arul threw a stick at Keeran's legs, but he danced out of the way in a flash. After a half-hearted chase along the banks of the stream, Arul gave up. Breathing hard, he spied a nice round pebble and was about to peg it when he noticed Keeran staring into the sky. Following his friend's gaze, Arul squinted at the shape of a white and brown sea-eagle flying in strange patterns over the valley.

'What on earth?'

'My thoughts exactly,' Keeran replied as he sat down. 'That bird doesn't live in the mountains. It should be on the coast.' They watched the enormous eagle fly in tight circles, then dip into sudden unpredictable arcs. 'Something's wrong with it!'

With a piercing scream, it flew straight at them.

'Run!' Keeran shouted, scrambling to his feet. Arul didn't need any encouragement to join his friend, sprinting hard for the cover of a nearby guava tree, Keeran overtaking him on his long legs. Arul twisted his head over his shoulder and saw nothing but blue sky.

Where's it gone?

The next few seconds seemed to take an eternity. Without warning, Arul felt the ground dip away. With a cry, he fell headfirst onto the grass, rolling uncontrollably.

The horizon tumbled as he fought to roll upright and keep running. But it was too late. The eagle's talons found his back, raking bloody furrows as it passed. Arul screamed in agony, trying to shield his head as he rolled to a stop. With a tremendous whooshing sound, the bird flashed past at an incredible speed, soaring up for another attack.

Arul's writhed helplessly on his stomach, his back a knot of pain. Then Keeran's hands materialised out of nowhere and dragged Arul to cover. They took cover under a guava tree, Arul's face contorted, his back red with blood. Keeran grabbed a fallen guava and flung it desperately at the eagle with a yell.

The bird tried to reach them but was frustrated by the tree branches. It screamed its displeasure before climbing high above the tree and circling. Then something completely unexpected happened.

The great bird plunged upside down without warning, spiralling into the ground with an awful shriek that made the boys cringe. Keeran swore, something he rarely did. They stared into the plantation where the bird had crashed, Arul's injury forgotten for a moment.

'Nothing could survive a crash like that,' Keeran said, his voice tight. 'It's not right.'

'Worse, it's not natural', Arul whispered. Then he remembered his injury. The stabbing pain struck with such violence that it left him on his knees, gasping. He reached for his circular amulet, his only link to his mother. He wasn't quite sure afterwards, but he thought he could feel it briefly radiate heat into his palm. He felt as though something sheltered him from the pain, just as a tree shelters one from the midday heat.

'C'mon, put your arm around my neck,' said Keeran.

Using Keeran for support, he hobbled his way back to the village, looking for the village healer. They found her outside her ramshackle hut, picking leaves off some herbs. A wizened stooped woman with green eyes, Inba eyed the boys with a frown.

'What is it this time?' She grumbled while adjusting her ragged woollen shawl, her eyes widening when she saw Arul's bloody wounds. She rushed him inside with remarkable speed for someone so old, barking instructions to Keeran. 'Well? Don't stand there gawking! Light a fire under the water kettle!' She glanced at Keeran with a suspicious face and rubbed her rather large nose. 'You *do* know how to light a fire, don't you?'



That evening in Inba's hut, Arul lay on his stomach and stared at a flickering brass deepam. He could smell the buttery ney used to fuel the lamp and felt rather hungry.

It's a pity they use the same clarified butter to make sweets. What a waste to use it in a deepam.

He could almost taste the ghee-infused sweets made in great heaps during the New Year Puthandu festival. Any thoughts of sweets fled when Inba placed a fresh herbal poultice on his back. ‘Stop writhing like a speared fish, boy!’ Amma’s leathery voice barked. Arul tried to keep still.

Now I know what a skewered fish feels like.

Next to him stood his Appa and Keeran, watching the scene, eyes filled with worry. The old woman muttered, ‘I didn’t think I’d live to treat a sea eagle attack. I’ve never even set eyes on the sea.’

Arul’s father spoke respectfully, as all villagers did to Inba. ‘I didn’t think I’d live to see such a thing either, Aunty. I’m also puzzled as to why such a creature would attack someone as large as Arul.’

The healer muttered something and began mixing more herbs in a brass pestle, the odour of crushed herbs overwhelming. Arul sniffed the air.

She’s making a poultice of tamarind leaves.

Arul’s Appa turned to Keeran. ‘Thank you for being so brave with Arul. I’ll take him home now if Aunty has no objections.’ He hugged Keeran. ‘You’d better get back home too.’

Inba called out to Arul’s father. ‘Make sure that Navira comes for her lesson this week. She’s the only girl in the village with enough dedication to learn my craft anyway.’

Keeran bent over and whispered to Arul, a wide grin splitting his narrow face. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow, eagle boy.’

Arul groaned, staring at the deepam flame as though hypnotised, floating on the pungent aroma of herbs and medicinal pastes filling the hut. Outside the window, a noisy cricket *cree-creed* in the approaching night, now settling like a thick blanket over the alpine valley.



Chapter 3



The Council of Elders

Next morning the sun rose into a clear blue mountain sky, deepening signs of autumn upon the land. Arul tightly snuggled into his woollen shawl and gazed towards the forested slopes of the mountains, a vast green canopy dotted here and there with trees in late season flower. Splashes of reds and yellows led his eye past the foothills to the high peaks, capped in blinding cloaks of white snow. He squinted at the long clouds billowing off the summits, stretching away into the sky like unravelling wool. Up there it was always snowbound.

Is it possible to climb that high?

‘Arul...halloo!’ Navira’s insistent voice brought out of his daydreaming with a start. She was his childhood friend, now a slender girl of fourteen. Her nose was small and sharp, her lips slightly downturned, indicating something of her quick temper. It was a bad idea to annoy Navira, as Keeran was often reminded.

Navira and Keeran were looking for Arul’s father to ask him if he had seen any lions close to the village. More dead cattle had been found that morning. Arul joined them, weaving through the village on the way to his house. They passed a collection of rundown huts, hollow-eyed children playing in the dust, lethargic and sickly. The poorest section of the village. Grimy hands thrust out, begging for food.

Arul faked a smile at them and turned to his friends. ‘I don’t have anything to give them,’ he whispered. ‘I’ve never seen kids looking this scrawny.’

‘And it isn’t even winter yet,’ said Navira, studying Arul with almond shaped eyes the colour of russet autumn leaves. ‘I heard the grain stores are almost empty,’ said Keeran as though it was a great secret. It wasn’t, although folks tried to ignore it. Villagers were good at pretending to be ignorant. Maybe that’s how they survived their harsh lives high in the mountains.

Arul nodded. ‘What do you expect? Farmers are staying indoors. Since spring, they’ve been big predators seen roaming the outskirts. The valley’s become dangerous.’

They reached the icy stream on the outskirts of the village. Arul began to hop across the line of flat stones someone had placed there generations ago. Midway, an almighty shove sent him sprawling into the icy water, his wounds stinging like hot needles. He bit his lip to stifle a scream, a school of silver fish scattering away from him like shattered glass.

Keeran stood on the bank laughing hard. Navira glared at him, slapping him on the arm. ‘You might have made his injury worse!’

Arul spluttered and spit water from his mouth. Shivering, he stood in the middle of the stream while his friends crossed. When Keeran passed by, he charged forward, sending the taller boy flying. They both crashed into the stream, spluttering and wheezing.

Navira and Jaya crossed and stood on the far side. Arul glanced at Jaya looking with puzzled tilt to his head. ‘He thinks we’re crazy!’ Arul yelled.

‘Not all of us. Just you and Keeran,’ said Navira flatly.

It took the boys some time to dry off in the morning sun. Arul's bandages were a mess. 'Better not let Inba see her bandages in that state,' Navira warned him. 'Dry off and I'll fix it.'

It was rather enjoyable simply lying in the soft grass that lined the banks of the stream. The sound of gurgling water rushing past made for pleasant listening, although for Arul there was a feeling of unease about that sound. It reminded him of his nightmare about the sea.

'Look Arul, I'm sorry that I pushed you. I forgot that you were injured,' said Keeran. Before Arul could reply, Navira punched Keeran on the arm.

'Stop that!' Keeran whined.

'Then stop acting like an idiot! You could have really hurt Arul,' Navira growled. Grinning, Arul noticed that Keeran wisely declined to reply.

Under glorious autumn sunshine, they waited for their clothes to dry while Navira tidied up Arul's dressing. The teens then wandered down a beaten dirt path between emerald fields of millet, the air smelling of tilled earth, crops, and woodsmoke from the village.

The path ended at the edge of an empty field. During the summer, cattle grazed here, but it was left to fallow during the colder months. Nestled on the far side stood Arul's home, surrounded by neat stacks of firewood, a chicken pen, and a fenced enclosure with a single dairy cow. A lazy column of smoke rose from an opening in the hut's roof.

'Appa! Are you there?' Arul shouted.

A nearby woodpecker stopped its rapping. No one answered the call, so the trio approached the hut and peered in. There was something on the hearth that smelt of milk and palm sugar. Delicious.

Arul's eyes narrowed.

Appa hasn't been gone for long. He took his spears.

'He didn't even string his bow. Look,' said Keeran.

'Is he out patrolling the forest...or hunting?' Navira said, scanning the trees.

Arul shrugged. 'I have no idea, but something feels off.' He grabbed his own spear and walked to the rear of the hut, an uneasy feeling beginning to gnaw at him. He peered into the gloom where a narrow path plunged into the plantation of towering jackfruit trees. Navira and Keeran joined him and stood listening to the echoing calls of mountain birds deep in the plantation.

'Halloo!' Navira's high pitched voice called out.

It was unlike Arul's father to vanish in the middle of cooking a meal. A chill breeze stirred the tops of the jackfruit trees, causing a wave of rustling leaves to move through the canopy. Keeran shivered and stepped backwards.

Arul glanced sideways at Jaya. The wolf froze and stared into the distance, both ears swivelled forward. He was much quieter than the average village dog, but Arul could still tell if Jaya sensed trouble. Right now his tail was level and his head held high, meaning no danger. A good sign.

'What's that over there?' Navira squeaked.

The boys craned their necks to where she was pointing and saw a figure moving in the shadows between the trees, as though hunting for something. Arul strained to see who it was.

'Wait a minute!' Keeran exclaimed. 'That's your Appa!'

Arul stared hard at the figure, who was now somewhat closer. It *did* look a lot like his father. They called out to him, waving furiously.

The figure in the trees paused and stared.

As he approached, Arul squinted at his face.

Appa.

Ori ran up to them and stood with his hand on Arul's shoulder, a sheen of sweat covered his face. He

needed a minute to catch his breath. Bits of shrubbery clung to his hair and clothes. ‘Something’s spooked them,’ he said between deep breaths. The only weapon he carried was his sheathed aruval.

Arul’s frowned. ‘Spooked what? Who?’

Appa’s used his spears fighting off something.

Ori unsheathed his aruval and began wiping blood off it. Arul stared at the blood. Keeran took a sharp breath and stepped back. Arul’s father nodded towards the jackfruit trees. ‘I was cooking when I heard roars in the plantation. They’ve come down off the mountains. At least two. Maybe more.’ He coughed and spit. ‘I speared one lion and killed it. Another came at me from behind. I fought him off with my aruval and injured him. He ran off.’

‘You mean sabre-tooth lions?’ Navira said, her eyes round with fear. Arul’s father sat down on the ground to recover, the teens huddling close to hear more of his story. Keeran kept stealing nervous glances into the plantation, gradually shifting so that he ended up behind Arul.

‘Usually, the largest animals I see out there are small black bears...but today...’ His voice faltered. ‘These lions were huge.’

Jaya pointed his ears towards the plantation, eyes alert. Arul wondered what his wolf could hear.

Probably quite a bit more than me.

They waited for Ori to continue, staring towards the mountains. ‘This morning, Viyan and a group of villagers told me that one of their cows was killed last night. It showed all the signs of a slashing, sabre-tooth attack.’ Ori took a deep breath. ‘I’ve only ever seen a sabre-tooth kill years ago in one of the high passes. They never come down this far.’

‘They prefer the mountains and caves, don’t they?’ Arul said. The four of them sat in silence for some minutes, imagining various reasons why the fearsome lions would roam so close to the village. ‘We should protect our house with brushwood and sharpened stakes,’ Arul said in a quiet voice. ‘I’ll start today.’

His Appa nodded with a hint of a smile. ‘Practical. I like that. I’ll help you, Son.’ He rose to his feet and dusted off his clothes. ‘I need to speak to the village council tonight. We have to find out what’s happening up there...whatever it is. If we don’t, this village is in deep trouble.’

The teens eyes found each other. Their boring village life was about to take a turn. Not a turn for the worse, they hoped.



It wasn’t until late that night when the village council gathered in the large pañcāyattu hall at the centre of the village. Like all villages, the Kattu Pañcāyattu governed Sailem. A group of the most respected elders in the village. By the time the lamps of the hall were lit, a half-moon rose in the night sky like a paper model, sharp and clear in every detail. The aroma of spiced vegetables drifted from cooking pots as dinners were prepared to the sounds of crying babies and shouting children. A few villagers came out to see what was happening at the pañcāyattu hall, but most stayed inside their homes. A meeting of the pañcāyattu was a private affair unless invited.

That was the law.

Teens were *absolutely* not invited, but Arul snuck out anyway. He crept closer to the hall, keeping to the shadows and crouching low, looking for a certain gap in the wall. He found it soon enough, the light from inside the hall shining through like a glowing eye. He silently put his face to it, ears straining to pick up the conversation inside.

Ori sat on the floor with the council and spoke to them in a low voice. A welcoming fire crackled on a large stone platform, sending a column of glittering sparks up through a hole in the roof.

The council was composed of older villagers. All men, except for Inba the healer. She sat unmoving,

wrapped in a drab shawl, a look of impatience pinching her lined face. The men wore fine robes, at least by village standards, gold jewellery shone from their arms and necks.

Arul pricked up his ears when he heard his father speak. 'No, it's not just random chance that so many sabre-tooth lions are roaming the lower reaches. My son and I killed one last week in the Ancient Forest, and I speared another on the outskirts of the village today.'

A very thin dark man called Kapilan shook his head energetically. 'We in the council have not actually *seen* any of these lions. You're making all of this up for your own profit. Perhaps to try and become chief warden of the whole province!'

Arul had never liked Kapilan, although he had to show respect to the elder when talking to him. The man endlessly argued with everyone as though he genuinely enjoyed upsetting people. Kapilan's devious eyes glittered as he continued his verbal assault. 'So if you invent these *supposed* attacks with your son's help, you can pretend to solve it and come out a big hero in the eyes of the village. Once the Provincial Governor hears about it, he'll promote you!' Kapilan clapped his hands and cackled, no doubt thinking himself extremely clever for working it all out.

Arul ground his teeth in anger. He saw his Appa abruptly stand up in disgust and step towards Kapilan. Pari, Arul's teacher and a council elder, quickly rose and spoke soothing words to Ori. Arul's father sat down, glaring at Kapilan.

Pari was Arul's *Guru*, who after a long absence had come back to live in Sailem at the time of Arul's birth. Guru Pari had a noble face framed by long white hair. Although his face was lined with age, he somehow looked young. He carried a permanent expression of amusement, as though he knew something so funny he might burst out laughing at any moment. His robes were simple white cotton, but nothing about his eyes indicated a simple mind.

His eyes saw everything.

Guru Pari turned and spoke to the council. 'We need to organise a scouting party to go up past the plantation and the Ancient Forest. In the Brown Hills, we may find answers. That is the only sensible course of action, isn't it? Then we can work out a strategy to deal with whatever we find.'

Arul's father sat up straight. 'We need to build brush and thorn barriers all along the plantation edge to keep them out. Sharpened stakes too.' Outside, Arul glowed with pride at his proposal being mentioned.

Appa actually listened to my suggestion!

The council of elders murmured amongst themselves awhile. Sailem's headman, Viyan nodded. Decisions were reached by voting, although Viyan had more influence than the other elders.

Viyan rubbed his broad nose vigorously. 'We'll start building these barriers on the morrow. As for these animal attacks. I will lead the scouting expedition with Ori our forest warden and three other experienced villagers.' He paused to let his words sink in. 'The series of attacks along our borders have not only killed many of our milking cows, but people are scared to harvest their crops. Our grain stores won't last the coming winter.'

The elders looked shocked, their eyes wide in the firelight.

Ori nodded respectfully. 'You have spoken wisely. Already I know of many children who have fallen ill due to a lack of food.' Kapilan snorted, but Arul's father continued. 'We could leave tomorrow at dawn. He scratched his chin stubble and added, 'Hmm...yes...may I bring my son Arul to assist me? I've trained him myself, and he's quite skilled.'

Kapilan laughed dismissively, waving his bony hands about. The other elders quieted him with stern looks and went back to discussing the arrangements. Viyan obviously trusted Arul's father and agreed to allow Arul to accompany them.

The elders rose and parted in the traditional manner, with palms held together as though praying. The

fire had burned down, and flickering shadows danced about the pañcāyattu hall like wandering spirits. Arul shivered, a feeling of unease clouding his mind.

When the rest of the elders departed, Viyan called to Ori and conversed with him in such soft tones, that Arul couldn't hear. They said their goodbyes and Ori was about to step through the door when Pari grabbed his arm. 'You need to tell the boy everything. And soon.' Arul froze and put his ear hard against the outside wall. 'He's having bad dreams, isn't he?' Guru Pari said.

Arul's Appa spoke tersely. 'How did you know that?'

'Don't take me for a fool, Ori. The boy carries the stone of a Navigator, like his mother before him. He must be told about her! You can't keep him isolated in this village forever.'

'Of course not, Guru Pari. I meant no disrespect. I'll find the right moment to tell him.'

Pari leaned forward, his eyes dark as a storm. 'I'll be watching him, Ori. I always have. His amulet holds powers you can't even imagine. He must learn how to control it.'

Ori rubbed his scalp, his voice nervous. 'Yes of course, Guru. You helped me all those years ago, and I haven't forgotten. I...we're always in your debt.'

Arul decided that it was a good time to make himself scarce and began backing away. He called softly to Jaya, the wolf appearing from the shadows like a black ghost. Arul was slinking between two huts when a hand shot out from the dark and grabbed him. He jumped, stifling a scream with his hand.

'I trust you heard all of that, although you were not invited?' His Appa said in a stern voice. Arul stammered, unable to conjure up a believable excuse for eavesdropping. Ori interrupted. 'It's good you overheard us actually. Shows me you have some interest, unlike Keeran and Navira who are no doubt fast asleep.'

This change in tone took Arul by surprise. He turned away to hide his face and beamed. His Appa's praise meant a lot to him, and it didn't come very often. His father's sharp gaze fixed him. 'Did you overhear your Guru and I talking?'

Arul lied. 'No! No! I was already on my way home straight after the headman talked to you.' Jaya looked at him accusingly and yawned.

They left the pañcāyattu hall and followed the dirt path out of the village towards the stream, Ori pausing to look at the moonlight shimmering off the water. As Arul stood next to him, his father put an arm on his shoulder. 'I remember when I showed your Amma this stream on a night just like this.'

Arul stiffened. His Appa almost never mentioned his Amma. By now Ori had his face turned, his shoulders slumped as though pressed by a great sadness. He walked off without another word.

Arul crossed the water and stopped at a tiny shrine to light a lamp and perform a puja to the village deity. While not one of the major gods such as Shiva or Vishnu, each village had its own protector deity. A small fire of juniper wood filled the air with its pungent aroma as Arul added a handful of sticks. He continued home past the vegetable gardens, accompanied by the buzzing sound of cicadas lurking in the grass. Arul breathed in the damp grass as he crossed the field, an expression of contentment on his face.

His Appa was waiting for him on the field. 'Sorry I walked off. I...'

He fell silent. 'It's fine, Appa. I know it's hard to talk of her.' Ori nodded with a pained smile.

Behind them, Jaya began to growl.

Arul and his father spun around. Then all at once with a great commotion, flocks of birds rose into the air along the tree line. 'Something's woken them!' Arul yelled.

'Indeed,' His Appa said. 'But what's scared them?'

A tremor began to shake the ground, gentle at first, then building in intensity. Trees shivered and villagers began shouted in the distance. Arul staggered as the ground heaved, jets of liquid mud spewing from the surrounding field.

Then the earthquake stopped without warning, the cries of panicked birds filling the moonlit sky. In the village, neighbours called out to each other over the sound of weeping children. ‘That’s the third earthquake this month!’ Arul shouted over the noise.

‘I know. That’s not normal, is it?’ His Appa glanced at the ground as if hoping to glean answers from it. He grabbed Arul’s hand and they hurried back to the village.

They and the village elders moved from house to house calming folk, most of whom swore that the village was under a curse. Village huts were made of timber and rope, able to flex in an earthquake. But many now sagged dangerously. People had been injured. They helped where they could, though as the hours passed, Arul’s exhaustion grew. ‘I think we’ve done everything we can tonight,’ Arul’s Appa said as he tore off a strip of muslin cloth and tied it around the injured arm of Sunai, a middle-aged widow. ‘Let’s go home, Son.’



They returned home exhausted, Arul collapsing into bed fully dressed. When his father finally blew out the diya, the flame spluttered and hissed before blinking out, silvery moonlight leaping through the open doorway, cold and beautiful.

Arul turned on his bed, making it creak in protest. His heart raced as he dreamt of exploring the high country beyond the forest. He thought he heard the distant roar of a tiger before he swiftly fell into a dreamless sleep.



Outside the hut, Jaya sat like a black shadow, his eyes reflecting the moonlight like pools of liquid ivory. He raised his head and let out a low mournful howl. In answer, the howling of wild wolves echoed through the mountains behind Sailem, hulking black silhouettes under a moonlit sky.



Chapter 4



The Guru

Arul woke at dawn, soft grey light pouring through the door into the darkened hut. Outside, songbirds trilled their intricate melodies, rising and falling like flutes, the steady tap-tap of a woodpecker keeping beat on a nearby mahogany tree. The familiar aroma of dosa encouraged Arul to jump out of bed, his stomach growling. He found a pile of the rice pancakes wrapped in cloth on the table and wolfed down four in quick succession, enjoying the nutty flavour.

I wish I had three meals of these a day instead of just one.

Wandering outside, he found his father leaning against a wall making arrows with his aruval. Unlike the large curved aruval that the kingdom's soldiers wore, this one was small and straight. A woodsman's tool. Arul slouched against the wall and watched his father work, his skilful hands fast and precise.

Beyond their hut the paddock was blanketed in a heavy mist, reminding Arul of winter snow. Somewhere in the quiet he heard Jaya howl. 'It's off,' his father said without looking at him.

'What?'

'The scouting expedition. We're not going anywhere.'

'Wha.... why?' Arul stuttered.

'Well...,' his father sighed. 'Viyan can't come because of the tremors last night. As headman, he needs to organise repairs to houses and the temple. The other villagers and I need to help, and Viyan won't allow a scouting party until repairs are complete. He's also ordered me to supervise our defences against the lion attacks.' He scratched his head. 'So that's that...'

There was a long silence. Arul didn't reply, but he was thinking hard when he went to the water trough to wash up. His Appa called out, 'Perhaps sometime soon, Viyan might reorder an expedition. I hope he does, for the village's sake.'

'What about the elders? What do they say?' Arul said.

I think for the elders, Sailem *is* their whole world and they have no interest in anything else. They're scared of the outside world, so they make excuses,' Arul's father said, sounding a little weary.

'That's sad,' Arul said, returning from the trough. 'I wonder if our ancestors were the same?' His Appa didn't answer and stared at the arrow in his hands, lost in thought.

Arul walked into the hut and performed his morning puja in front of the tiny shrine to the God Vishnu. Vishnu inhabited the forests, so it seemed like a good idea to keep him happy. Arul gazed at the dark wooden statue with a round smiling face and tall conical crown.

I wonder what you would tell the elders to do?

Vishnu's four arms held celestial objects whose meanings Arul found hard to understand. Keeran had tried to explain them many times, but Arul couldn't quite get it. He sat before the shrine and said a short prayer before lighting a sweet-smelling incense stick. The smoke curled up, bright as it drifted through a beam of sunlight.

Soon he was wandering about with a another warm dosa in his mouth. The fermented rice pancakes

were payment from a village family in exchange for firewood. Other times it would be clothes, spices, or rice. 'Don't run off Arul!' His Appa called out. 'You have lessons with Guru Pari today, so remind Navira and Keeran to be there as well!'

Arul groaned. 'Looks like I'm never going anywhere. Ever.'

He liked his Guru, but today Arul rather fancied going on the cancelled expedition. Head hung low, he went off to search for Navira. Silently, Jaya appeared alongside him and matched his stride. Arul rubbed the wolf's coal-black head affectionately. It felt soft and cool. He sometimes thought that Jaya knew more about what was going on than anybody. As he walked, he couldn't get the depressing images of hungry village children out of his mind. Almost every house had a malnourished child.

The elders don't know what to do, so they're doing nothing.

He kicked at a stone and thought hard. An idea began as a tiny glow in his mind, brightening with every step. Arul rapidly hatched a plan to discover the cause of the animal attacks. To mount an expedition even if the elders forbade it.

To save his village from starvation.

He made for the village square, certainty filling his mind, his heart racing. Weaving through Sailem's haphazard collection of huts, Arul came out onto the village square, a mud field bordered by a small Vishnu temple. Nearby was the village well and the wooden pañcāyattu, the meeting hall. The village's huts clustered around the square like ants to sugar, gradually thinning further out. It was a pleasant spot, made even grander by the backdrop of snowbound mountains that some called the Abode of the Gods. Arul often thought it must be true. Where else would the gods live?

He reached Navira's house and found her braiding the hair of Kavini, her younger sister. The chubby toddler could barely sit still as Navira braided her long hair with expert fingers. Arul sat on the front steps and waited. Homes in the village were larger and better furnished than his own hut. He sometimes wished that he lived in a fine house. 'Um...you know we've got lessons today, according to my Appa.'

Navira's eyes narrowed. 'Of course I know, dummy! Guru Pari told us last week, but you have a head like an empty coconut!' That was Navira. Fiery, yet loyal. She struggled to finish braiding as Kavini fidgeted. 'Keep still for goodness sake!' Navira yelled. She tied a length of cotton to her sister's hair and tickled her with a snort. Kavini giggled and leapt up, tumbling into the house. With a sharp exhale Navira rose, pulling Arul's arm. 'Let's go then!'

Just then, Navira's father, Nikandan, walked out of the front door, his oversized hands hanging like plates by his side. 'Arul! Do you have a moment?' He called out, rubbing his small nose. Nikandan walked closer. 'I hear you've been asking around the village about your Amma. About where she might have gone all those years ago.' Arul glanced at Navira, receiving a helpless gesture in return.

Nikandan breathed in deeply and put a hand on Arul's shoulder. 'I understand why you're asking. But I think you might have to accept that she's dead.' Arul's muscles bunched up under Nikandan's fingers, his eyes looking away. 'I think it's upsetting people, Arul. You should stop asking around and learn to face reality.' With that, Arul pulled away and walked back to Navira, now watching him with a drawn face.

'Sorry my Appa said that stuff to you,' Navira whispered. 'You deserve to know about your Amma.'

Arul nodded, his lower-lip trembling. 'I won't accept *reality*, as your Appa puts it.' He looked up to the sky. 'I *will* find her, Navira. She's not dead.' He searched her face, seeing a flash of doubt that she quickly masked with a soft smile. 'You believe me, right?'

Navira stopped to scratch Jaya under his chin. 'I do believe you. I don't know why, but I do.' She was the only other person who could touch Jaya. Other people received a hair-raising growl that made them leap backwards. They would pretend that they were very busy and had to rush off on some errand. Some even ran.

The village square was a hive of activity and repairs were in full swing everywhere. Women and children prepared rope and carried wood, while the men busied themselves on the village temple. A group of boys paused to watch Navira, her pretty looks quite a topic of conversation amongst them in recent times.

A jagged crack ran down the temple's white plaster, the walls leaning at odd angles. Ilamaran, the village priest, stood with his fingers twisted nervously as Viyan bellowed orders. New plaster was being prepared in large pots from sand, lime, and water. Meanwhile coils of hemp rope were cut for use in the houses to rebind their wooden beams.

Arul and Navira spotted Keeran carrying a length of wood across the busy square and raced over to him. 'Did you forget our lessons today?' Navira asked him. 'Instead, here you are hauling wood like some elephant!'

Keeran gave them a look of a hunted animal. 'I can't go. I'll be at this all day. Tomorrow as well, if my father has anything to do with it.' His shoulders sagged. 'Maybe even for the rest of my life, knowing my luck.'

Arul grinned. 'Forget all this! Come with us!'

'What about my father? He'll really give it to me if I just disappear!' Keeran whispered.

'If Guru Pari asks anyone to attend his lessons, no one dares refuse him, not even your Appa,' said Arul. 'That's what you'll tell him when he asks. That Guru Pari said you had to come.' Keeran scratched his head and nodded. With a growing smile, he accepted Arul's proposal.

Arul grabbed Keeran's arms. 'Keep working for another hour, then carry your wood around the banyan tree. We'll see you there.'

Keeran nodded energetically. He figured it had to be better than hauling wood like an elephant.



In the middle of the village square grew an ancient and enormous banyan tree sheltering all sorts of things. Places to sit. Places to worship. Spots for children to play. Hidden amongst the massive roots, tiny shrines stood, daubs of vermilion and yellow bright on the dark wood. Children ran between its roots which grew down from its branches like living pillars. Over time the huge banyan tree had spread its roots to create a maze of hidden nooks covering half the square. One could easily hide amongst its giant roots and not be found for hours.

Arul and Navira sauntered around the tree, trying not to attract attention to themselves. Once out of sight, they hid amongst the roots, some of them higher than a tall man. Soon Keeran appeared, holding a length of timber, trying not to look suspicious. His acting was appalling and he kept looking around, making him look even more suspect. Dropping his log, he hissed, 'Oi! Where are you two?'

Arul and Navira let him fret awhile while stifling their giggles. Keeran face grew anxious when they didn't appear. 'I'm not going back to carrying wood all day,' he muttered.

Arul lowered his voice and cupped his hands over his mouth. 'Get back to work you lazy fellow!' He shouted.

Keeran jumped and grabbed the log. He was about to rush back to work when Navira and Arul emerged from their hiding spot, laughing hysterically. Before Keeran had time to be angry they pulled him away from the tree and led him behind a row of huts.

'C'mon! We'll be late for the lesson!' Said Arul.

They hurried around the back of a row of huts, unseen. 'Don't forget that tonight is the Devarattam dance. And wear your best clothes!' Navira said.

'Yeah, Arul! Don't turn up in your old hunting clothes like last year,' Keeran laughed.

'What about the repairs? Shouldn't they cancel the dance?' Arul inquired.

‘It’s a religious dance, dummy!’ Keeran said. ‘We wouldn’t want to anger the Gods even more, would we? They’d send more earthquakes or something.’

They reached the rear of the pañcāyattu hall, pausing to check if the way was clear. Jaya was already waiting, his eyes tracking a dragonfly. Arul’s eyes widened.

How did he know we were coming here?

The hall was a startlingly ornate building considering Sailem was such a remote village. Arul often stared for hours at its carved Mahōkani panels, dark wood carvings flickering with shadow and light. Heroes fighting demons. Gods. Great wars. The story of Kumari Kandan.

The panel that fascinated Arul the most was of the creation story. It displayed a brilliant light descending to Earth, radiating star-like beams. In the middle of the light was carved a mysterious black circle. He could never figure out what that meant, and not even Guru Pari understood it. He always questioned everything he saw. He asked about *why* things were because he couldn’t help it. That was who he was. None of the other teens seemed to be curious about anything outside of the village. They accepted things as they were. Arul didn’t. He was different, but he didn’t quite understand how.

Wiping their feet with care, the trio climbed the stairs into the spacious hall. Their Guru was already seated inside next to a stack of parchment, eyes closed in meditation.

The teens shuffled in and knelt before him. They touched his feet and pressed their fingers to their foreheads, following ancient custom displaying respect for their teacher. Guru Pari’s eyes flickered open and he gave them a knowing look. His hand opened, motioning for them to sit.

The three friends avoided his eyes and arranged themselves in a semi-circle. Guru Pari seemed to know what they were up to, no matter how much they hid it. It was one of the great mysteries of life.

Can he read our minds? Arul wondered, not for the first time.

‘I know,’ Guru Pari said in his singsong voice. ‘The village is full of activity and distraction. But this comes first.’ His thin face held a kind of refinement about it as if he didn’t quite belong in a small mountain village. Arul glanced at Guru Pari’s chest, where he knew a curious gold amulet hung concealed. A disk holding a curious white stone. Guru Pari normally kept it covered with his robe, but once in the forest while teaching them about stellar navigation, Arul noticed it slip out. Although it was a pitch-black, moonless night, the amulet was *glowing* from within.

Arul had a sneaking suspicion that Guru Pari kept many secrets. He pushed the strange memory from his head and focused on the lesson. ‘The Seven Sages Constellation is one of the brightest,’ Guru Pari began. ‘Commonly worshipped in Kumari Kandan, from the tropical north to ice-bound mountains in the south.’



Outside, the repairs continued as the sun arced overhead, lonely streamers of high cloud to keep it company. Far above tiny Sailem, a spotted mountain eagle rode a current of rising air. Its brown and white feathers ruffled in the wind as it roamed in search of prey. Higher it circled into the blue vault.

Then an odd disturbance far away on the southern horizon caused its head to snap up. Above a distant volcanic cone, the air rippled as though a giant bubble was expanding. The eagle went into a rapid dive to gain speed and raced northward, terrified.

Outside the hall, Jaya sat in the shadows watching the repairs. Abruptly he sat up and stared south, growling, his keen senses straining to discover what was stirring. After a moment he whimpered and slunk under the pañcāyattu. Some things were better left alone.



Late that night in a forest grove ringed by towering deodar trees, bowl shaped lamps of clay were hung from branches and lit. The grassy clearing became a place of wondrous light. A sacred place. The annual Devarattam was about to begin. Villagers streamed in, excited voices and bright colours filling the grove.

Giant slabs of stone chiselled with a long-dead language stuck out from the earth at odd angles. Arul's fingers brushed a lichen covered slab, his eyes filled with wonder.

Arul and Keeran stood to one side and observed the final preparations for Devarattam, the dance of the Gods. The Deva Thunthubi's sacred drum rested against a tree, the drummer waiting to put on his wooden facemask. The mask that would transform him into a god. Keeran pointed to the hundreds of shells decorating the mask. 'It's scary how they look like sharp teeth. And the drummer hasn't even put on his false beard yet!'

Arul chuckled and stared at the drummer as he put on his horsehair beard. He nodded to Arul and then reached for his mask. Arul hurriedly flicked his eyes down, embarrassed to be caught staring.

Chozan's hulking form stood opposite the grove, his equally sturdy friends surrounding him like a honour guard. His mocking smile flashed across the sacred grove and found Arul. The bullies wandered across the clearing, surrounding Arul and Keeran. Chozan's round face leant into Arul. 'This Devarattam is only for us Sailem folk, so get lost.'

Arul gritted his teeth and ignored Chozan. He walked away, shouldering one of the boys. 'It's a pity that intelligence isn't a qualification for the Devarattam.'

Chozan's turned to his gang. 'What does that mean?'

'Oh, that was close,' Keeran said, his voice quavering. Then his face brightened. 'Look! It's beginning!'

The Devarattam drummer assumed a divine status the moment he put on the mask, the villagers touching their heads to the ground as one. Keeran pulled Arul down. 'Do you want to offend the Gods?'

Forehead on the cool earth, Arul groaned in his stiff embroidered vest. It seemed to him that comfort wasn't a priority during festivals. Rising to his feet, he spotted a line of village girls make their way to the centre of the grove.

'It's Navira!' Arul said. 'And she looks...um...different.'

Keeran smirked. 'So do you.'

Navira wore a white Putavai, a single length of embroidered cotton draped around her multiple times. A string of jasmine flowers hung from her hair, copper bangles shining around her arms. The drumbeat began. Rhythmic. Hypnotic. The girls stamped their feet, ankle bells jangling.

'Are you just going to stand there?' Keeran hissed as he placed two lengths of cloth in Arul's hand-one yellow, one red. The boy's line was already moving towards the Deva Thunthubi, the drummer who kept up a steady beat.

Keeran pulled Arul into line as they stamped and swayed while waving their cloths in unison. As the two lines drew closer, Arul couldn't help but stare at Navira. She looked up at him and smiled as they passed without breaking the dance's rhythm. Arul smiled back, then hurriedly dropped his head, uncertainty gripping him. Chozan's mocking voice playing in his head.

You're not one of us.

The lamps burned steadily as the dancers entered a trance-like state. Perhaps even a sense of the divine. Arul felt as though the world outside the grove faded away, and with it the feeling of being an outsider. Tonight he was one with the village, if only for a while. He only heard the sacred drum and ringing ankle bells. The Deva Thunthubi's fake beard shivering, his head nodding with every drumbeat.

'Do you really think we dance Devarattam because we're descended from the Gods?' Keeran asked in a breathless voice.

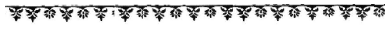
Arul flicked his cloths back and forth, his feet moving to the memorised pattern of the dance. 'That

would be something, wouldn't it? To be divine.' Again his blood surged, as though something was calling him from a distant shore.

The drumbeat rose to a crescendo, rising over the grove and its shining lights, up into the night sky arching over Sailem like a cloud of diamonds, white and brilliant.



Chapter 5



A Secret Plan

It was several days before Arul figured out his plan. One afternoon as he walked with Navira and Keeran, he decided to tell them. Under a sky splashed with purple and yellow, they chatted under a large puli tree, stopping to pick the sour pods. Breaking the hard brown shell, they snacked on the dark flesh, allowing its intense flavour to fill their mouths. Jaya lay down nearby and watched them, sniffing hopefully at the fallen pods. But he was a carnivore, and eating puli didn't quite appeal to him.

Arul took a deep breath of pine scented air, the days becoming colder as autumn took hold. He studied Keeran and Navira as they ate.

This is the right time to tell them.

'I have something really important to tell both of you, so listen up'. He told them of his secret plan while Navira and Keeran listened with incredulous expressions, their chewing motions slowing down quite a bit. 'I'll be better prepared to fight off lions this time. I'll have my bow,' Arul said. 'The thing is, if we don't find a way to stop those predators from invading farms, come winter we'll all starve. If we find poachers driving animals off the mountains because they're after skins, we come back and tell the council. They can organise an armed group to take them on.' Arul stared into the hazy blue foothills. 'I could use your help. We should all go.'

'What do you mean *we* should go?' Keeran whined, the pitch of his voice rising higher as he became agitated. He accidentally bit down on a fragment of puli shell. 'Ow!' He wailed, holding his jaw, spitting the seeds and crushed shell onto the dirt.

'So you'll leave your best friend to wander off to who-knows-where alone?' Navira said. Now *her* voice rose in pitch. 'Don't you care that we're hungry all the time? And what about the smaller children like Kavini? She'll starve.'

Still cradling his jaw, Keeran stepped back a few paces before arguing back. 'Well, it's Arul's plan to find out why some vicious sabre-tooth left the highlands. It's not *my* plan, so why should *I* go?'

'So we'll stay home like a pair of grandmas and *not* help him?' Navira took a step towards Keeran, now hastily retreating.

Arul stepped in. 'Don't force him, Navira.' He held them with his gaze for a moment. 'As for me...well, I figure that the village is in trouble and I want to help out. The scouting expedition is delayed and may never happen.' He stopped talking and pretended to study the ground as a woman carrying a clay pot walked by. Arul continued. 'I think the elders don't know what to do about it, so I think we should. Together.'

Keeran had a guilty expression, but said nothing. Navira looked at Arul with a weak smile. 'Keeran will come around. You'll see, Arul.'

'Okay.' Arul's eyes filled with doubt. 'Thanks anyway.'

The aroma of cooking food and woodsmoke drifted across the village as Arul made off towards his home. Most families would eat nothing but watery soup and vegetables tonight. Crops lay rotting in the

fields and villagers remained terrified of the beasts prowling the outskirts. For Sailem, things were becoming very grim indeed.



Keeran watched Arul walk away then turned to Navira. 'My uncle once told me that Arul's mother disappeared when he was a baby. Just disappeared!'

Navira stared at Keeran. 'That's silly! How can someone just vanish?'

'I don't know, but maybe that's what makes Arul do these crazy things, like chase lions through the mountains.'

'I'm not so sure he's crazy,' Navira said with a thoughtful expression. 'He's so *different*.'



It was almost dinnertime. Arul hungrily sniffed cooking aromas wafting all over the village, the fading light turning the sky a deep red. He was nearly home when he heard a ruckus in the fields to the south. Shouting. A knot of men ran past holding their sickles like weapons. Arul spun around, his hand instinctively dropping to his aruval. Within seconds he was sprinting with the villagers, running towards fields of millet shadowed against the bright snow of the mountains in the distance.

Arul heard a shaky voice protesting energetically. 'I'm not going out there again!' It was Thiraiyan, a farmer who had been harvesting the late summer crop. 'I don't care about the millet! Not with those bears out there!' He paused to peer into the darkening field. 'They're frothing at the mouth! Mad!'

Arul walked to the edge of the field. He could hear the bears growling and snorting, hidden amongst the tall rows of millet. 'Come back here young fellow!' One of the men shouted to Arul. 'It's too dangerous!'

The other men standing around shouted and waved their sickles threateningly at the bears, yet lacked courage to go into the field. One of the field hands stood next to Arul. 'There are other fields not being harvested because of animals coming off the mountains and attacking us. Even an elephant last week! And now our grain store is empty!'

Arul left the farmers arguing amongst themselves, walking home deep in thought. He arrived to the sight of a cosy fire, his Appa cooking a pile of uthappam on a hot metal plate. The large rice pancakes were sprinkled with fried onions and smelt mouth-watering.

Where did Appa get these from?

Arul reluctantly went outside and took a bath, followed by a quick puja before diving into dinner. One never ate without washing and praying. That was custom. They finished the meal with hot mugs of thengai paal, sweet milk flavoured with coconut. Arul drained the cup with relish.

Appa must have done some family a big favour to get all this. I reckon I won't eat like this again for a while.



After dinner, Arul sat outside with his father listening to the chorus of insects in the dark, a small fire crackling noisily between them. He studied his father's face in the firelight, speculating about what thoughts were going through his mind. The pain so obviously haunting him.

Unbidden, a distant image of a woman's face caressed Arul's mind. A long forgotten whisper. It was so fleeting that he barely registered its passing. 'Who was my Amma?' He said rather suddenly.

His father stiffened. 'You know how I feel about that subject, Arul.'

'I know...but all you keep saying is that she left when I was born. Where is she? Why wait to tell me about her? Don't I have a right to know right now instead of when I'm twenty?'

His father shifted to face Arul. 'Because you won't understand...and it may...well...upset you. Yes. You need to be older,' he said with some finality.

Arul fingered his amulet, as he did whenever he was upset, feeling the cool gold disk. Its' curious etchings. He frowned when he thought of all the times he'd asked his Appa where it was from, yet received no answer, just like his questions about his mother.

His father glanced at the amulet. 'Take good care of that. Your Amma didn't leave much behind, but she was very specific that it be passed to you if anything happened to her. She told me that the stone contains your heritage. More than that she did not say.' His voice thickened with grief towards the end and he lapsed into silence. Firelight danced across his face, now etched with sadness.

A gust of wind made Arul shiver, a wave of rustling leaves moving through the nearby plantation like a whisper. The fire sputtered and sparked as if it were angry at the wind for disturbing it.

She left because she didn't love you. You're an outsider without a home. Without a mother. A nobody.

Arul stared at the ground. It was of no use. His Appa would never give him an answer. He felt that some terrible secret full of misery lurked just beyond his sight. Without another word, he rose and went indoors, not even stopping to stroke Jaya. The wolf looked at Arul with pale gold eyes, his head tilted to one side. Arul glanced at the wolf, his face bitter and full of pain.

Even Jaya probably knows more about Amma than I do.





Chapter 6



The Plantation of Elephants

Arul woke with a gasp, his cotton vest soaked with sweat, a relief to be awake. He lay still for a while, breathing deeply until his mind relaxed. Glancing at his sleeping father, he rose in slow motion, without making his rope bed creak. He groped for his leather satchel under his bed, freezing when something inside made a faint noise. His father snorted, but didn't wake up.

So far, so good.

Arul tiptoed outside and put on his well-worn sandals, feeling their comfortable shape over his feet. He was about to put them to good use. The cold night air felt good, waking him up and supercharging his body. Stretching his arms and yawning, he gazed at the incredible view, something he never tired of. To the west, snow-capped mountains towered, glowing white under the half-moon.

From the doorway, Jaya raised his head and watched expectantly. Arul crept to a lean-to beside the hut where a neat pile of firewood lay, pulling out a carefully hidden stack of clothes. He put on his rough hemp cloak, cotton vest, and vetti, washing his face and collecting his weapons that were neatly arrayed against the wall. He crept along the outside of the hut, slinging his satchel over his head, adjusting it so that it rested next to his hip. His walk quickened as he entered the field in front of the hut, dark apart from the faint wash of moonlight. Suddenly from out of nowhere, Jaya rubbed up against his leg. Arul jumped, arrows rattling in his quiver. He hadn't heard Jaya approach, even though he was listening hard for every little sound.

Now to wait for those two. If they ever show up.

In the dark, a glowing cloud of fireflies rose up out of the grass and floated away like so many tiny lanterns. From the gloom of the village garden, Arul saw two shadowed figures make their way through the narrow dirt path. Reaching the field, they stopped to look back at the sleeping village. Keeran and Navira sneaked across the open space, hemp cloaks hanging loose like misshapen skins.

'Have you got everything we need?' Arul hissed to Navira as she approached. As if to answer the question, Keeran, who was a step behind her, stumbled and jerked his bag. It made a tiny rattle which seemed rather loud in the quiet pasture. Navira turned and slapped him on the shoulder.

'Ow!' Keeran protested.

'Shhh!' Navira and Arul said at the same time.

They stood in a circle looking at each other, knowing they were now past the point of getting into serious trouble. They were now in *ridiculous* amounts of trouble. Without warning a large owl swooped overhead with a faint rustling of feathers. 'What was that?' Whispered Keeran, his eyes round with fear as he crouched low to the ground.

'It's an evil omen, Arul!' Navira squeaked.

'It's just an owl!' Arul snapped. Unlike foresters, who saw the divine in all animal life, village folk saw owls as bringers of misfortune. It annoyed Arul whenever he heard such talk. He sucked in a deep breath and calmed his voice. 'Ready? Then let's go,' Arul said quietly. 'We'll enter the forest down there, away from

the house so Appa won't hear us. Both of you be quiet for goodness sake!

He overheard Navira whisper to Keeran. 'How come Arul isn't scared of owls?'

Arul remembered something he had planned to tell Navira and turned around. 'Oh yes, Navira. I know you like to have your way and shout everyone down, but out here you need to listen to me if you want to live through this.' Navira puffed out her cheeks and glared at Arul. 'Do you understand, Navira? This is serious.'

Navira stepped backwards at the intensity of Arul's voice. She nodded slowly.

Village folk...they don't know the jungle like Appa and I.

'Aren't we forgetting something?' Asked Keeran. Arul stopped and Navira threw Keeran a puzzled look. 'We need to do a puja before setting off. It's only proper,' Keeran said. 'Before such a long journey, we must ask the Sky Mother for help.'

'I thought she's called, Star Mother,' Arul said.

'She's called both. The old language isn't too clear. Sometimes it's written as Star Navigator, whatever that means,' Keeran said, his face turned skyward.

They knelt on the grass and faced the constellation of Orion as it set in the west. 'Sky Mother, please protect us on this journey and look upon us with favour,' Keeran prayed. Then he fished out a small box of turmeric paste and put a yellow dot on Arul and Navira's foreheads. Arul had grown up knowing this puja to the Mother who lived amongst the stars. Now he really hoped she had heard them.

They would need her help in the wild.

Navira and Keeran agreed that Arul would lead. He was far more experienced and better trained than his friends at surviving in the jungle. After all, his father was known as the best forester in the province. The teens walked a little east before moving toward the tree line, now a solid wall of shadows. They merged into the blackness of the plantation, abruptly disappearing from sight as if they had never existed.



Moments later, a lone figure crossed the field and warily followed the Arul into the trees. He paused, listening for a time before plunging into the plantation with barely a sound.

Nearby, the same hunting owl that had swooped over the teens, sat on a high branch, observing the disturbances below. Unfortunately, the humans were far too large to eat. Her dark eyes swivelled, and she went back to hunting mice. She knew that in the wilds, there were larger more bloodthirsty creatures than her.

They would find the humans perfect to eat.



The trio followed a dirt track through scrubby bush for some minutes, suddenly emerging among large jackfruit trees that grew for miles in either direction, towering forty feet or more into the starry night. It was the same plantation that grew behind Arul's home, and he knew it well. Stories told that it had existed before the village was built, but no one remembered who had planted it. Or why.

'We'll wait for dawn,' Arul announced. 'It's not a great idea to travel through the plantation at night.' Navira and Keeran agreed, glancing into the dark with round eyes.

'This place is eerie enough during the day,' Keeran muttered under his breath.

Arul threw off his shoulder bag and dropped his weapons, slumping against a broad tree. High above he could see a cluster of jackfruit in the moonlight, large as human heads. He slid a few feet to the right just to be safe. Keeran and Navira frowned until Arul pointed up. They moved without a word.

Navira opened her bag and pulled out a package wrapped in banana leaf. 'I've been gathering food at

home for two days,' she said. 'I had to be quite sneaky about it too.'

Arul smiled, his stomach rumbling as Navira unwrapped the food. The aroma of freshly cooked pongal flowed out, and they shared the sweet rice meal, gathering their strength for the long trek to come.

'What's that light over there?' Keeran said with his mouth full. Arul followed Keeran's gaze. Yellow firelight flickered through the trees less than a hundred feet away.

'Have they sent someone after us?' Navira said, rising to her feet. Her eyes widened when she saw Arul fitting an arrow to his bow.

'Wait here', he whispered, creeping off towards the mysterious light, moving from tree to tree like a ghost. Closer in, he stood behind a tree and poked his head around its trunk. A man wrapped in a shabdkosh squatted next to a small fire warming his hands. Arul stepped out from behind the tree with his bow pointed down, ready but unthreatening. The man stirred and pulled his travelling cloak from his head, revealing a bald head and black robes. Arul's brow furrowed.

A priest? Out here?

He warily stepped into the circle of firelight. 'Good-day Sir!'

The stranger didn't appear to be surprised. Arul involuntarily stepped back when he saw the man's eyes glittering like shards of glass. 'Hello, Young Master', he said. 'What brings you into the wild?'

Arul paused. 'Um...well, we're hunting tomorrow, so we made camp in the area.' The stranger merely nodded.

'And you? You look like a priest, Good Sir,' Arul said.

'I am indeed.' The bald man studied Arul's inquisitive face. 'There are old temples in the hills beyond this plantation. I'm on a pilgrimage to visit them.'

'I see,' Arul replied. 'Well, good luck and safe travels. I'm sorry we haven't much food to offer you.' In truth, he felt uncomfortable around this priest. A creeping sense of malice.

The travelling priest smiled, his eyes never leaving Arul. 'What is your name?'

'Arul, Sir.'

'And your clan name? Who are your people?'

Arul frowned. 'I have no clan, Sir.'

The man stared into the trees. 'No clan? That's odd, even for mountain-folk.'

'My father is only known as Ori. More than this I do not know,' Arul said.

'I'm sorry I cannot offer you more hospitality, but as you can see I have few belongings.' The man smiled a little thinly. 'Good hunting to you, young man.' Arul waved goodbye and hurried back to his friends, glad to be away from the priest.

'He's just some travelling holy man,' Arul said when he returned to his camp. He didn't tell Keeran and Navira how unsettled he felt.

Why scare them.

Navira cast a long, curious look at the priest's campfire before settling down to sleep. Arul felt comforted that Jaya was patrolling, invisible in the plantation's gloom. He still felt uneasy and kept his spear under his hand as he fought to stay awake. Something seemed to be pressing in on him. Putting him to sleep. He huddled under his blanket.

When did it become so cold?

The cold increased steadily, creeping in like a fog. Arul shivered as the air turned dark and the fire faded away as though a mist shrouded it.

A nightmare. Again.

A human figure wreathed in black smoke drifted towards him.

It's the priest!

Arul fought to grab his spear, but his limbs refused to budge. The priest smiled and put out his hand. Reaching for Arul's throat.

He's after my amulet!

Arul lay paralysed, a look of horror twisting his face. Unable to scream. Unable to move a single finger. The priest lifted Arul's amulet from under his vest, his eyes empty and black like a cobra.

Then Jaya's dangerous growl sounded from behind the priest. The man dropped Arul's amulet and spun around, Jaya holding the man's gaze and stepping forward, his neck fur standing up.

The priest muttered incantations in a strange language, waves of black energy seething towards Jaya like thin fingers. The mountain wolf tilted his head, as though amused. Suddenly there was a brilliant flash of light around Jaya and the priest was flung back. 'This can't be!' He wailed, gathering his dishevelled robes and fleeing into the dark.



Arul woke with a cry, Jaya's wet nose pressing his cheek, cold autumn air making his skin prickle. Opening his eyes, he saw long beams of golden sunlight piercing the spaces between the trees. A light dew covered the ground like crystals, reflecting the rising sun.

Arul jerked upright. Beside him, Keeran and Navira were still sleeping.

I must have fallen unconscious. All of us by the look of things.

His gaze slid over Jaya. 'Was that a dream or did you really fight that priest?' Jaya caught Arul's eye for a second, then yawned and turned away, as though he was unwilling to reveal himself.

'Well, I can't understand wolf anyway.' Arul shook his head to clear it, then leapt up and grabbed his spear. He ran over to the priest's campsite, an equal mix of anger and fear coursing through him. A blackened heap of ashes lay where the fire had been, but no sign of the stranger.

Not even footprints in the soft earth.

Arul walked back to his friends, deep in thought. He pulled out his amulet, turning it so that the red gem at its centre caught the light. Inside the stone, a blood-red flame flickered and vanished in the time it took to blink. His head jerked back.

What's that?

Putting his amulet back under his vest, he neared their campsite, his course of action decided.

I'm not going to tell the others about that dream, or whatever it was. Imagine how Keeran would react.

Back at camp, a large gathering of crows sat on a low branch and screamed at the teens. Keeran threw a pebble, which only made them caw louder. He yelled at the crows until a warning look from Navira silenced him. Arul was glad Navira was with them. He held Jaya's sleek head and looked into his eyes. 'Well boy, now the journey really begins. Stay sharp for all of us, okay?'

The wolf padded ahead, then turned with an expression that seemed to say, *what else would I do? Wolves are always sharp.*

'So, what's to stop your Appa from catching us?' Navira inquired as they packed up. 'I mean, he could easily do that couldn't he?'

Arul hefted his leather bag. 'He could...except that last night I told him I was going hunting before dawn. Viyan the Headman also asked Appa to go to Karur and escort the Royal Scouts to our village.'

'So he won't be able to catch up with us when he returns in a few days and finds us gone,' Keeran said, patting Arul on the back with a smile.

'I hope so,' said Arul.

Grey dawn gave way to bright morning, colour seeping back into the landscape, lighting up spiky green

jackfruit high in the trees, the flash of brightly coloured parrots. Dark red earth. Arul smiled and felt a surge of pure joy. He was always happiest out here.

The fruiting season was ending, but there were still a few jackfruit left on the trees. Using his legs and arms to grab onto a tree trunk, Arul made his way up like a giant insect. Keeran placed his hands on his hips and gazed up. 'He's almost as good as me when it comes to climbing.' Navira rolled her eyes.

'Look out!' Arul yelled. A huge spiky fruit thumped onto the grass.

Arul shimmied down the trunk and leapt off with a grin. He used his aruval to cut the fruit into small squares, yellow and ripe. The sticky sap covered his fingers and soon he had a large pile of fruit.

They portioned the pile out equally, wrapping the pieces in lengths of cloth. 'I think we have enough food to last awhile,' Arul said, shaking his gluey hands.



Onwards they trekked through the deserted plantation as the sun climbed into a clear sky, now streaked with wisps of cloud. Hordes of insects buzzed around the rotten jackfruit, scattered like green and yellow melons. 'This smell is awful!' Keeran cried as he tied a piece of cloth over his face, making a gagging sound as though he was ready to vomit.

Navira shook her head. 'Will you just shut up?'

The plantation had a road of sorts running in a straight line north, long disused and barely visible in the undergrowth. Arul paused and surveyed the path.

Better to move unseen, away from the path in case they come after us with a search party.

Towards late morning Arul froze when a distant roar echoed through the plantation. Keeran grabbed Navira's arm, his eyes wild with fear. 'It's almost half a mile away,' said Arul. 'It won't bother us.'

'I'm not so sure about that,' said Keeran. 'But I think I know why the village stopped gathering jackfruit.' Arul nodded.

If only the elders would get villagers to harvest these trees with armed escorts. Then no one will go hungry. The elders just stick to doing nothing and arguing.

The trees began to thin out and wild scrub filled the land. Arul wondered why the village of Sailem had such a large plantation when they couldn't possibly eat so much fruit. It was as if someone else had planted it long ago to feed a city, then forgotten about it. There were many mysteries scattered about Kumari Kandan's landscape. Most people in the village never really thought about it.

Unlike most people, Arul thought about things quite a bit.

'This place is massive!' Exclaimed Keeran, crunching over a carpet of fallen leaves.

Arul didn't take notice of him. He cocked his head and listened to a shuffling noise coming from some way off. Jaya turned in the same direction and began to growl, his tail held low. Arul's eyes widened when he realised what was causing the sound. 'Quick! We have to find a tree *now!*' He yelled.

His friends stared with puzzled expressions. 'Why?' Navira asked, defiance creeping into her voice.

Arul dropped his spear and slung his bow over his shoulder. 'Just hurry up and follow me! There's no time!' Meanwhile, Jaya bolted away onto a thicket, unwilling to face what was coming.

Arul was already running towards a climbable tree. Leaving his spear on the ground, he easily reached the lowest branch and waited for his friends. Pulling them up, his eyes narrowed towards the direction of the shuffling noise. 'We have to go higher.' Navira and Keeran blinked and looked even more puzzled. but up they climbed until they found a large branch able to seat all three.

'What are we doing up here exactly?' Navira asked in an irritated voice.

'Shhh!' Arul shot back. Before she could retort, Keeran tugged Navira's arm and pointed down. A column of elephants wound their way through the abandoned plantation, their enormous grey bodies

nearly invisible under the dappled shadows.

They watched the giant animals snort and huff their way under the tree. 'Be very quiet.' Arul mouthed silently to his friends

An enormous bull elephant with curved tusks walked at the head of the column. The King's army would have treasured him as a mighty war-elephant. It stopped and lifted its trunk, sniffing at the unusual scent of humans. Then flapping its ears like great fans, it lumbered past.

The teens waited in the tree until the elephants were out of sight, leaving behind a trail of broken branches and trampled grass. Navira turned to Arul, her eyes full of wonder. 'I didn't know there were elephants so near our village.'

'I haven't seen them before either. Maybe they found water or something,' Arul replied.

Or they're disturbed by the same thing that's driving sabre-tooth lions off the mountains

'I think they'll leave us alone,' Keeran said hopefully.

But the bull elephant had other ideas. Circling around the teens silently, he came up on their tree from behind. His battering-ram of a head slammed into the tree trunk with a hideous crunch. Navira screamed as she clutched the branch, her body slipping sideways. Arul grabbed her just as she began to fall off, her eyes wide with horror. They held on grimly as the elephant backed away for another charge. Just as it lowered its massive head, Jaya started growling.

The furious elephant halted, ears held outwards. Listening. It swung his massive body about. Jaya bared his teeth and growled again, challenging the giant. Without warning, the elephant sped after Jaya. Arul clenched his jaw, feeling helpless.

'Ganesha help us! That giant is going to kill Jaya!' Cried Navira.

Arul put a hand on her shoulder. 'He'll be fine. You'll see.' He lied. The truth was, he had no idea how Jaya would do against the enraged giant.

They watched Jaya dodge away, running in a zigzag pattern to confuse the beast. He kept challenging the elephant, leading it away from Arul and his friends. Soon there was no sign of wolf or elephant.

Jaya saved us. He's brilliant!

Arul waited for a good while before he climbed down, looking for signs of the elephants. The jungle appeared quiet. He collected his spear and waited for Navira and Keeran to climb down, their faces drawn.

All the same, Arul cast worried glances in the direction Jaya and the elephant had run off. Keeran shaded his eyes. 'Shouldn't we go and find Jaya?'

'Um...I don't think so,' Arul said. 'If that herd catches our scent again, they'll attack for sure.'

'So Jaya will catch up with us later?' Navira asked.

Arul nodded. 'I hope so. I don't know what I'd do if something happens to him.'



They camped at the north end of the plantation before dusk fell. Arul used his flint to spark a fire, and soon it crackled to life, smoke filling the gaps in the wood and flowing up in thin columns. They huddled close to the flames, eating the last of the sweet pongal rice. Navira had found some wild mangoes, which were delicious, the sticky juice dribbling down their chins as they feasted. They kept the fire burning all night. Fire was the one thing that frightened animals. That was basic forester knowledge.

'I think it'll take a few hours to climb to the high forest tomorrow,' Arul said, staring into the yellow flames. 'After that, I think we'll sleep up in trees to be safe.'

Keeran's eyes became wider. 'Err...why would we need to do that?'

Arul gaze lingered west. The sky flared deep red against the shadowy bulk of the mountains, the buzzing of thousands of night insects filled the air with a deafening chorus. 'Well...so that bears and tigers can't get

to us. I think snakes could reach us though,' he said.

Keeran stood up. 'Wha...snakes?'

Navira smiled at Arul, her face looking a little mysterious in the firelight.

She's really quite pretty...when she's not yelling.

Arul blushed and let his gaze fall. In the twilight, they unrolled their woven sleeping mats after Keeran had calmed down. Arul stood at the edge of the pool of firelight and whistled to Jaya. His wolf melted out of the jungle like a shadow, fresh blood smeared on his mouth from hunting. Arul took a deep breath.

Thank Vishnu he's alive.

They lay down and stared up at the sky as it turned from deep blue to black. '*Paveli Mantalam...*the celestial river of milk.' Arul murmured, mesmerized by the vast band of stars stretching the whole length of the sky. The air was very still and clear, and the stars shone with barely a shimmer. It was as though they were leaning close, trying to whisper something.

Keeran watched Arul thoughtfully, eyes shining under the starlight. 'Did you know that Vishnu created the earth when he plunged into the cosmic ocean in animal form? He often becomes an animal to visit his creation.' Navira turned to gaze at Jaya with a frown.

'It sounds like Vishnu cares for us more than most Gods,' said Arul.

'Well, he did create our home, so of course he's going to help us' Navira said.

They lapsed into silence, which deepened and settled over them like a dream. To Arul it felt that anything was possible. The night wind sighed through the darkened trees and deep emotion stirred in his soul. It seemed as though part of his being suddenly leapt from his body and fled to the stars. Under his vest, a tiny point of light glowed deep inside his mother's gem, shining with the same light that streamed from the glittering points of lights in the heavens.

Fallen starlight.



Chapter 7



Wildflowers in the Grass

Dawn broke in a fiery red spectacle, lighting the scattered clouds like burning *vimana*, the flying craft of Kumari Kandam's ancient mythology. Arul gazed east and imagined those legendary ships landing in clouds of fire and smoke.

That must have been something to see. If it were true.

The trio made a quick snack of leftover mangoes, leaving an untidy pile of yellow skins on the damp ground. Bright green parrots eyed the discarded skins hungrily, waiting for the teens to leave.

The friends neared the northern edge of the plantation by midday, when the white disc of the sun hung overhead. It was surprisingly warm for autumn. The plantation was overgrown with creepers winding around the trees, strangling them in slow motion. Ranks of tall grass sprouted between the trees like an invading army, purple heads nodding as one.

One day it will return to wilderness, Arul thought. Maybe in the end, nature will reclaim everything. Every trace of human life.

A faint shiver passed through his body. 'I think it's safe to follow the road now,' he said.

'If you think its ok, its fine by us,' Keeran said.

Arul nodded. *They trust me more out here than they did back in the village.*

They re-joined the path which by now had become a stone road, although it was caked with mud and rarely used. There was a collapsed stone arch which once marked the northern edge of the plantation. The ruins gazed out over an expanse of green rolling hills, climbing towards the Ancient Forest in a series of gentle ridges.

Arul couldn't read the finely chiselled script on the broken archway, but he figured that this had been an important road a long time ago. Apart from a few hunters and forest rangers, no one used the road now. He gazed over the familiar hills, his heart surging with energy.

Jaya thought differently. Warily sniffing at the hills, he seemed reluctant to continue. Arul scratched Jaya's ears. 'C'mon boy! A mountain wolf can't be scared of a few hills.'

They walked the twisting road as it climbed ever higher. 'This is incredible!' Navira said, pointing to the hills on either side. The most vibrant mass of alpine wildflowers they had ever seen covered the slopes. Arul smiled at her then turned his face into the chill wind blowing steadily from the mountains.

'I can breathe again!' Shouted Keeran, opening his arms wide and twirling around. 'The plantation was so stifling with all of that stinking fruit.' Navira gazed at the great clusters of purple and yellow flowers surrounded them, her face full of joy.

Even in Arul's dreams, he had never imagined a place like *this*. He sniffed at the faint perfume which the breeze carried in great eddies over the hills and into the dazzling blue sky. Arul knelt and touched the paving.

I've always felt that this place has a sad feel to it.

He waved to Keeran and Navira to follow him. 'If we keep to this road we'll find the entrance to the



The road cut through the green land like a brown scar, bits of stonework visible under centuries of dirt. Grass rippled like waves on an endless green sea on all sides, the wind cold and untainted. The sun was still high when they climbed a rise and saw the Ancient Forest, a canopy of emerald bordered by mountains. Ahead, the road plunged into the dark mass of giant trees and was lost to sight. Arul stared into the gloom, a cold sweat glistening on his face as dark memories of the lion attack surfaced.

At the point where the road entered the forest, a tumbledown stone arch stood guard. Navira leant close and squinted at faint words set into the weathered stone. Green moss covered everything, including stone creatures of myth so finely chiselled, it was as though they were alive.

‘What does it say?’ Navira asked Arul, running her fingers down a carved snake wrapped around one of the pillars.

‘I asked Appa the same thing. He didn’t know.’

‘Maybe Guru Pari does,’ Keeran suggested. He uneasily eyed a fierce tiger carving on a half-buried stone. Arul touched the feathery moss gently.

I should carve new words on it. This is where the sabre-tooth lion almost killed Arul, son of Ori.

Arul’s face darkened as they walked the long curving path up to the line of trees, Navira fixing his eyes with a concerned expression.

Jaya stood ahead and examined Arul with his bright eyes. *Are you ready for this? You will not be the same when you leave this forest.*

Arul blinked. He knew something had brushed his consciousness, but wasn’t sure what. It felt like Jaya.

‘So, this is it! The highland forest!’ Navira declared loudly. ‘I’ve never been this far from home.’ Her voice seemed to shrink a little.

‘Yeah...neither have I,’ said Keeran hesitantly. ‘And I don’t think I want to.’

‘Are you sure we’ll be safe in there? I mean...with the lions and all?’ Navira said as her gaze slid to the trees.

Dark moss covered the road, and huge tree roots had broken the pavement like smashed pottery. Scattered beams of sunlight pierced the thick canopy and struggled to illuminate the ground.

‘It’s easy,’ Arul reassured them. ‘I’ve been in here lots of times and had no problems. Well...until the last time...’ His voice trailed off.

Navira and Keeran stood where the road plunged into the leafy gloom. Arul glanced at them.

It’s as if they’re afraid that they’ll wake the forest.

Arul whispered to Jaya and pointed into the trees. The wolf knew what to do and sped off into the forest like a ghost, dappled shadows flashing over his ebony fur.

The teens sat by the path and waited for Jaya to return. A damp earthy scent drifted on the air, mingling with the smell of living things. The forest echoed with sound. Keeran stared into the forest, as though looking harder might reveal something more of the strange place.



It was well past lunch, so they snacked on pieces of jackfruit from the plantation. The yellow fruit had a peculiar flavour—a sweet mix of banana and mango. It helped fill their growling bellies, at least for the time being.

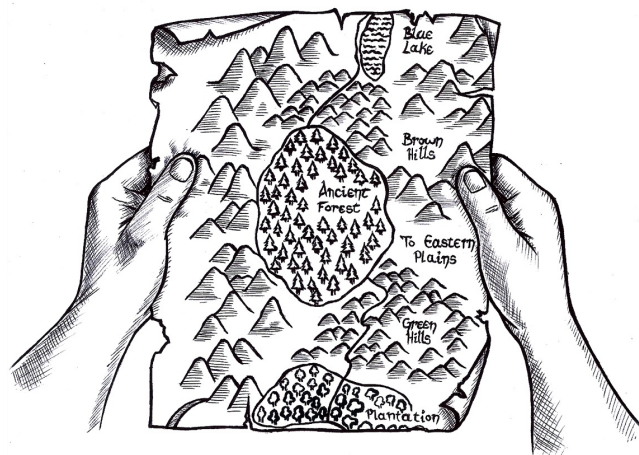
A small shrine dedicated to Ganesha the elephant god stood to one side of the entrance. Arul gaze settled on its blackened stone, weathered to near shapelessness over the centuries. Ganesha was stained with

traces of faded yellow paste, daubed by travellers long ago. Arul glanced sideways at Navira as she looked curiously at the elephant.

‘I wonder how long this Ganesha has been standing here?’ Navira said. The boys shook their heads. As they stood before it and said their silent prayers, Arul felt that they were going to need Ganesha’s help in the forest. Ganesha was after all, the remover of obstacles.

‘After Jaya returns from scouting, we’ll follow the road for about two days to reach the end of the valley. Then we’ll come out into the Brown Hills. Another day or two from there and we should reach the high mountain passes. We’ll find some kind of answers, I hope,’ Arul said.

He rummaged around his bag and pulled out a small piece of folded tan leather. Spreading it on the grass, he called the others to look at it. It was a crude map of the highlands, drawn in black ink.



‘Where did you get this from?’ Keeran asked in amazement.

‘I...the thing is...’ Arul mumbled, ‘I stole it from Appa.’

Keeran gave a soft whistle.

‘So I know where I’m going!’ Arul proudly said, jabbing his finger on the map.

‘But Arul, you haven’t actually been *past* the forest. You said so yourself,’ Navira said.

‘I know what I said!’ Arul shot back. ‘And you don’t have to come with me, you know!’ Immediately, he regretted what he had said. Navira had volunteered to accompany him despite the danger. Stomping off, he searched for branches suitable for spears, whittling them with his aruval, smoothing the sides and sharpening the ends. Soon he had a pair of crude but effective weapons.

‘Here!’ He gave Navira and Keeran a spear each. ‘Practise with these while we wait for Jaya. They could be quite useful in there.’ It was his way of apologising for his outburst.

Navira felt her spear’s weight and tested it out. Keeran simply stared, his face drawn. Scared. Arul took both his friends off the road and instructed them on how to use spears. To stand with a good wide stance, one foot forward of the other.

‘So...will these spears actually *kill* animals?’ Keeran said. Arul’s look confirmed Keeran’s fear. ‘But I can’t kill living creatures! It’s not proper for a Pirāmanar!’ Keeran protested.

Navira leaned on her spear and eyed her cousin with narrowed eyes. ‘And what will you do with your religious vows when a leopard comes for you? Pray?’

‘Keeran, you’re not in Sailem anymore. You’re in the wild. Trust me. Learn to use the spear.’ Arul said. Keeran slowly nodded, his shoulders slumped.

The final technique Arul taught them was how to plant the butt of the spear in the ground while kneeling, so that a leaping predator would hopefully impale itself. Even hunters found that terrifying. Arul figured that throwing spears would have to come later. It was hard to do well.

After an hour of practice they collapsed on the soft grass, the shade of a giant branch cooling them. Arul stared up at the mottled bark, gnarled and lichen covered. He had a feeling that these trees did not recognise time and were very ancient. Old long before his ancestors first stood on the shores of Kumari Kandam.

He listened to the rustling leaves and felt they were talking to him in some secret language. It didn't make sense in his head, but to another deeper part of him, he knew it to be true.

Appa often said to use my feelings and instincts out here. There's more here than I see.

The afternoon sun had long begun its westward march when Jaya trotted out of the forest. He looked at the three teens lying on the grass, wagging his tail and rubbing up against Arul.

Good, he's relaxed. No threat ahead. At least not yet.

Jaya tilted his head and stared at the forest intently. Arul looked at him thoughtfully.

Can he understand the language of the trees?

According to Guru Pari's teachings, the God, Suryan drove the sun like a chariot. Midday had passed and Suryan drove the sun towards the western horizon, as he had since the beginning of the world. Flecks of gold lit up the underside of ragged clouds, and swept along by a rising wind, they fled west towards the sea.

It was time to enter the forest.



Chapter 8



The Ancient Forest

They stood under the boughs of the forest and gazed back at the meadow, its dazzling vistas of flowers framed by a golden sky. Clouds of insects droned over the grass, circling the flowers like moths to lanterns. Arul took a slow, deep breath.

I'll miss the sun.

He took the lead and plunged into the Ancient Forest, fingering his bow, unsure of what he might find, his eyes adjusting to the murky light. Keeran kept so close to Arul that he kept bumping into him, eyes darting about nervously.

Arul tuned to Navira. 'All OK?'

Navira bit her lower lip and furrowed her brow. 'Lead on, Arul. I'll keep an eye on Keeran.' Arul turned away, hiding a curling smile. It was good to have Navira here.

The valley widened until he couldn't see the surrounding mountains anymore. He craned his neck, looking up at the huge trees filling the land on either side of the road. Vines grew up massive tree trunks like giant snakes in the act of crushing their prey. On the floor of the forest, plants of every description struggled to survive in the never-ending twilight.

'Don't touch the shrubs with purple leaves,' Arul said. 'Poison. If it gets on your skin it's bad news. Keeran shied away from the plant and covered his mouth. Arul sighed, 'And you don't need to hold your breath.'

Navira paused and tilted her head back. The boys followed her gaze and stared at the leafy canopy suspended a hundred feet above. Screeching echoed from the vast green ceiling, unseen amidst a maze of branches stretching for countless acres.

'Smells funny,' said Navira. 'Like we're living *inside* the soil, if you get my meaning.'

Arul laughed. 'You mean it smells as though we're inside something living?' It felt that he had stepped into a living temple. A sanctuary from the outside world and a reminder of what the earth once was.

Untamed. Wild.



As the Sun dipped a little lower in the sky, the figure of a man walked to the forest entrance and peered into the jungle. A deep hood shadowed his face, his robes displaying signs of much wear. With a lowered head he reached out and put a hand on the nearest tree, as if listening to something very faint. The air stirred under the boughs like a deep sigh, the forest seeming to take a great breath. After standing motionless for some time, the stranger slipped into the darkening forest.



The teens made good progress in the failing light. The road itself was broad and straight, although the jungle had long since ruined the paving stones. They often stumbled on the uneven surface and needed to

stay watchful. From time to time the trio had to walk around some monstrous tree that had grown onto the path, as though the forest intended to destroy every trace of man's work.

They often stumbled on tree roots which crisscrossed the stone road like thick ropes. Haloes of light streamed through gaps in the canopy, tiny squirrels skittering across the great boughs. On the ground, startled forest deer bounded away with flashes of brown fur, huge eyes darting about nervously.

Soft green light filtered down through the leaves like falling rain. The unsettling thing was that they couldn't tell the time of day. It was like being in a twilight without end. 'We should reach a stream before dark. There's a tree-platform not far from this road that Appa and I built three autumns ago.'

'Let's hope the monkeys haven't taken it over,' Keeran mumbled.

They reached the stream that Arul mentioned just as the light grew too dim to continue. Over the water the trees arched together like a living ceiling. 'These trees wider than entire houses!' Keeran said, blinking as though his eyes had deceived him. Emerald moss flowed around scattered boulders like a sea. They stood transfixed by the sound of flowing water. It was like thousands of tinkling bells ringing all at once.

'This place is...' Navira's voice trailed off into a whisper.

'It is, isn't it?' Arul replied with a soft smile. He knew what she was trying to say. It was beyond words.

The water was cool and clean, allowing them to refill their waterskins. With great relief they washed and drunk to their hearts' content. Enormous red dragonflies buzzed over the water like flying gems, darting between the teens and startling Jaya.

'This place isn't so bad, Arul!' Keeran shouted, his lanky body half submerged in the water like some oversize crab. 'Your stories were scaring me!' He laughed. Startled by the sudden noise, a flock of parrots flashed over them in an emerald cloud. Arul looked at him silently. Keeran had no idea of the terrors that inhabited the wild.

Just before the sun vanished, for a brief moment, brilliant shafts of yellow light filled the forest like shafts of gold. Jaya stood in the water, and snapped at a school of shimmering fish, scattering them like fireflies in the settling dusk.

Keeran and Navira silently gazed at the wondrous light as Arul found his bearings. Using the stream as a guide, he found the very same tree him and his Appa had used as a base two years ago. Perched high between forking branches, a log platform was barely visible amongst the leaves.

Darkness came fast, veiling the forest from their eyes. They ate a small meal of Navira's crumbling idli rice cakes and gooseberries. The berries were rather tart and made them screw up their faces as they chewed. There was much to eat in the forest if one knew what to pick, but eating the wrong fruit could lead to a terrible death. Appa's forester wisdom. Arul never forgot to heed that advice.

Keeran and Navira yawned, nodding off where they sat, thoroughly exhausted.

Arul stared up through the tree canopy, stargazing long after the others had nodded off. He fell into a troubled sleep, only to wake near midnight. It was almost pitch black on the forest floor, but overhead through a gap in the branches, he saw something wondrous. The glittering stars of the Seven Sages. He yawned and wondered what it would be like to fly all the way to the stars. Something in his soul yearned for the stars with an intensity that surprised him. He held his circular amulet and felt a very faint vibration coursing through it.

It felt good.

Comforting.

Amma, is that you?

Arul's eyes closed, thoughts washing away like an outgoing tide in the dark.

Deep in the shadows across the stream stood an unmoving stranger in a hooded cloak. For a time he watched the teens high in their perch before moving out of sight. His cloak briefly opened as he turned. From his chest, a tiny light glowed with an unearthly flicker.



Chapter 9



Soul of a Warrior

The teens second day in the forest was a pleasant affair, walking at a leisurely pace deeper into the valley. Here the trees grew ever larger, great giants that brushed the sky. A shower of autumn leaves floated past like flakes of gold, swirling through the trees before settling on the ground in a carpet of gold. They danced through it with abandon, laughing with arms outstretched.

Arul stopped and watched Navira as though in a trance. Her long hair spinning free, face upturned into the light. The moment fled and Arul hurriedly turned his face away. But something remained. A tingling on his skin whenever he thought of her. And that was happening more frequently, although he tried to deny it to himself.

They were fortunate enough to collect a good supply of wild mangoes and berries as they went. Keeran refused to step off the road to help them gather the fruit. 'They're giant snakes out there!' He called out. 'I'll keep an eye out from here!' Navira snatched a rotten fig and drew her arm back, Arul grabbing her wrist just in time.

Once they thought they heard a distant roar of a tiger. 'It's the wind,' Arul said, trying to reassure his friends. That didn't stop Keeran from peering about the forest for the rest of the day, his nerves on edge.

As the late afternoon brought deeper shadows to the forest, Arul felt a growing sense of unease that he couldn't quite figure out. He gripped his spear tight, glancing at the nervous faces of his friends. Twice Jaya froze, his growling making Arul shiver.

The forest eventually thinned and the trees changed. Narrower, with bark the colour of faded ivory. To Arul, it looked like they were passing through a giant palace filled with white columns. The wind became noticeably colder, and he realised that he had never been this far before. It was an uneasy feeling, walking into country that felt alien.

As the light faded into deep orange, and Arul figured it was time to look for a safe place for the night. But the trees were smooth and straight. Unclimbable. 'Let's camp on the road,' he told Navira and Keeran.

'That's good thinking. It'll allow us to see anything coming,' Navira said. Arul smiled. She was learning fast.

They dropped their packs and set about gathering wood. 'Be sure and keep your spears with you,' said Arul.

Arul placed the collected twigs in a pyramidal heap then rummaged about for his flint. 'We'll have to take turns staying awake tonight,' he said, striking the flint against a small stone. Keeran knelt and placed dry leaves in the path of the sparks. Faster and faster the sparks flew until a tiny column of smoke rose uncertainly into the cool air. Arul gently blew on the struggling fire before adding more kindling.

Soon a yellow flicker shone under the pile of twigs, and it wasn't long before it lit the campsite with a comforting glow. 'Why not let Jaya guard us?' Asked Keeran as he watched the flames. 'Why do we have to stay awake?'

'We won't have the protection of being up in a tree,' Arul answered with a hint of irritation.

‘Oh, I forgot. No tree.’ Keeran was already reaching for his spear, holding it tight, his eyes flicking to the line of trees. ‘Protection from what? What lives around here?’

‘What do you think, dummy?’ Navira snapped.

‘Just asking...’ Keeran replied in a sulky voice. He slumped to the ground, still holding his spear close. Seated around the fire, they feasted on the forest foods they had collected. Small blood coloured berries, yellow guavas, and bush mangoes.

Arul touched the cold paving stones beneath him and wondered about its ancient builders.

How I would love to talk to them. I’m only a thousand years too late.

The last remnants of sunlight vanished from the sky and a quarter moon rose, peeping from behind the leaves. The moonlight created a web of shadows that danced on the forest floor, shivering one moment and completely still the next. Under the moon the trees shone like bleached bones. Silent. Watchful.

Arul grew more uneasy with each passing hour.

‘I’ll take watch first,’ volunteered Navira, hefting her spear and standing. Jaya moved next to Navira and let her rub his ears, and they both kept watch as Arul curled up on the ground.



When the moon was high overhead, Navira woke Arul. He groaned and raised himself on one elbow, throwing more wood on the fire. Beyond the circle of light, the forest was in deep shadow, the glittering eyes of small creatures scurrying through the underbrush. Arul sat up and felt for his spear, its copper tip shining dull in the flickering light.

‘Okay, I’m ready to take watch,’ he told Navira.

She lay down with her spear next to her and closed her eyes. ‘Finally I can sleep.’

Arul began to work on his spear with a small whetstone. He poured a little water on it first and carefully sharpened the weapon until its edges were like a razor. Then he did the same with his aruval knife, the scraping noise jarring his ears. His eyes constantly flicked up to scan the dark trees, ears tuned for the slightest disturbance. With a satisfied expression, he inspected the glittering curve of his aruval.

When he glanced up again, he noticed something odd.

No animals in the underbrush. Nothing in the trees.

Arul stopped sharpening his knife and listened hard, the hair on his arms standing on edge. The jungle had become eerily silent. Jaya started to growl, a mix of fear and aggression. Fear seemed to be winning.

Arul’s eyes flicked to Jaya with a rising sense of panic. The wolf was backing away with his teeth bared, his hair standing up along his neck. Very few things would cause a wolf the size of Jaya to back away.

That was bad.

He knows something’s watching us from the dark.

The warning scream of a nearby monkey sounded. Arul stood up very slowly and stepped backwards in a crouch. He kicked Keeran in the leg. ‘Wha...?’ The sleeping boy murmured. A second kick made him sit bolt upright.

‘Wake Navira now!’ Arul whispered. ‘Something’s out there!’

He quickly added all of the remaining wood to the fire and watched it flare up. By now Navira was grumpily waking up as Keeran shook her. ‘Go away,’ she mumbled.

A deep growl rolled across the campsite.

Arul’s chest tightened.

It sounded close.

Keeran and Navira moved so fast that Arul jumped in surprise. In a blink they were standing next to him with their spears at the ready. Navira rubbed her face hard. When her hands dropped, dread filled her face.

'What is it? What is it?' She kept hissing at Arul.

Arul raised a finger to his lips. 'Shhh! *Tiger!*'

The growling moved in a wide circle, always keeping out of the light, seeking a way in. The teens huddled closer, spears pointed outwards as they turned to follow the sound.

The growling changed to a low rumbling that went into Arul's bones.

Then silence.

A look of horror filled Arul's eyes. *I know what's going to happen now.*

Jaya's growling faded. Holding his body close to the ground he slunk into the darkness. Arul stared at Jaya with dismay.

He knows he's no match for this tiger. He wants to survive.

Arul slid behind the fire without making sudden movements. His heart jumped hard in his chest, fear squeezing his lungs. Navira and Keeran stuck close as though glued to him, the flames their only protection. Straining to see into the darkness beyond the fire, they finally saw it.

Two unblinking eyes.

Glowering lamps, deep gold in the dark.

The predator paused, then stepped forward into the pool of firelight, unsure of the flames. Keeran's eyes were bulging with fear. His spear wobbled as though made of paper. 'T...ti...tiger...' He stammered.

A deep rumbling came from inside the tiger's chest. Its enormous striped hide rippled in the firelight, hinting at its incredible strength. Shining eyes fixed on the teens, draining their will to fight.

A Royal Forester's legs wouldn't shake like this.

Arul felt ashamed of his reaction. But it didn't help. His fear grew like an expanding ripple. He knew that from where it stood, the tiger could reach them with a single bound. Tears flowed, his legs shaking violently. Instinctively he grasped his amulet, squeezing the engraved gold disc.

His mother's gem.

A tremor passed through his body. A surge of something.

His shaking subsided and his mind became clear, like a bowl of dirty water left to settle. The briefest flicker of something approaching recognition crossed the beast's shining eyes. *I see you, child. But I must fulfil my karma.*

Arul shook his head.

Did that tiger speak to me?

With hunched shoulders, the tiger stalked them around the fire, its eyes watching Arul. The teens huddled together and mirrored the creature's moves. 'Stay behind the fire! It's our only chance!' Arul croaked, his throat like sand.



The tiger became enraged and released an ear-splitting roar, designed to rattle its prey. Keeran's knees gave way and he collapsed onto the ground, covering his head with his arms. Navira continued to stand by Arul, although by now she was sobbing in fear.

Arul felt as though he was made of stone.

Rooted to the spot.

Never in his life had he felt this kind of terror.

Then, as if to counter the fear, from somewhere deep, Guru Pari's teachings echoed.

Fear will take away my mind. It must not win. I will let it pass over me.

Arul knew that what he decided now would allow them to live.

Or die.

His face grim, Arul drove the butt of his spear into the ground, its point facing the tiger, motioning for Navira to do the same. With great force of will, she went down on one knee with her spear jammed into the earth, shoulder to shoulder with Arul.

The tiger crouched on the far side of the fire and tensed its massive rear legs.

It roared and leapt over the fire in a perfect arch, scattering sparks into the night like clouds of fireflies.

Its drawn claws shone white and cruel, searching for soft flesh to tear. Long dagger-like canines flashed from its open mouth.

Navira shrank back and closed her eyes.

Instead of meeting human flesh, the tiger fell onto the spears, sharpened bamboo driving into its chest. Arul and Navira cowered under the spears for an instant before scrambling out of reach of the vicious claws. The spears snapped like twigs, explosive cracks echoing through the jungle.

The beast roared. Impaled, it thrashed about desperately, its violent movements causing Arul's spear to work its way into its heart, piercing it fatally. The tiger died with a moan that faded like a sighing wind. Arul cried as he watched.

The tiger's life force fled into the forest with a wave of raw power that made even Keeran gasp. Arul felt it pass like the touch of an invisible breeze, although he was unsure of what it was. He suddenly understood what the tiger was trying to tell him.

It died without sadness or regret. Somehow, I know that. It was our karmic destiny to meet and battle to the death here.

Arul's legs gave way. Clutching his amulet, he fell back, shaking uncontrollably. There followed an awful silence, interrupted by a stifled sob from Navira. The horrible smell of singed fur wafted up from under the dead tiger, its body smothering the fire. Keeran rose to his feet unsteadily and wiped his eyes.

Jaya had vanished without a trace. Darkness pressed in as they huddled together on the forest road, so small and lost in that immense forest of pale trees. The moon emerged from behind a cluster of ragged clouds, bathing the forest in a pitiless cold light.



Chapter 10



Kidnapped

What was left of the night seemed to pass painfully slowly, like the steady drip of water from a roof during the monsoon rains. Arul's face sagged with relief when finally the grey light of dawn crept into the forest, uncertain at first, then building to a glaring intensity. The sunlight revealed the grisly remains of the tiger's corpse, even larger than they had imagined the night before.

Arul struggled to his knees and knelt next to the body. He softly chanted a hunter's prayer that his Appa had taught him. Mountain hunters had passed it down through the centuries and considered it a sacred duty after a kill.

Arul gazed down at Navira and Keeran, tears welling in his eyes.

It's my fault they were nearly killed. If I hadn't brought them into the forest, none of this would have happened.

He thought about turning back right there and abandoning his quest. He felt completely drained, as though part of his life force had fled with the tiger's soul.

'You're injured, Arul!' Navira said. Arul's eyes dropped to his legs, to a bloody line below his knee where the tiger had sliced into him with a single claw. The pain suddenly came in stabbing bursts, Arul face twisting in agony.

Navira grabbed her satchel and produced a leather pouch filled with tiny packets of herbs wrapped in palm leaf. Using her drinking water, she made a paste in her palm and pressed it onto the wound.

'What's that?' Arul asked.

'It's a mixture of plants I made with Inba.'

'So she's your Siddha medicine teacher?'

Navira nodded. 'I think she knows about every plant in the forest.' She finally brought herself to gaze on the fallen animal. 'Arul, I didn't realise you shot it with your bow.'

'What? No...I didn't! My bow is over there, unstrung.' Arul crawled over to the tiger. There in the beast's muscular neck was an arrow. Only not one of his arrows. Someone else's, deeply embedded and fired from close range. Arul touched the wound and felt blood only hours old, thick like syrup. His eyes flicked around wildly, almost in a panic.

Who else is out there?

Keeran put his hand on Arul. 'What's wrong?'

Navira's gaze lifted from the tiger. 'Arul?'

'Someone's following us. Somebody shot the tiger to help us.'

Keeran and Navira's eyes swivelled towards the forest. 'Is he still watching us?' Keeran asked in a squeakier than normal voice.

'He might be,' said Arul. 'I think we should fan out and search for signs of him.'

'Or her,' said Navira.

Keeran guffawed. 'Really? *A her?* Out here?'

Navira smacked his arm. *I'm* here aren't I? And where were *you* when the tiger attacked?'

Keeran dropped his head and shuffled away.

‘You two take this side of the forest. I’ll scout over there,’ Arul said. ‘But don’t lose sight of the road.’ Navira and Keeran nodded and grabbed their spears. Arul watched them move into the trees before turning and crossing the stone road.

I wish Jaya were here. He’d sniff out this person in no time.

He found nothing of the stranger in the surrounding jungle, as if whoever-it-was could move without leaving a trace of their passing. At one point a huge golden cobra glided across his path. It appeared unafraid and raised its head to look at him. Its body shimmered and rippled in the dappled light. Arul knew the ancient stories about Vishnu transforming himself into animals, particularly snakes.

One never knew which animal was divine.

Perhaps all were.

Arul stepped back and went down on one knee, lowering his head. *Bless us on our journey.*

It fixed him with its black eyes and raised its head, swaying back and forth. When Arul looked up, the cobra slid into the undergrowth with a single flick of its tail.

Arul made his way back to the road and waited for Navira and Keeran, chuckling when he heard them crashing through the jungle and arguing. They were still having a heated discussion when they emerged onto the road. ‘Keeran wants to go home,’ Navira said. ‘He’s had enough tigers and elephants for a lifetime, apparently.’

Arul looked at them thoughtfully. ‘I think I’ve caused enough trouble for you. I should have never led you here.’ He dropped his head. ‘Keeran’s right. We need to turn back now.’ He crumpled to the ground and crossed his legs.

I’m not the one to save our village. We nearly died.

He closed his eyes, wishing it would all go away. Then just for a tiny moment, flecks of light glittered around him like moonbeams on water. He felt a hand on his shoulder. A touch that told him it was going to be okay. He thought he remembered that feeling from long ago, but the memory slipped away. Arul turned, thinking it was Navira’s hand. But she and Keeran were deep in conversation some distance away.

Is that you Amma? I’m so tired...

He sighed and stood up. ‘What are you two talking about over there?’

Navira walked over. She was quite angry. ‘If that’s what you and Keeran think, then you can turn around right now. I hope you both find a nice deep hole to hide in for the rest of your lives, because you deserve it!’

‘What about you?’ Arul asked a little timidly.

‘I’ll see you when I get back, because *I’m* going on.’

‘What?! By yourself? In the *wild*?’

‘What do you care, Arul? I don’t know how to survive out there, but I’ll make do.’ Arul stared at her with his mouth hanging open. Keeran kept well back, shuffling about and staring at the ground. ‘Well, goodbye!’ Navira grabbed her spear and pack. Without another word, she stormed off along the forest road and was soon lost to sight.

‘Vishnu preserve us!’ Arul muttered. ‘Keeran! Are we going to let her go off and get killed?’

Keeran jogged over. ‘I want to go home so badly. Nothing will happen to her, right Arul?’

Arul stared at him. ‘Something *will* happen. Believe me.’

Without another word, they grabbed their weapons and packs and raced off after Navira. ‘She’s *your* cousin! Are all your family so stubborn?’ Arul gasped between breaths as they sped along.

‘No! She’s the only one!’

They raced after Navira along the forest road, but it was as if she had simply vanished. Arul slowed, confused. Keeran jogged ahead, calling out to her, his voice echoing through the trees, sounding ridiculously puny.

Arul scanned the ground on both sides of the road, looking for signs of a predator attack. Or much worse, bandits. 'Keeran! Stop yelling and get over here!' Arul called out. He sank to his knees, touching something on the ground and looking into the treeline.

'No sign of her up there,' Keeran gasped, chest heaving.

'I know. She's been kidnapped,' said Arul in a flat voice.

Keeran's face darkened. 'What!? There's nobody to kidnap her out here!'

'There must be. Look!' Arul pointed to a patch of disturbed mud, the plants around it flattened by heavy footsteps. There in an extremely large footprint lay Navira's medicine pouch.

'Oh no...' Keeran whispered. 'A giant took her.'

Arul stood up. 'The trail leads this way into the trees. Three or four men at most.' He began to follow the tracks, occasionally kneeling to touch the earth, fingering broken blades of grass as though they were speaking to him.

Keeran leant over Arul's shoulder. 'Three or four! How will we rescue her?'

'They'll wish they never took her, giant or not.'



They left the forest road and trekked west, Arul moving from shadow to shadow, often pausing to listen carefully. Keeran followed closely, peering over Arul's shoulder, his fear growing with each step.

The trampled grass led through the sparse forest, further and further away from the road. Without so much as a breath of wind, the white trees stood ominously silent. Every sound became shockingly loud. Every snapping twig an explosion.

The trail rose for half a mile then dipped into a secluded bowl-like valley. 'We'd better have a good look at this before we go charging in,' whispered Arul. They stopped behind a vine-choked tree and surveyed the valley. In the middle stood the remains of an ancient temple, surrounded by a murky lake. A single causeway connected it to the surrounding land, the stone blackened with age.

No doubt the temple had been a handsome structure once, but now it was nothing more than a pile of enormous granite blocks spotted with green and yellow lichen. Many blocks had fallen into the scummy water as though an elephant had knocked them over. It was as though time had forgotten this place.

Arul moved forward and crouched behind an outcrop of rocks. He pulled Keeran down. 'We need to be quiet and move very carefully.' Keeran's head bobbed in agreement.

Below them on the causeway stood one of the bandits, a large bearded man dressed in clothes the colour of mud. He carried a tall bamboo spear and kept yawning. Of the other bandits or Navira, there was no sign. Then another man emerged from the temple. A dwarf wearing nothing but a loincloth and a dented sword strapped to his back.

'A giant and a dwarf! What a strange mob,' whispered Keeran as he squinted over the rocks.

Arul pushed Keeran's head down. 'A mob of robbers that will kill us without mercy.'

Keeping low, they crept down the slope into the valley. 'Appa mentioned bandits. He never told me how he took care of them, but I can guess,' Arul whispered. Keeran hissed through his teeth and tightened his grip on his spear.

They reached a heavily wooded area not far from the causeway, hiding in the thick scrub. 'Once we're spotted, we'll have to move fast or they may kill Navira,' Arul whispered.

Keeran looked terrified. 'So what are we going to do?'

Arul leant close and relayed his plan into Keeran's ear.

'You want me to do *what?*' Keeran hissed, his eyes widening.



The dwarf and the giant were deep in conversation when they heard a voice calling them from across the causeway. It was around midday and quite warm for the mountains. A host of cicadas hidden around the valley made a deafening chorus that drowned out even the birds. The bandits shaded their eyes and looked towards the voice. A tall boy stood waving at them cheerily. The bandits smiled at each other through blackened teeth. The strange boy might fetch a handsome ransom. They casually walked towards the teen, so as not to alarm him.



'Pssst! They're walking this way!' Keeran said, still smiling at the bandits. He waved with one arm, while with the other hand he grasped a heavy branch, hidden behind his back. Arul kept very still behind a nearby tree, fingering a bamboo arrow.

He waited until the giant passed him, then loosed a shot at close range. There was no way he could miss. His arrow hit the man's huge leg with a *thunk*. The giant grunted and reached for his thigh, fingers groping for the arrow. He appeared more annoyed than hurt. While he was bent over, Keeran swung his branch and swiped at the robber's head. The branch shattered on the man's skull. He went limp without a sound, toppling forward on his face.

The dwarf stepped back and reached for his sword. It was rusty and caught in its sheath. Arul stepped out from behind cover and pointed an arrow straight at the man's head. The bandit knew when he was defeated. He let go his sword and smiled at the boys with a mouth full of rotten teeth.



They left the two bandits securely tied with their own sashes. Arul covered his nose when he smelled their stink. At Keeran's insistence, they removed the men's vettis and left them naked on the ground. Bandits without clothes seemed less threatening.

Keeran screwed up his nose. 'Yuck! Do these people ever take baths? And this lake around the temple doesn't smell too nice either!'

'Quick! We need to hurry!' Arul said as he raced across the causeway, even as he fitted another arrow to his bow. The stench of stagnant water and rotting things crept across the lake. He paused at the temple's shadowy entrance before peering in.

It was empty.

They crept inside. Every one of Arul's senses became heightened, his body tense. Bundles of stolen goods lay strewn about the uneven floor.

There in the back of the room lay Navira.

Motionless.

'Is she dead?' Keeran whispered, his eyes filling with tears.

Arul threw down his bow and ran over to Navira, putting his ear next to her nose and listening. After a long moment he exhaled sharply. 'Not dead. Sleeping. Or drugged.'

Keeran knelt next to Navira. 'So where are the others?'

'No idea. Maybe off robbing some village. They weren't expecting trouble. Drugged her and left those two guards. I don't know what they used, but Appa says bandits often use the juice of a plant to knock-out

captives.’

‘She must have been really annoyed at them. Good idea to drug her,’ said Keeran.

Arul’s sharp gaze bored into Keeran. ‘What!? A good idea?’

Keeran’s hands waved around. ‘I didn’t mean it like that! You know how she is when she’s angry!’

They tried to wake her, but she refused to stir. Whatever they had forced her to drink had done its work. Arul handed Keeran his bow and picked up Navira, straining under her weight.

‘Let’s get out of here in case the rest of the gang returns.’

They peeked out of the door and looked for signs of other bandits. The way seemed clear. Keeran waved Arul forward and they jogged across the causeway and up out of the valley. But not before Keeran paused to kick the trussed up bandits in the ribs. The giant was still unconscious but the dwarf squealed loudly, his yells echoing through the valley.

‘Keeran! What about your vow of non-violence? You’ve broken it.’

‘I know,’ he replied. ‘The world provokes you into doing these things. It’s more complicated than religious books tell you.’

Arul thought about Keeran’s words as they climbed up the slope.

The world has definitely done some provoking in my direction.

They left the valley behind and reached the forest road just as the sun cast its final light into the sky, the clouds radiant yellow above the forest. The teens hurriedly made camp in a well-hidden thicket some distance from the road.

‘Is she ever going to wake up?’ Keeran said.

‘We’ll just have to wait and see,’ Arul said. He knew it was going to be an anxious night.

Finally, in the grey pre-dawn hours, Navira’s eyes fluttered open. Keeran put a water skin to her lips and she drank greedily. ‘My head...full of stone...it hurts,’ she murmured. Arul and Keeran laughed and cried at the same time, if that was indeed possible.

Arul held her hand and looked down at her. He wiped a tear from his eye and saw Navira looking at him with a softness he had never seen. Meanwhile Keeran spoke a prayer of thanks to Lord Ganesha, remover of obstacles. The elephant God had done them quite a few favours lately.



They were ready to move before dawn’s watery light had brightened much. ‘We need to get out of this forest quickly. Those bandits will be looking for revenge, and their idea of revenge will be...well...nasty,’ said Arul.

Keeran and rubbed his neck. ‘I’d rather not find out.’

But for Arul, first there were a few issues to be sorted out. ‘Wait a moment. I want to say something.’ He took a deep breath. ‘Firstly Navira, don’t ever walk off alone out here. We were lucky this time. Second, does anyone think we should return to Sailem after all of this?’

Keeran and Navira looked at each other for a long moment. Then they turned to Arul. Navira, who was still groggy, spoke in a slow deliberate voice. ‘Arul...you know we weren’t forced to come up here. We actually decided this for ourselves.’

Keeran added his thoughts with a certainty that Arul had never heard before. ‘If we can help the village somehow, then allow us to do so. Allow us to fulfil our karma.’

‘But Navira was *kidnapped!*’ Arul blurted out.

‘Yes, but I was a coward during the tiger attack,’ Keeran said. ‘I don’t want to be like that anymore. That’s why I have to go on.’

Arul rubbed his chin, eyes sliding to Navira.

I've never been tested this much. I always thought I was a tough apprentice forester, ready to face anything. But Navira is a true warrior. She never gives up.

'In any case, the rest of that bandit gang will be searching the forest road for days. We can't go back home,' Navira said.

Arul and Keeran stared at her as an awful realisation dawned on them. The way home was blocked.

Overhead, a large bird with an immense red plume squawked and leapt off a branch, twisting and turning between the trees. 'So let's go! Which way, Master Forester?' Navira said with a gentle smile.

Arul hesitated. 'Thanks...that really means a lot. That you want to keep going. I feel so stupid for giving up.' He let out a deep breath. 'So...um...now we follow the road north until it leaves the forest. Then we'll see...'

They returned to the site of the tiger kill and gathered their gear, carefully checking the area in case they had left anything behind. Some animal had tried to drag away Keeran's satchel and flies were already swarming about the tiger corpse. Arul looked at the animal with a glum expression.

The forest claims everything.

He knelt by the animal and touched it one last time. Something brushed his mind and urged him to pull out a knot of fur. He separated the strands of hair and wove it into a tiny thread, which he then tied around his pendant's chain. He didn't know why he did it, but he felt he had to. He sighed and stood up, nodding to his friends.

Northward we go.

Arul thought it odd that Jaya hadn't shown up to sniff at the dead tiger. He cast his eyes in a slow circle but saw no sign of his wolf.

They rejoined the forest road, continuing in a straight line through the trees. As the morning wore on, the white trees gradually became more widely spaced, the forest thinning out. The road climbed uphill towards the forest's northern exit. Arul noticed wide swathes of grass gradually appear. Large gaps in the forest canopy allowed for glorious sunlight to stream in, brightening the mood considerably. It was nice after the gloom of the past few days.

Arul looked for Jaya all that morning, but his wolf never showed. He couldn't call out for fear of bandits, but his eyes swept the forest relentlessly.

Where is he?



They stopped for lunch in a small gully, a little way off the road. Navira discovered a tiny gush of water that bubbled from the ground nearby. They filled their waterskins to the brim and washed themselves. Arul strung his bow carefully, testing the bowstring with his fingers. 'I'm going to get a hare. You two wait. And don't wander.'

'Where would we go without you?' Keeran shot back.



Soon enough, Arul arrived back at camp holding a brace of rabbits. 'We found wild guavas!' Keeran said, holding up the tiny yellow fruit. His grin melted and suspicion clouded his face when he saw the rabbits. 'You're going to eat *that* disgusting thing?'

'Absolutely!' Arul said, grinning from ear-to-ear.

Navira washed the rabbits while Arul started a cooking fire. She fished out a small pouch of spices from her pack and rubbed it over the meat. Soon Arul had the rabbits on a wooden spit, carefully turning over them the flames. He and Navira watched it roasting with watering mouths. The aroma wafted over them,

making their stomachs rumble. The hot meat was delicious.

Keeran wouldn't touch the meat. He munched on his guavas and watched them unhappily. 'What I'd give for some hot *idli* rice cakes,' he moaned.

Arul wiped the grease from his lips and lay back against a tree stump. His thoughts went to Jaya.

Is he injured?

He felt terrible inside but knew they couldn't search the entire forest.

I have to trust his survival instincts.

He voiced his thoughts to Keeran and Navira. 'I don't know where Jaya is. Absolutely no idea. I think we should go on as planned. If he's anywhere within a mile, he'll track us.'

Then a familiar presence brushed past Arul's mind unexpectedly.

I'm here...

Arul frowned. The voice was inside his head.

Jaya?

I'm here. I'll follow.

What? Where are you?

I'm in the trees, and if I were you I'd get going. The bandits are hunting you like a wolf-pack. They lust for blood.

What kind of wolf are you? Are all wolves able to do this?

But Arul was only met by silence. Remembering Jaya's warning, he hurried to pack his things.



They joined the road for the final leg to the forest's end. The pale trees became more stunted as the valley's altitude rose ever higher, the wind noticeably cooler. Navira rubbed her arms and hunched over, shivering, her cloak no longer warm enough. They paused and rummaged through their packs, drawing out thick woollen shawls they had stolen from Kapilan's house.

'I look like my Auntie Menmai!' Said Keeran as he tried on a roughly woven shawl, pulling it over his head. Navira laughed, her voice clear as a bell.

They were ready for the high country.



Chapter 11



The Desolate Highlands

The late afternoon sun hung the western sky, a glaring white disk burning the grassland gold and brown. Arul trudged over the ancient road, Keeran and Navira close behind. From time to time Arul would stop and turn, waiting to see if anyone was following. The teens hadn't the energy to converse with each other, preferring to keep to their own thoughts.

The road reached a gentle crest as the light began to yellow in the late afternoon, and there in the distance was an end to the forest, the blue sky visible through the thinning trees.

The Ancient Forest dwindled to a few twisted and stunted specimens, unable to thrive in the harsh winds that scoured the region. From a distance, a small herd of spotted deer watched them with large dark eyes, twitching noses alert to danger. With relief, Arul saw that the road seemed to be in much better condition than back in the forest.

There was another fallen archway, similar to the one they had passed at the entrance to the Ancient Forest. The chirping of birds faded, only to be replaced by the whisper of rustling grass. It was a different world, and its only song came from the endless wind.

Keeran stood on one of the crumbling stone blocks, his hands on his hips. 'Why did they build these gateways if there's no-one to use them?'

'Doesn't mean they were *never* people here,' Arul said. 'It means that these parts were quite busy once.' His voice took on a wistful tone. 'A very long time ago.' He touched the strange writing on the ruined archway, then stepped into the new landscape.

Sunlight streamed from the brilliant sapphire sky, startlingly bright after so many days in the forest. It felt good. The grasslands spread out before them in a vast series of undulating hills, a golden-brown land without a single tree. A gusting wind carried with it the chill of the surrounding mountains, and it looked to be hostile to any form of life but grass.

'I think Appa never came this far,' Arul said. 'At least not that he told me.' As they talked, their voices were swept away by the wind, as though speech had no place up here. 'His job as a forest warden stopped at that archway.'

'So what's up here? Any villages?' Asked Navira.

'Good question. Wish I knew.' Arul said.

Navira narrowed her eyes. 'What about your map, dummy?'

Arul pulled out his leather map with a sheepish expression. He unrolled it and studied it for a minute. 'It shows a lake of some kind north of here. If we stick to the road, we'll reach it in a few days.'

'So let's go!' Navira said, her eyes looking forward. 'Predators aside, I love seeing these new lands. I couldn't stand the thought of living in Sailem my whole life.'

'Really? I thought I was the only one who wanted to see the world,' Arul said, nodding at Navira and fingering his spear, squinting at the road ahead. The stonework was impressive, considering its builders had constructed it many centuries ago. He felt Navira's hand slide into his own. It felt even better than looking at

the open blue sky.

Keeran leant on his spear, bowing it under his weight. 'Do we *have* to walk so far? Can't we just scare off those lions from here?'



Time seemed to slow amongst the hills, and to Arul he barely seemed to be moving although he had been walking for countless hours. Many miles to the west rose forbidding grey foothills, hazy and forlorn. Beyond them sat the imposing Meru Ranges topped by crowns of dazzling white ice, soaring into the azure sky like great jagged teeth.

Arul's heart ached at the sheer beauty of the scene.

I hope I get to live my whole life in the mountains. When I'm old, I'd like to sit quietly and watch the seasons come and go. Nothing would make me happier.

Navira's voice broke into his daydreaming rather unpleasantly. 'Arul! Are we stopping for a rest or what? ARUL!'

'We're not resting yet. I'm just thinking, that's all.' Arul said, turning in a full circle. There was nothing except grass. No people. No animals. No trees.

No water.

'What's that thing over there?' Asked Keeran. He squinted at something in the hills to the west, shielding his eyes with his hands.

'What are you talking about?' Arul said in an irritated voice.

'THAT thing!' Keeran shouted. Half buried in the hills over a mile away, a mammoth domed building crouched. Perhaps an ancient palace. 'I don't know, and I'm not going over there to find out,' Arul said with a faint shiver. The structure looked ancient. Great holes yawned darkly where the roof had collapsed inward in places.

Abandoned cities in the mountains.

Arul had heard tales of ancient peoples who lived up here long ago. Tales that were retold over evening fires for countless generations. Beings with the power of flight. Weapons of terrible destructive power.

Perhaps they weren't all fables.

With a growing feeling of doubt, Arul led them onwards. Their water began to run low, and the only animal they saw was a lone spotted deer on the crest of a hill. Arul hadn't the strength to give chase, gaping at the half-starved creature until it bounded out of sight.

When night fell, they camped on the road, thirsty and hungry. Arul upended his water skin and tasted a leathery trickle of water. Without another word, he sank into an exhausted sleep.



'I'm so tired Arul!' Navira blurted out on the second day out of the forest. 'My feet hurt.'

Arul glanced at her, then lifted his gaze into a clear blue sky. Overhead, a lone eagle wheeled in slow circles, rising on warm air currents. There was no other sound apart from the rustling grass, rising and falling with the wind like the breath of a sleeping giant. He gazed out towards the horizon, eyes anxious.

Where could Jaya be?

'Navira's right. I've had it! I want to lie down and die right here,' said Keeran with a pitiful moan.

Arul checked the sun's position. 'Ten more minutes and then we make camp,' he told them. They only groaned more.

They rounded yet another hill, no different from all the others. Arul abruptly came to a dead stop and Navira crashed into him. The ruins of a large stone building lay to one side of the road, clearly abandoned

for long ages, its wooden roof rotted away. Grey tumble-down walls gave the place a sad feeling.

Arul studied it for a long moment. The outlines of the ruins were of an unmistakable shape. A large hall surrounded by smaller rooms.

Humans lived up here and travelled this road in great numbers. Why else would they have built this inn?

‘I think it was a guest house for travellers,’ Arul said. ‘That pile of timbers must have been the stables. And look at the row of guest rooms.’

‘Travellers? Here? In the middle of...of...nothing!’ Keeran spluttered.

Arul pursed his lips. ‘Maybe people from that domed city we passed.’

‘Whatever. I just want to rest!’ Said Navira. She would have sat down right there on the road if Arul had allowed her to.

‘This place looks like a good spot to camp. I’ll go scout in case some animal is using it for shelter.’ Arul walked ahead, his bow at the ready in case of any nasty surprises.

He had barely rounded the rear of the inn, when a full grown sabre-tooth lion walked out from the ruin and fixed him with blazing eyes. Arul’s heart skipped a beat. The same fear he had felt during the tiger attack now squeezed his chest. Without thinking he brought up his bow and pulled back on the arrow. Unmoving, the lion stared at him with eyes the colour of burnished gold. They froze for what seemed like an eternity.

Until Keeran blundered between them.

Typically impatient, he had decided to follow Arul. Keeran looked at Arul, completely missed the lion behind him. ‘Arul, what’s taking you so long?’

The lion stared at the new intruder for a moment, then swung its head back to Arul, uncertain as to who was the greatest threat. It tensed its hunched shoulders, muscles rippling under its tawny hide.

‘Lion!’ Arul whispered.

‘What?’

‘LION! Behind you!’ Arul nodded to the spot behind Keeran.

Keeran’s eyes widened, his gaze creeping over his shoulder.

He screamed.

The sudden yell startled the lion. It stepped backwards with a snarl. Arul followed a hunch and screamed as well. The lion flinched, turning tail and sprinting into the hills.

Keeran collapsed onto the grass, shaking. ‘You okay?’ Asked Arul.

‘The lion was...was...so close!’

‘Very. Thank Vishnu your screams are so loud,’ said Arul with a shaky smile.

‘We could have screamed at that tiger, you know. It might have run off too,’ Keeran said.

Arul’s face darkened. ‘No Keeran. It wouldn’t have. This sabre-tooth was surprised by us. That tiger was stalking us for a day at least. Nothing would have stopped it from attacking.’

Navira sauntered around the ruin. ‘What are you two up to?’ She casually inquired. Arul and Keeran burst out laughing, even though their hands were still shaking.

Navira frowned. ‘Have you both gone mad?’

Arul left Keeran to relate the lion encounter to Navira, making a complete circuit of the ruin before entering, his arrow at the ready. ‘No lions!’ He yelled out. ‘It’s safe!’

That one must have been a scout. But where’s the rest of the pride?

He warily scanned the empty hills before waving Keeran and Navira over. The ruins made a cosy campsite. Most importantly, it protected them from the cold wind. They found a spot amidst the broken walls and settled in for the night, collecting bits of ancient wood that lay scattered about the ruin, using it to start a much needed fire.



The teens huddled around the flames as the night became colder. Keeran nervously watched the firelight dance off the old walls in eerie patterns. There wasn't much to eat except for a handful of Keeran's guavas. Arul would have really liked another meal of wild hare, but out here there wasn't much to hunt.

Arul looked at his friends. 'If we don't find water within a day, our water skins will be empty and we'll...'. He didn't finish the sentence.

'This road must lead to water at some point,' said Navira. 'How else could the ancients have travelled through here?'

Arul shrugged.

'Ah! Sitting is much better than walking!' Said Keeran, rubbing his sore feet. 'Do you think these hills will ever end, or do they just go on forever?' He yawned. 'Where's a tub of hot water for my poor feet when you need one?'

They fell silent when a gust of wind whistled into the campsite. The campfire hissed and wavered, a cloud of orange embers rising in a furious burst, swirling in a luminous cloud, only to wink-out over the darkening grassland.

Navira stared at the distant western mountains, glowing under the purple haze of the late afternoon sun like immense giants squatting between heaven and earth. 'I wonder what the world would look like from on top those mountains?'

'Very beautiful I think,' Arul replied, looking at Navira. Their eyes locked for an instant before they hurriedly lowered their faces.

Keeran shrugged. 'You would need to be an eagle to get up there.'

Navira thought for a long moment. 'Being out here in this endless grassland makes me feel so small.' She sighed. 'After the tiger and those bandits, I began to think that life is so uncertain. I've been so sure of myself. Sure of my opinions. But here I'm like a speck of dust.'

Arul and Keeran stared at her with some confusion. 'I've been a bully to you Keeran. I'm sorry,' Navira whispered. Keeran nodded and stared at his toes.

Navira leaned towards Arul. 'You know, I never really thought about the pain you've had to live through, not knowing your Amma.' She was on the verge of tears. 'I'm such an idiot.'

Arul crawled over and hugged her. 'No, not an idiot. Someone with a good heart.'

I hope the old feisty Navira doesn't completely disappear.

Navira blushed and looked down, her hand refusing to let go of Arul. They watched the fire in silence until the dusk deepened to a velvet blue. They were too tired to take watch and one by one they curled up beside the fire and fell asleep.



As the light faded from that isolated place, the cloaked figure of a man stood and watched the inn from a nearby hill. Abruptly he turned and disappeared down the reverse side, leaving the landscape empty once more. Outside the ruins a night breeze picked up, the grass moving in great ripples, sighing like the whispering of lost souls.



Chapter 12



Sacrifice

Arul woke before dawn, the sky still and grey. He stretched his limbs and looked at his sleeping friends hidden under their heavy shawls. Keeran's mouth was wide open. When he started to snore, Arul suppressed a laugh, his eyes turning to Navira curled up into a ball, her hair across her face like a river of black silk. Arul's heart skipped a beat, unable to move his gaze from her as he warmed his hands over the fire.

I'll leave them sleeping. At least for a while.

Arul stepped outside to watch the sunrise, a glow in the east pushing back the deep blue of the night. Shukran, the morning star glowed brilliantly in the last few hours before dawn, perhaps as the myths said, jealous of the sun, wanting to remain the brightest object in the sky. The rising sun would soon destroy the subtle colours of the night. A great pity, for the night was far more beautiful in Arul's eyes.

Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed something move. Spinning in that direction, he spied a distant figure on the summit of a hill. He blinked once and it was gone. He ran back to the campsite, his face tense. 'Wake up!' There's someone out there! I think we're being followed!

'Where?' Navira yawned, rising and following Arul outside. Keeran emerged and rubbed his eyes, squinted at the dim landscape. Arul pointed in the direction of the hill.

'Are you sure you didn't imagine it?' Said Navira.

Arul's face darkened. 'No way! Someone was there all right!'

Keeran scratched his tousled hair and yawned. 'Hmm...we can't do much about it, so let's just be careful, okay?'

'Any sign of Jaya?' Navira asked.

Arul slapped his forehead. 'Oh no! I'd forgotten in all the excitement!' I assumed he was roaming about like usual.' His eyes leapt to the grey hills. 'Where *is* he?'

Navira put her hand on his shoulder. 'He's a wolf, Arul. He'll find you. He's very clever. Really he is.' Arul nodded half-heartedly.

The sun rose over the hills in a sudden blaze as they left the ruins and re-joined the winding road. Without food they became steadily weaker as the morning wore on. It wasn't helping things that the road became ever steeper and there wasn't a single animal to hunt. Arul's gaze swept the ranks of hills, looking for Jaya.



They sat by the roadside, stomachs rumbling, the sun not even overhead yet. Arul licked his cracked lips and listened for signs of flowing water. A creek or spring. Anything.

One more day without water, then we're finished.

'We don't even know where this road leads,' Keeran mumbled as he squeezed a few drops from his waterskin, twisting it like a rope. It was true. They couldn't see past the next hill. It was as if they were

caught in a giant maze.

Arul thought for a minute. 'I need a high point to scout ahead.' He stood wearily in the middle of the road, his gaze falling on a promising spot. 'That one!' His friends looked up and saw a particularly tall hill west of the road. 'It's not far. I'll go up and see,' Arul said.

Navira and Keeran slumped, bodies near exhaustion. They wrapped themselves deep in their cloaks to wait. Keeran unstopped his water skin and stared into it, as though the act of looking might create more water.

Arul strode off and was climbing up the brown grassy slope soon enough, puffing as he reached the summit, a forlorn wind-blasted place. He recovered his breath for a minute before gazing in a complete circle.

The view was spectacular, the grasslands undulating far towards the hazy eastern horizon. In the west lay the vast bulk of the snow-capped Meru Ranges, rugged and majestic. To the north lay a gap in the mountains through which the road climbed. A pass of some kind. He turned south to see if he could spy the Ancient Forest.

Instead, he saw something else. Multiple objects moving fast. Tiny dots skimming over the grass. Arul shaded his eyes from the glare, but couldn't make out the shapes. He squinted at the tiny figures of Keeran and Navira sitting by the road, then back to the moving shapes.

Abruptly, he recognised what they were.

His heart froze. Half a mile behind Keeran and Navira, there were eight swiftly moving animals, their dull-yellow bodies blending into the grassland as they ran effortlessly, not slowing for anything.

The rest of the lion pride! That scout must have led them to us! They've caught our scent. We won't stand a chance if they catch us...

Arul felt sick in his stomach. He fought to control his panic, his mind racing, shouting desperately at the top of his voice, waving his arms like a lunatic. He leapt about, trying to catch Keeran and Navira's attention.

'Heey! Naviiiiiraa! Keeraan!' He shouted. But the distance was too great for them to hear. After a minute they appeared to notice his urgent movements. They stared at him blankly. Arul pointed to the road behind, his arms frantically miming the jaws of an animal opening and closing. His two friends seemed puzzled, but then their heads jerked towards the south. Arul pointed and screamed with every bit of energy he could muster.

'RUN!!'

Arul made the actions of someone running and kept screaming. Hesitantly at first, the pair began to walk up the road. As they watched Arul's frantic movements, the wind suddenly carried his distant voice to them.

'RUN!!'

They ran.

Arul sank to his knees, his legs shaking.

When his eyes flicked south, Arul saw the pride bound onto the road and turn north after Navira and Keeran, their pace accelerating.

The predators were now only minutes behind his sprinting friends. Arul grabbed his head in despair.

They can't outrun those lions! I need to distract the pride.

He raced down the hill, flattening the dry grass as he slid down most of the slope, fitting an arrow to his bow without pausing. The second he knew the road was within reach of his arrows, he dropped to one knee and forcefully slowed his breathing. It was difficult to do with his heart hammering away so hard.

He waited.

And what happens when they turn towards me? I can't take all of them down before they reach me.

Arul suddenly realised this was a fight that would only have one outcome.

He was going to die.

From somewhere deep inside, his courage rose up like a wind, gentle at first, then rising to a gale. A fire in his heart. He shook his head, blinking away sweat from his eyes, letting his eyes rest on the sky one last time.

Blue and infinitely calm.

If it is my destiny to die, then so be it.

He was at peace when he heard the soft thudding of the running pride, their padded feet barely disturbing the ground. The first lion sped into view, focussed on the distant running figures of Navira and Keeran. It slowed and sniffed the ground, perhaps smelling someone else.

Arul kept still, his bow drawn taut, his aim perfect. The sabre-tooth never saw the killing arrow slicing through the air, barely a foot from the ground. With a howl the lion burst into a sprint towards Arul, an arrow sprouting from its neck. But then it tumbled head over heels, crashing in an explosion of dust and grass.

Arul had another arrow ready before the rest of the pride appeared. The lions saw one of their own lying dead on the grass. They slowed to a walk, sniffing the air suspiciously, chests heaving with exertion. Arul closed his eyes for a moment. He knew it was time. The second arrow loosed with a twang, a murmured prayer to Vishnu on his lips. A warrior's prayer.

When I die, let my soul fly to you true and straight like this arrow.

Another sabre-tooth lion roared in fury, an arrow embedded in its shoulder. A second arrow hit it in the chest, the animal thrashing about, snarling as it died.

The rest of the pride swung their massive heads towards Arul, eyes blazing. They spread out in a semi-circle and began to move in, clawing the grass impatiently. A smaller lion went down in a roar. Two more arrows missed their mark as the wind suddenly gusted across the hills.

Arul nocked his last arrow.

I've given Keeran and Navira a chance. Please let them live.

The four remaining animals roared as they fixed their golden eyes on Arul, their muscular forelimbs rippling with power. Arul fired at the closest lion and saw not one, but two arrows piercing its neck, killing it instantly.

Arul threw down his bow and drew his aruval.

His eyes flicked to a figure on a slope opposite. A stranger firing arrows incredibly fast.

Who on earth?

Now there were only three of the beasts remaining. They stopped charging, snapping around to the new threat behind.

Arul threw off his satchel and quiver. The largest predator kept closing on him, accelerating into an explosive sprint over the last twenty feet. Arul stepped back uncertainly, gripping the hilt of his aruval, his body tensed like stretched cord.

Maybe I can stab upwards into the animal's neck.

The lioness leapt on him in a killing frenzy. Arul stabbed upwards while the lioness was still airborne. He rolled sideways, desperate to escape her razor claws.

The lioness twisted in the air, sailing past Arul and landed with a howl. He could hear the animal's scrabbling feet as she tried to turn, ripping out clods of earth.

Arul's heart skipped a beat. He had lost his aruval.

His eyes darted to the ground in a panic.

He was now unarmed, facing an enraged sabre-tooth lioness.



The lioness came to a stop. She could feel something lodged in her throat. Something that burned with an intensity that she had never felt before. She roared at the puny two-legged creature that stared at her with wide eyes. Twisting her head violently, she tried to dislodge the object.

She bounded towards the human boy then suddenly staggered, feeling her life draining away. Her head drooped and she could see that the grass beneath was stained red. Yet her fury drove her onwards. The boy fell back and pushed himself away with his hands and legs, his fear like a cloud, stinking and weak. As she died, the lioness made one last lunge at the boy, raking his foot with a claw.

A scream of pain shattered the air.

Darkness came swiftly for the sabre-tooth, and beyond that, worlds bright with spirit animals. The remaining lions, watching the struggle with confusion, turned tail and fled.

No prey was worth this much death.



Arul gazed at the stranger, his face invisible within the shadow of his hood. He wanted to call out to him. Thank him. Say something. Instead, his breath became ragged, his body falling into shock. The horizon spun, points of light flashing like jewels. His eyes rolled back and he fell to the ground unconscious.

Only the hooded stranger remained as a witness to the desperate struggle between boy and the lions.



Time ceased to exist for Arul, and oddly familiar dreams washed over him like bells ringing on a faraway mountain. Calling him to puja. He dreamt of being carried while someone sang to him. He thought that he remembered the song from long ago, but in his memory it was a woman's voice.

In his dream, someone touched his forehead, a sudden light flooding his body. The light healed him. Not only physically, but somewhere else. Somewhere deep in his heart. A lonely boy never accepted by his own village. A boy that stood alone and waited for his mother to return year after year, realizing finally that she would never come back to him.

He glimpsed the hazy face of a beautiful dark eyed woman smiling at him. He knew her face. He knew the glimmering amulet at her throat. Arul was about to call out to her, but she faded quietly into the night.

From deep inside his core, overwhelming grief welled up. He had felt it all his life, and now it poured into his dreams. He wept in a secret place known only to him. He wept until his heart was empty. Mercifully, he fell into a deep sleep, like a ship wandering into a dark sea.



Many days walk away, the woodcutter Parthiban stood next to his cart and watched the crowd restlessly mill about Sailem's pañcāyattu hall. Gusts of cold air kicked up red dust from the space in front of the building. Above the murmurings of the village-folk, he could hear only one sound coming from inside the hall.

The shrill voice of Kapilan, The Elder.

It rose in pitch from time to time before lapsing into lengthy silences, causing the waiting villagers to crowd closer to the front entrance. In due course, Kapilan's supporters filed out of the hall with smug

expressions. At least half of the Council of Elders were in that group. Parthiban rubbed his head and re-stacked the logs on his cart. He had a bad feeling about what was happening.

Headman Viyan and the rest of the elders exited the hall, their heads bowed. Then Kapilan came out and stood on the front veranda, chest puffed out. Parthiban turned his back and started pulling his cart. As he left the village, he heard Kapilan explain that he was now Headman and assistant to the Royal Scouts.

'I expect your full co-operation in this matter. The fanciful tales of Ori the Forester will not influence this village. These attacks are isolated cases, and there's no need to panic. I am here to look after Sailem now.' His supporters cheered.

The rest of the folk remained sullen and quiet.

Parthiban stopped his cart and tightened his vetti around his waist. The world was changing, even in this isolated valley. He muttered a prayer to the God that dwelt on Mount Amundi, although sometimes he doubted that the Gods really existed. With a grunt, he tugged his cart forward. The old woodcutter and his rattling cart were soon lost in the gathering dusk.



Chapter 13



The Blue Lake

Arul slept in a dreamless place without time, healing in a dark, restful nothingness. When he eventually opened his eyes, the stars were twinkling above him, bright in the cold mountain air. He stared at them for a long time, thinking about the woman's face in his dream. Fragments of pain surfaced in his mind like flashes of lightning in the deep mountains. Then he felt strangely calm. A leaf floating on a mirrored surface of a lake.

He winced when the pain of his wounded foot disturbed his thoughts, shifting his body .

Smells like there's water nearby. Why am I outside?

Arul didn't have to wait long to have his questions answered as footsteps sounded in the dark. A warm, leathery hand touched his forehead. 'It seems that our brave lion-hunter wakes!'

I know that voice!

Turning sideways, he saw a glowing jewel dangling from a necklace, a white light ebbing deep within. With a faint swish, someone's hand swiftly hid it within a cloak. 'How are you feeling, Arul?'

'Guru Pari!' Arul shouted. He tried to sit up, but was hit by a wave of dizziness. His Guru helped him lie back, laughing in his high-pitched voice. There were so many questions Arul wanted to ask Guru Pari, but he didn't know where to begin.

'Wait here, lad. Certain people want to see you.' Guru Pari turned, his feet crunching over what sounded like gravel. Arul studied the constellations overhead and figured that it was nearly midnight. It was a skill taught to him by his Appa, vital for navigation and marking the passage of time in the wild. He turned and gazed at the waxing moon glowing above the peaks of the Meru Ranges, bathing them in a ghostly light.

The mountains seem much closer up here.

Arul rolled on his side and listened to the faint rippling of water, or perhaps the lapping of small waves. The wind whistled through what sounded like a rocky canyon, and lit by moonlight, forbidding cliffs rose sheer and grey.

Something wet licked his cheek, Arul jerking back before he realised whom it was. As a huge smile broke across his face, he turned to see the gold eyes of Jaya mere inches from him. His wolf licked him again, this time on the nose. Arul reached over and held Jaya's furry head. Jaya was patient and let himself be held.

'How did you find me so far from the forest?' Arul whispered.

Jaya looked back with a tilted head. Again, Arul sensed the wolf's thoughts brush his mind, his eyes narrowing on Jaya. *Really? If you hadn't noticed, I'm a wolf.*

Moments later, Arul heard running feet crunching on the gravel. Small hands grabbed him tightly, Navira's beaming face hovering above, though she was barely visible in the moonlight. Keeran's equally happy face appeared next to hers and they stood silently for some time, unable to voice their emotions, simply glad to be alive.

Keeran spoke first, his hands on his hips. 'Guru Pari told us what you did back there.' He paused for a long moment, choking up. 'You tried to sacrifice yourself for us.' He took a deep breath. 'Idiot!'

Navira looked at Keeran with a shocked expression. Then she started to laugh. ‘Yeah, you are an idiot, Arul,’ she said, grasping his shoulder as Jaya pushed his head into the circle of friends. Arul wondered if Jaya also thought he was an idiot.

‘Don’t do anything that stupid again, okay?’ Navira said. ‘We face things together from now on. Promise!’

‘Uh...I promise. Happy now?’ Arul said, feeling their bond deepening.

But I’ll never stand by and watch you die. Never.

That settled, Keeran began telling Arul about the strange valley they were in. ‘This is where the road led to, although it seems to continue past this valley. And there’s this person you have to...’

‘Wait, wait!’ Arul interrupted. ‘Someone please tell me how I got here? I mean, the last thing I remember is passing out. I didn’t fly here, did I?’

Keeran flapped his arms like wings and danced about like a bird, a silly grin plastered across his face. ‘Shhh! Guru Pari’s coming back!’ Navira whispered.

‘No lad, you’re quite right. You didn’t fly.’ Guru Pari said as he walked up. ‘After the remaining lions fled, I carried you here.’

Arul’s eyes widened, realizing a few things all at once. ‘You mean it was *you* that helped fight off the lions? It was *you* who followed us all the way from the village and helped kill the tiger?’

Pari’s eyes glinted mischievously. He simply nodded, waiting to see if Arul could work it out.

Keeran’s mouth hung open blankly. ‘Wha...?’

‘So you shot the tiger in the forest?’ Navira asked.

His smile faded for a moment. ‘I regretted the death of that magnificent animal.’

‘So did I.’ Arul nodded thoughtfully. ‘You were looking out for us, weren’t you? Protecting us. Somehow you knew what we were planning back in Sailem.’

‘Err...I wouldn’t say we planned everything.’ Keeran said with a shiver. ‘Especially the part where a giant tiger wanted to eat us. And then there were those bandits.’

Guru Pari laughed, his long beard shivering with the effort. ‘No Keeran, I would agree with you there. I’m also here for other reasons, but we’ll discuss that tomorrow.’

‘But just how *did* you know we were plotting to sneak off that night?’ Asked Arul. ‘I mean, we were pretty careful.’ He looked at the other two. ‘Weren’t we?’

Navira held Keeran with narrowed eyes. ‘You blabbed, didn’t you?’

Keeran raised his hands. ‘Never!’

‘No need to place blame, Navira,’ Guru Pari said. ‘I could tell what you were planning.’

‘How?’ Navira and Keeran asked in unison, causing Arul to chuckle.

Guru Pari smiled back mysteriously, but didn’t elaborate. ‘Now that we’re all together at Blue Lake, we can work out what to do next. He looked at Navira and Keeran. ‘You both need to rest, so off you go!’

Arul watched the pair crunch over the gravel, disappearing behind a ring of large boulders where a thin column of smoke rose from a campfire. He turned to Pari. ‘Blue Lake?’

‘At night it’s not exactly blue, but you’ll understand in the morning.’

Arul turned to where his Guru was pointing and saw the dark shoreline of a lake. ‘Is this where the road leads to?’

‘It is indeed, but the road goes on through the mountains for hundreds of miles to north Kumari Kandam. Once it was a busy highway supplying many mountain cities. And other places long forgotten.’ His Guru gazed into the distance wistfully and scratched Jaya’s ears.

Arul stared out into the landscape. ‘Other places?’

‘Hmm?’ Pari looked at Arul with a wistful smile. ‘Later lad, later. Now you need to rest. You’ve had a bit

of a rough day, wouldn't you say?'

'Guru Pari. One more thing,' Arul said. 'I had a dream while you carried me. A light went into me and I saw a woman's face.' Arul's eyes searched Pari's lined face. 'Did you make that light?'

Guru Pari's face looked sad, but it was hard to tell in the dark. He fixed his intense gaze on Arul as if he wanted to say more, but instead remained silent. It was as though he knew it wasn't the time.



Soon Arul was alone with Jaya again, but sleep came slowly. He realised that there was so much more to know about the world, a feeling of ignorance overcoming him. It was depressing to know so little.

What did Guru tell us once? When you realise you know nothing, you are wise? What a strange thing to say.

In his mind, he pictured the woman's face he had seen in his dreams. Raven black hair. Dark brown eyes full of compassion. More beautiful than any woman he'd ever seen.

Is she real?

Her face brought him a sense of deep peace that settled over him like a quiet dusk. Arul, son of Ori, slept deeply on the shores of Blue Lake under an infinity of stars.



Chapter 14



Eye of the Snow Leopard

Dawn glowed red behind the mountains, a towering wall of black circling the valley. Blue Lake was still in deep shadow, its rippling waters dark as oil, silent as the land around it. Arul and Guru Pari stood on its rocky shore, deep in conversation. Arul would occasionally select a pebble and fling it horizontally, attempting to skip it across the water as Jaya watched the splashing ripples unfolding in a line.

Guru Pari watched the stones skimming over the dark water with a faint smile. ‘The answers you’re seeking lie past this valley. There’s something you should see up there. Something that may help the village.’

Arul looked at his teacher’s cloak, almost black in the gloom. ‘You mean, stop predators from terrorising Sailem?’ His eyes flicked north to where the road climbed to a pass between the mountains. ‘What’s up there?’

‘Some things that will need explaining. Things you need to see for yourself,’ Pari said. He paused and looked towards the mountains, a word forming on his lips, then dying. Arul felt that Guru Pari was withholding much, but he had to trust him.

It’s like he’s been looking out for me for a long time. Protecting me somehow.

He wanted to ask Guru Pari so many questions that it was hard to restrain himself. He didn’t want to appear rude to his teacher, whom he deeply respected. ‘Ah! Look now Arul.’ Pari’s voice intruded. He pointed to the water. ‘There!’

As the sun climbed above the dazzling snow-capped peaks along the east side of the valley, blinding shafts of light shone onto the lake, the water changing from grey to brilliant blue, vivid in contrast to the shores of black gravel. ‘The Blue Lake!’ Guru Pari said, his voice soft. ‘Don’t you think it deserves its name?’ Arul stared in silence, faint waves slapping against the shoreline. Navira and Keeran joined them and they watched the valley fill with sunlight, the lake glistening like a great blue sapphire.

‘Why is it so blue?’ Navira asked Pari, unable to tear her eyes from the incredible scene.

‘Well,’ Guru Pari explained, ‘There are substances in the water from deep beneath the earth that make it so.’ The teens nodded respectfully, although they didn’t quite understand. They strolled on the lakeshore for some time, the sun climbing halfway up the sky before a very odd thing happened.

Arul felt something was wrong *before* he noticed anything. Above them, a flock of sparrows fled south, twisting and turning in fear. Arul’s head snapped up. He thought he could faintly hear something in the north. A buzzing. The odd thing was that he felt it passing through his body rather than with his ears. It began to build in volume, more a vibration than a sound. Navira and Keeran pressed their palms to their ears, fear clouding their faces.

Then all at once it stopped, silence flooding back into the valley.

Arul gasped and rubbed his ears. The teens faced Guru Pari expectantly, waiting for an explanation. Pari simply blinked and pointed. ‘I think we should move to higher ground.’

Before Arul could ask him why, a great rumbling sounded north of the lake, as though hundreds of animals were running together. There, where the road climbed steeply up to a ridge before plunging down

the far side, a stag appeared on the crest, shaking its impressive antlers before racing down towards the lake. Behind it raced hundreds of deer in a wild stampede.

‘RUN!’ Keeran yelled as he accelerated away. They all scrambled after him, the river of animals splitting in two and flowing along both shores of the lake. Some of the animals leapt into the lake, struggling to keep their heads above the freezing water. The noise was deafening as thousands of hooves shook the ground in a continuous tremor.

Jaya’s thoughts spoke to Arul urgently. *There! That slope!*

Arul scrambled up the loose gravel with Jaya, his heart thumping wildly. His wounded foot hurt, twisting his face into a grimace as he climbed. They crawled onto a stone ledge high above the stampeding animals. Nearby, Guru Pari climbed onto a huge boulder with Keeran and Navira.

Arul watched the blur of brown and white flashing past, the reek of fear rising in a cloud. Arul winced and touched his skinned knees. Hard stone was unforgiving on human skin.

The river of animals passed by, leaving a few wild-eyed stragglers in the rear, desperate to escape the mysterious sound in the mountains. Below Arul, a trio of beautiful snow leopards snarled, spotted coats shining like ivory against the black rock. The animals seemed to be confused, snapping at each other, unsure where to go. Arul instinctively reached behind his back for an arrow.

My weapons are at the campsite!

He swallowed hard, crouched on the rock, hoping the predators wouldn’t attack. One of the snow leopards abruptly stopped below the ledge and sniffed the air, fixing Arul with an intense gaze. It began climbing the slope, its head held low.

Jaya growled dangerously. ‘Shh! Quiet boy! They won’t harm us.’

Some deep instinct told Arul to wait. He was scared, yet couldn’t help but stare back into the leopard’s startling blue eyes. When it was quite close to Arul, it paused, its body very still. The entire world seemed to fade away as boy and leopard gazed at each other. Arul’s perceptions unexpectedly became heightened. He could feel the energy of the rocks beneath him, coursing like silver spider webs through the earth. He felt things that his mind could not process or even understand.

Something passed between the leopard and Arul. A message of some kind. He frowned and tried to concentrate as an unfamiliar consciousness reached into him.

When you sit afar on your golden seat, think of us.

Remember us, Child of the Mountains.

The connection faded, the leopard growling and turning away, racing for sanctuary in the south. Arul collapsed on the rock, heart racing, his mind hovering between two worlds.

Remember you? Why? What’s going to happen? Tell me!

He blinked away tears that sprang to his eyes, the rock cold and unforgiving beneath him. Jaya sidled up beside him, pressing his head into Arul’s lap. Somehow, Jaya understood.



After a time, Arul and Jaya joined the others in the campsite, Navira and Keeran standing around their Guru with searching eyes. Before they could bombard Pari with questions, he raised a hand. ‘Those animals were in a blind panic. Running from something. That something is connected to that sound we all felt before the animals stampeded.’ He stood up and dusted himself off. ‘That’s what Arul and I are going up there to figure out tomorrow.’

Keeran and Navira stood with their mouths open, speechless.



Chapter 15



The Hermit

It was well after lunch when Guru Pari made an announcement. ‘It’s time you met someone, Arul. On the other side of the lake.’ Arul looked at Navira questioningly, but she only shrugged, confused as he was.

They walked around the south edge of the lake where Keeran was waiting. He slapped Arul on the back with a huge grin. ‘You’ll find this fellow very interesting, and that’s putting it politely.’ His grin widened even more.

‘You’ve been to see him?’ Asked Navira.

‘The first day after we arrived. While you were snoring, Guru Pari and I went to this fellow’s hut,’ Keeran said.

It was a difficult walk over the loose gravel, but eventually they reached the far side of the lake, Guru Pari leading them to a small ravine. It led into a dead-end, and there set against the back cliff was a tiny stone hut. A cold wind swirled around the cliffs and into the ravine, making the hut’s wooden shutters bang, the clapping echo bouncing off the cliffs. The dwelling had a single wooden door, stacked stone-walls, and roughly shaped wooden shingles for a roof.

The whole thing appeared rather rundown.

Out in front, there was a stone hearth, around which were strewn dented copper pots. ‘Why didn’t we stay in this hut, instead of out there next to the lake?’ Arul asked Guru Pari.

‘Master Seri doesn’t...um...isn’t used to people, Arul. Not anymore.’ There was no sign that anyone was home. ‘Master Seri! Are you there?’ Guru Pari called out, his voice echoing through the ravine. ‘I’ve brought someone to meet you! Come out!’

A high-pitched voice sounded from within the darkened hut. ‘Go away! I’m not seeing anyone!’

‘Come out, Seri...,’ began Pari.

He was cut off by a loud ‘SHHH!’

Guru Pari shook his head, but persisted. ‘I’ve brought Arul to see you.’

There was a long silence, followed by the creaking sound of someone getting up from a bed. A tiny, ancient looking man opened the door and stepped out. He stroked his scraggly white beard and examined the visitors.

‘His features are a bit delicate for a man, aren’t they?’ Navira whispered to Arul.

‘Shh! He might hear you,’ Arul whispered back, his eyes still on Seri. The old man’s small chin and large eyes gave Arul the impression Seri was highly intelligent, much like Guru Pari.

Seri blinked at the visitors with cloudy grey eyes, fingering his plaited hair, cascading like an avalanche of snow all the way to his waist. ‘Arul you say? Arul?’ He said it as if he doubted what Guru Pari had said.

Seri made his way forward towards the gathered party. He nodded at Pari and then went on to study the others in turn. He glanced at Keeran, sniffing at him before examining Navira with a smile. Finally he stood in front of Arul and stared up at him for a full minute, making Arul take an uncomfortable step backward. The old hermit muttered, ‘He looks so much like her, does he not, Pari?’

Guru Pari's shoulders slumped. When Seri turned back to Arul, tears welled in his eyes, large as raindrops.

I look like who? Are they talking about Amma?

Seri held Arul's shoulder and gently touched his cheek. Arul could feel Seri's hand shaking as though a dam of emotion was about to break inside his frail body. Arul stood silently, wondering what remained unsaid.

Seeing me made him very sad. Seri and Guru Pari seem to know more about me than I do.

Keeran suddenly blurted out, 'I'm hungry!' Navira glared at him, her leg lashing out. 'That hurt! And I'm still hungry,' cried Keeran, hopping on one leg. Seri jerked his face up and started to laugh, his shrill voice reminding Arul of a forest bird that lived near Sailem. Even Guru Pari began to chortle.

'I like this fellow, Master Pari. I like him!' Seri and Guru Pari walked past Arul and headed towards the lake, laughing in fits.

The teens looked on in amazement before breaking into giggles themselves. Keeran whispered, 'I think they're old friends.'

Seri and Pari strolled on the shores of the lake for some time as the teens sat by the stone hut, dozing. Jaya wandered up sat on Arul's legs. Arul winced. 'Hey! You're really heavy!'



It was nearly dusk before they all gathered to eat a simple evening meal. Seri brought out a large wooden bowl filled with dried fish spiced with turmeric and salt. They ate under a ribbon of purple sky, the dark cliffs of the ravine looming ominously. Seri picked at his meal and gestured towards the mountains. 'If you know your way around, there's food everywhere. Mountain streams filled with fish, wild berries on the slopes. You name it.'

Guru Pari swallowed the last of his fish. 'I want to take Arul to a place further up in the mountains, to a place very few know of. It's better if only he and I go.' He fixed his gaze on Keeran and Navira. 'I want you to stay with Seri and wait for our return.'

Seri's eyes widened. 'You're taking him to see the tower?' He chuckled to himself. 'It's probably about time. Try and sort out whatever's causing all those poor animals to stampede through my backyard!'

Navira sat up straight with an indignant look, lips curved downwards. 'I don't like that plan, Guru. Why should we stay here?'

Guru Pari searched for the right words. 'It's not that you're any less important than Arul. However, this involves only him. *His* bloodline.' Navira stared blankly at Pari. 'While you wait, Master Seri has something to teach you about herbs. Pay close attention to him,' Pari said. Navira furrowed her brow and looked at Arul. He simply nodded encouragingly, eyes pleading with Navira to not argue.

Guru Pari rose and regarded them kindly. 'We'll leave after Arul's foot is healed, which with my help should be in a week. Then we'll head for the high meadow.'

Arul's eyes flashed. 'High meadow? Tower?'

Their Guru ignored the question about the tower and spoke about the meadow. 'Yes, I think you'll like it, Arul. It's an extraordinary spot. You'll see. Oh yes, Jaya will have to stay here with Navira and Keeran.' Jaya heard his name and looked quizzically at Pari. Guru Pari saw Arul starting to protest. 'Before you say anything, consider this. Whatever is scaring the wild animals will also affect a wolf. You wouldn't want Jaya going mad, would you?'

Arul hated the idea of travelling anywhere without his loyal Jaya, but Guru Pari's logic was convincing. Shoulders slumped, he nodded in agreement.

The following week passed pleasantly enough, the teens recovering their energy by spending long hours basking in the warm sunlight. Jaya found the best boulders to lie on, irritating Keeran immensely. On a few occasions, Arul noticed Jaya suddenly raise his head and stare north beyond the pass.

What is he sensing?

All too soon the departure was upon them. The sun rose into a clear sky as a white disk, dazzlingly bright in the thin alpine air. Arul carefully tested his injured foot with Keeran's help. It felt as if the sabretooth had never clawed it. Keeran slapped Arul on the back. 'How did Guru Pari heal you so fast?

Above them, the sun passed its midday zenith. At the campsite, Navira and Keeran helped Arul pack for the journey. 'So what happened to you two after I yelled for you to run?' Arul said.

'We ran! I mean, we didn't know what you were doing, hopping about on that hill like a mad monkey. But then we got the idea,' Keeran said with a grin.

'We kept running until we reached this lake. We were hiding behind these boulders when Master Seri found us,' Navira added. Her face clouded. 'I thought you were dead!' She quickly stepped forward and hugged Arul hard. Just as quickly she stepped back, her cheeks colouring.

Arul coughed and looked south to the Brown Hills. 'A few minutes later and...well... the lions would have caught you.'

Navira followed his gaze. 'But we're fine, and they didn't get us. It's also okay that Guru Pari wants only you to go with him. I trust him, Arul.'

Arul smiled back. They continued packing in silence. He saw Guru Pari and Seri strolling back from the hut, deep in conversation.

What I'd give to eavesdrop on them. The things they must know...

On the lake, lazy ripples lapped endlessly against the dark rocks, sounding like the footsteps of long-vanished folk. The sun rose behind the wall of mountains, the sky brightened into a golden haze. Shafts of sunlight fell upon the lake, like sparkling blue sapphires floating in a sea of grey.



Chapter 16



The Secret Meadow

Arul and Guru Pari began their journey at sunrise, the valley still in deep shadow. They skirted the lake to walk the ancient road, climbing towards the north until they reached the pass, the ground churned into a muddy bog from the stampede. Arul paused to look back. Sunlight flooded into the valley, turning the lake dazzling azure, bluer than the brightest sky.

Three tiny figures waved energetically to Arul, who waved back in turn, a big smile on his face. Inside, he didn't feel cheerful at all, thinking of the mysterious journey his Guru had planned for him. He took a deep breath and hurried to catch up with Guru Pari, stumbling on the broken paving.

The road led into a rather bleak land, hemmed in by grey forbidding slopes. Clattering gravel would often slip down the mountainsides, echoing in the quiet of the pass.



They walked for the better part of half-a-day before the road split in two, a narrower path leading in a westerly direction while the main thoroughfare continued north, following the spine of the Meru Ranges. Arul noticed that the new track was even steeper. He sighed and followed Pari, treading carefully on the loose paving stones, leg muscles burning from the effort.

How on earth does an old man like Guru Pari could keep up this kind of pace?

Stunted pine trees began to appear, clinging to the slopes, struggling to survive in the high altitude. The trees crowded both sides of the road, casting flickering shadows. The wind grew colder, stinging Arul's face as they moved higher into the mountains.

They pulled their homespun cloaks tighter, raising their hoods. It became harder to breathe. The air felt thinner to Arul. Guru Pari heard him struggling and turned. 'I think you need a break. You won't be any good if you faint,' he said, chuckling.

Arul threw off his pack and sprawled on a bed of fallen pine needles. 'Guru Pari, why...is it so...hard to breathe here?'

Pari thought for a second. 'It's something to do with the mix of elements in the air. It seems that the life-giving elements are scarcer up here.' He studied the neglected path. 'Our ancestors knew a lot more about this than we do.'

People ought to become smarter as time goes on. Not the other way around.

The sharp scent of pine cleared Arul's head, lessening his tiredness for a while. 'Up!' Guru Pari said, rising energetically. Arul snapped out of his daydreaming, groaning as he shouldered his pack. He felt sure that it had become heavier. They followed the path until it became overgrown, thorny weeds sprouting in clumps like grasping fingers, tearing at Arul's ankles and leaving red scratches. Guru Pari paused awhile, carefully examining the surroundings. With a nod of his head, he seemed to make up his mind, taking a sharp right onto a steep hill.

Half-covered in the grass were the remains of a staircase, the stone mottled with lichen and black with

age. Tufts of grass sprouted from the cracked stone, tiny yellow flowers nodding in the wind, their perfume reminding Arul of wild honey. Guru Pari led the way up the stairs, joining another track which twisted through a sheltered pine forest.

They entered a glade hemmed in on three sides by cliffs, the trees taller and wider than any pines Arul had ever seen. Even more astounding, at the far end of the glade grew an enormous pine, its trunk the width of twenty men. Immediately behind it rose a cliff face, towering sheer and dark. Arul gaped at the giant tree, far taller than any tree he had ever seen, including inside the Ancient Forest. Then he realised that his legs really hurt. Folding his body onto the carpet of pine needles with a grunt, Arul looked around.

It feels like the outside world hasn't intruded into this place for aeons. Even sounds are hushed, like inside a temple.

Guru Pari offered Arul strips of dried fish, which he found unpleasantly salty. It took some chewing, but he was so hungry that he could have eaten a pinecone. 'We'll camp here overnight,' said Guru Pari as he laid his cloak on the ground. 'You need the rest, and it will be dark soon.' He pressed a black pill on some kind into Arul's palm. 'This should help with those aches.' Exhaustion overcame Arul swiftly as he curled up under his cloak, the trees whispering as eddies of cold air swirled above the glade.

Arul's dreams were troubled, filled with torrents of animals racing past him like the stampede at Blue Lake. But these animals were crying out for him to save them, although he didn't know what. Then he heard something snarling in his dream. Something standing very close to him. The sound drifted into his dreams, then back into the real world, dragging Arul's mind into wakefulness.

His eyelids fluttered open, afraid of what he might see. Not more than three feet away stood a colossal mountain wolf the colour of dirty snow, its midnight black eyes staring at him, cold and soulless.

Focusing into the darkness behind the animal, he vaguely made out the rest of the pack silently watching, their mottled bodies nearly invisible. Only their eyes shone like precious gems in the night.

Waiting.

The pack-leader edged closer, his teeth bared in a snarl. Arul raised his body into a crouch and drew his aruval, hissing as it slid from its leather sheath. As he leaned forward, his amulet fell from his vest, reflecting the firelight like a mirror. Without thinking, Arul's fingers brushed the knot of tiger hair on the leather cord.

In the darkness across the glade, the low rumble of a tiger sounded. Arul felt it pass through his body like an invisible wave, his neck hairs standing on end. The alpha wolf bristled with fear, his head urgently pivoting in the direction of the growl. The other wolves withdrew, dissolving into the gloom. The alpha stared at Arul's pendant, snarling, gradually withdrawing, one slow step at a time, its eyes shining in the dark until they faded like glowing embers in rain.

Arul looked nervously around the glade, searching for the tiger.

There was no sign of one. No breathing sounds, no footsteps, nothing.

Arul decided not to wake Guru Pari, pondering over the strange encounter long into the night while fingering his amulet. Dawn brought a soft grey light to the mountains, seeping into the glade like a dream, a few hardy birds singing in memory of this long-forgotten corner of Kumari Kandam.

As they chewed on more dried fish for breakfast, Arul opened his mouth to tell his Guru about the wolves, but Pari spoke first. 'By the way, Arul. I knew that the wolf pack was there last night.'

Arul sat up straight. 'What? But...but why didn't you help me?'

'I wanted to see how you would handle things. You kept your composure. Well done,' Pari said with a smile, his face crinkling.

Arul wasn't convinced. 'And if I couldn't handle things? Then what?'

His Guru merely touched his own amulet through his cloak and smiled. 'Your Amma left you more than you can imagine, Arul. I'm not just speaking of your amulet.'

What does that mean? These strange animal encounters have something to do with Amma?

Although Guru Pari wouldn't say more, Arul felt a glowing pride when he thought of his Amma's gift living inside him. It felt comforting in the same way that his Appa's cooking was. It felt like *home*.



After they had eaten, Guru Pari stood and walked to the giant pine tree, placing his hand on its rough bark, his head lowered. 'This grandfather of a tree was just a sapling when these paths were built over a thousand years ago.' He paused and craned his neck, looking up. 'Maybe longer.'

I may live for a hundred years, but this tree is over a thousand years old.

Arul closed his eyes and touched the ancient bark gently, running his fingers over the ridges and knots. He prayed for the health of the tree, touching his forehead to the ground. To mountain people, old trees were sacred objects, conscious and ever watchful. Breathing in the woody scent, it felt like the tree had transferred something into him.

Strength.

When Arul stood back up, he saw his Guru walk around the enormous trunk and simply disappear. 'Well come on then!' Guru Pari's voice called out.

Arul walked around the tree, where he found Guru Pari looking into a narrow cleft. 'A hidden entrance?' Arul breathed. His Guru clapped him on the back and laughed.

The gap in the cliff was choked with wild shrubs, but appeared to be wide enough to allow one person at a time. Arul took out his aruval and cut away the scrub until they had a reasonably clear path. He waited for Guru Pari to lead. When it was his turn, Arul squeezed himself between the rocks.

On either side the cliffs towered straight up, covered with immense green vines like tentacles of some mythical sea monster. There was barely enough light to see. Arul nearly panicked, his breathing quickening, but keeping his eyes on Pari's back, he forced himself onward.

I really hate closed spaces.

For some reason, Arul glanced over his shoulder into the glade for an instant, spying someone lurking beneath the pines. His eyes narrowed and looked again, but he saw nothing more. Dismissing it as a result of his tiredness, Arul hurried after his Guru, touching the weathered rock and grimacing, impatient to exit the cleft.

Fortunately for Arul, the cliff-walls opened up until they found themselves in a canyon that pierced the mountain like an enormous crack. Walking through the deep shadows, Pari was silent, the only sounds were their sandals scraping along the rock floor. Above them the sky darkened, shreds of hurrying clouds, a jumble of grey and black.

When Arul looked up again, a bright opening loomed ahead, and they came out onto a grassy slope overlooking a hidden meadow. An extraordinary space filled with a thousand colours, acres of tangled wildflowers, wondrous scents filling the air. 'I call this my secret meadow, although no doubt it had a proper name once. I think I'm the only one to have visited this place in centuries,' Guru Pari announced with a flourish of his arms. 'Come, Arul! Come and see!'

As soon as they walked out from the shelter of the cliffs, a biting wind hit them like a splash of freezing water. Dark clouds filled the sky, swept in from the distant ocean to the west, spilling over the mountain ranges and gathering over the valley. Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled ominously, towering black clouds quickly blotting out the sun. Daylight turned into purple twilight, the meadow taking on an unreal appearance.

'I think we should find shelter under the cliff!' Guru Pari shouted above the rolling thunder. The sky began to spit cold rain, ice needles stinging their necks. They searched the cliff-face, looking for a suitable

overhang. 'There!' Cried Arul, pointing near the canyon exit from which they had emerged. They raced for a rock overhang on top of a slope, huddling there and watching the storm. Forked lightning flashed horizontally across the boiling sky, illuminating the field in blinding pulses.

Arul's eyes widened when he saw the tower.

Intermittent lightning bathed the structure in flashes brighter than the sun. A tapering shape rising above the treeline, like some misplaced lighthouse. Bolts of lightning struck the tower in rapid succession, the spire glowing red-hot, bright against the grey sky.

'What in Vishnu's name is that?' Arul shouted.

Guru Pari's eyes crinkled around the corners as he laughed, the sound rising into the heavens. Arul had a feeling that his life was about to change forever.



Chapter 17



Ancient Secrets

The storm passed as swiftly as it arrived, an untidy mass of clouds rolling over the snow-capped peaks, thunder fading to a distant rumbling far in the mountains. Arul rubbed his face, unsuccessfully trying to warm his frozen cheeks. At that moment, the sun emerged from behind a towering thunderhead, blinding after the dark of the storm. Colours, the like of which he had never seen before, flooded the landscape.

A thousand mountain butterflies rose above the grass, like clouds of twisting ribbons, darting about in an ever-changing dance of ethereal beauty. Their colours appeared to change as the butterflies moved through shifting beams of sunlight. Azure, iridescent green, yellow, purple, and a hundred colours besides.

Swept clean by the storm, the sky shone deep blue, the last shreds of rain-clouds hurrying away. It was like being in a dream where the world was newly created, and all of life shone with a glorious light. Overwhelmed, Arul walked down the slope and sat at the meadow's edge, glancing sideways at Guru Pari. His teacher sat quietly, smiling with a mysterious light in his eyes. They rested in the green meadow for most of the morning, unwilling to break the sense of enchantment.

Guru Pari nodded at the meadow. 'All that you see are actually different forms of energy. They vibrate at various speeds, becoming light, rocks. Even stars. Our ancestors knew how to manipulate energy. *You* know how to manipulate energy.'

'Me? That's a joke, right?' Arul said.

'No joke, Arul. Have you noticed your amulet do strange things? How about animals trying to talk to you in your mind?' Arul puffed out his cheeks and exhaled sharply, his eyes widening.

How did he know?

But his gaze was drawn to the tower, standing west of the meadow on a thickly forested slope. The circular structure soared above the trees for at least a hundred feet, tapering to a graceful point. Arul stared wide-eyed at the metal spire, a spearhead stabbing the sky.

Silent. Ancient.

Guru Pari lapsed into silence. When Arul began to fidget with impatience, Pari spoke again. 'That's a structure built by your ancestors in a past age. We think it is...or *was* a kind of device that sent energy through the air. But some say that they're navigation beacons.'

Arul's mind raced. 'We? What do you mean *we*? Who else is with you?'

Guru Pari smiled. 'That was quick of you. You have a good mind. *We*, refers to me and my kind, Arul.'

'Your kind? You mean village teachers?'

Guru Pari chuckled. 'Yes, I suppose that's what you know me as, isn't it? I was born in Sailem and lived there until the Royal Scouts selected me when I was your age. I am...I *was* a Royal Philosopher. Maybe scientist is a better term.' His face looked pained. 'Until I returned to Sailem with...'

'Left with who?'

'Nothing, Arul. Let's not worry about that now.' Guru Pari stood up and led Arul through the meadow, butterflies swirling around their heads. They came across a bush laden with small red berries. Pari nodded.

‘Go ahead, it’s safe to eat.’

Arul plucked a large handful, cramming them into his mouth, feeling them burst with a taste-explosion somewhere between lemons and mangoes. He swallowed and wiped his mouth. ‘Guru, will I get to meet those visiting Scouts?’

‘I suspect that those Royal Scouts are not looking for any old youngster. I think they’re seeking *you* out, Arul, although they don’t know your name or where you live,’ Pari said.

‘How could they know about me?’ Arul’s face dropped. ‘I’m nobody.’ He slumped onto the grass, his body suddenly weary.

Guru Pari smiled. ‘The reason you are here, Arul, and not your friends, is that your bloodline needs to be explained. Your Appa wanted it kept secret from you, but I convinced him otherwise.’ He paused, stroking his beard. ‘Your ancestors, through your Amma’s bloodline, have some kind of ancient connection to these towers. You need to go to the Royal City of Ailas to discover who you are.’

Arul’s throat tightened. ‘Does my Amma live there? Will I get to meet her?’

Guru Pari’s gaze lifted to a distant mountain, struggling with the answer. ‘Quite possibly.’ Arul’s heart leapt at those words. He couldn’t wait to get to Ailas if it meant finding his mother.

Guru Pari looked at Arul, his eyes sad. ‘With your Appa’s permission, you and I can find the Scouts and return with them to the capital. The answers you need are there. It is your karma. Your path.’

Arul stared at the ground, his mind whirling. Guru Pari sat next to him and waited patiently. Arul let his fingers rest on the cool grass and closed his eyes. Hope for his Amma surged inside, yet from somewhere deeper, something else stirred. A longing to see the wider world.

Who am I?

As though in answer, iridescent butterflies gathered around Arul’s head, their wings brushing his face very softly. In his mind, it felt like a faint breeze was stirring from a great distance. Something spoke.

Get up, Navigator.

Arul shook his head, not sure of what he’d heard. Guru Pari stood and offered his hand to Arul. They continued across the grassy expanse. Reaching the western edge of the meadow, they entered a pine forest, sloping upwards towards the tower. The gnarled trees barely seemed to hold on to life in the harsh conditions. They walked past mounds of snow, a biting wind rising and falling through the branches.

Guru Pari clapped Arul on his back. ‘Not far now!’ .

As they weaved through the trees, Arul couldn’t shake the feeling that they were being watched. He turned and dropped his head, pretending to kick at the snow, his eyes raised. Watching. Someone darted out from the cliffs on the far side of the meadow. Arul squinted hard. The figure looked familiar.

‘Guru, I think someone’s following us,’ Arul said.

‘I know. It’s nothing to worry about, trust me.’

Arul’s eyes flicked to his Guru.

Nothing to worry about?

They left the meadow and wound their way through the trees, Guru Pari continuing his explanation. ‘Royal Philosophers study the past. The forces of nature. We’re always experimenting and trying to make sense of things. Like you do,’ he said, looking back at Arul.

‘I do?’ Arul replied distractedly.

‘Maybe you could become a Royal Philosopher in the Academy.’

‘Me? You’re joking!’ Arul laughed, bitterness rising up inside. ‘I live in Sailem, a million miles from the Academy. And I don’t think they’d accept the son of a forester.’

Guru Pari only smiled. ‘Oh, I think they’ll accept *you*.’ Before Arul could ask what Pari meant by that curious remark, his Guru suddenly halted, Arul nearly running into him. ‘Here we are,’ Guru Pari

announced.

Arul studied the tower, his heart racing. It soared skyward for a hundred feet, smooth grey stone gleaming in the sunlight. He stepped closer and examined the surface more closely. For something that old, it showed no sign of weathering. The stone was in perfect condition, the blocks fitted so expertly that he could barely see the joins between them. 'What are those copper bands that circle it?' He asked Pari.

'It looks like copper, doesn't it? But I don't think it is. It's not discoloured at all.

Arul turned to his Guru. 'We can't make things like this nowadays, can we? We're barbarians compared to our ancestors.' His voice trailed off sadly.

Then something very odd happened.

'Do you feel like joining us, Keeran?' Guru Pari called out without looking away from the tower. 'Well? Don't skulk about like that! Come on out!'

A bush not twenty feet from them began to shiver, and up popped Keeran's rather sheepish looking face. He stared into the mountains as if he suddenly found them particularly interesting.

Arul gaped at his friend, shock disintegrating into anger. 'Keeran! What on earth!?'

'No need to yell at him,' Guru Pari said. 'I think his curiosity got the better of him. Wouldn't you say, Keeran?'

Keeran nodded energetically.

'He's an idiot, that's what he is!' Arul growled.

Keeran plucked leaves from his hair as he casually walked towards them, beaming at his Guru, then staring up at the tower with great seriousness. Arul rolled his eyes and shrugged. He had to admit that he felt a little happier now that Keeran was with them, invited or not.

Suddenly a tiny yellow bird flashed past in panic, twittering madly as it raced away over the meadow. The tower started to hum with a deep vibrating sound, Keeran's hair rising up as though something invisible had grabbed it.

The same hum I heard at Blue Lake. It's from the tower!

It seemed not of this world, a deep thrumming that shook Arul's bones as the sound loudened in sudden jumps. He covered his ears, backing away from the tower, his body feeling like it was shaking apart.

Arul collapsed to his knees and screamed, eyes searching for Keeran. His friend's eyes bulged, palms pressing his ears like Arul. Next to Keeran, Guru Pari fell to the ground unconscious, his cloak settling about him like a pile of washing. There was a bright flash from on top the tower. Lightning in slow motion, unfolding from the spire before evaporating into the sky.

Then the hum vanished, the silence of the mountains washing back over the land. The sudden quiet was almost as deafening as the humming. Keeran rolled on the stony ground and moaned. Arul recovered his senses enough to scramble next to Pari, his eyes white with fear. 'Guru! Guru! Wake up!'

Pari's eyelids fluttered open. 'Now that was *not* supposed to happen,' he whispered.

Arul sat back. 'Really? You didn't expect that?'

'No, Arul, I didn't.'

'But you know everything! What *was* that sound from the tower?'

Guru Pari sat up. 'No idea, but I think I should find out. It won't be easy, but this is certainly what's driving the animals off the mountains.' He regarded Arul curiously. 'You should come with me and help find the answers.'

'Me? Maybe...after I'm locked up at home for a year! Appa's really going to give it to me when I get back.'

Keeran sat up, looking a bit stunned. He shook his head. 'My ears hurt! So does my head.' He rubbed his face. 'Why did I have to sneak after you?'

Arul shot him an exasperated look. 'You're asking *me*?'

Without warning, a rumbling started in the mountains and worked its way towards the tower. 'Now what?' Yelled Arul over the racket. The ground started to shake and heave; pebbles all over the slope hopping into the air.

The tower began rocking to and fro, its' bricks falling away with loud snapping noises. Guru Pari took one look at the swaying tower and shouted, 'We need to get away!' He struggled to his feet with the help of the boys. Next to the tower, a crack opened up in the earth and raced away into the forest in a giant zigzag.

Arul stepped back as bits of the tower rained down, its' copper bands snapping off, the metallic twangs echoing through the valley. They staggered like drunks as the earthquake intensified, Guru Pari grabbing Arul's arm and hobbling as fast as he could manage. Keeran didn't need any encouragement to run away, overtaking Arul like a rabbit in full flight.

It wasn't a moment too soon. The tower's base cracked wide open, sending the structure toppling over in slow-motion. It crashed down over the pine trees, a mighty boom sounding as the tower hit the earth. A cloud of white dust billowed over half the mountainside. 'Vishnu protect us,' Arul prayed.

Guru Pari looked faint as he stood there covered in fine grey dust. 'That tower stood here for thousands of years.' His mouth turned downwards, his bright eyes filled with sadness.

'Now what?' Arul scratched his head, expecting an answer. Instead, his Guru collapsed with a groan. Arul rushed over to him, his face white with dust. 'Guru Pari! Wake up!'



Chapter 18



The Cavern of Light

Arul and Keeran knelt next to their Guru, anxious faces leaning close. Keeran unstopped his water-skin and wet a strip of cloth from his satchel, wiping his teacher's face. Eventually, Pari's stirred and his eyes flickered open. 'That tower really knocked me about I'm afraid,' he said with a weak smile.

Keeran brought his water-skin to Guru Pari's lips. After a few sips Pari began spluttering. 'Enough,' he said, coughing in fits. He looked at the boys. 'Obviously, it hasn't affected either of you. I must be getting old.' He lay back, his dusty robes making him look like a beggar lying on the side of a road, his body thin and weak.

Arul watched his Guru, his brow knitted with concern. 'Can you get up?'

Guru Pari sighed. 'I'll be fine, but I can't go on right now. I'll give you directions to a certain cavern. I wanted to show you the place.' Pari caught his breath. 'I needed to do something vital that will help all the mountain villages, but now *you'll* have to do that task.'

'Cavern? Is it dark?' Asked Keeran, sitting back on his haunches.

'Yes, Keeran. Come back here when you're done. I won't be going anywhere.' He reached into his satchel. 'Oh yes. You'll need this.' He handed Arul a curious disc of black metal, unreadable symbols etched into it.

'What's this?' Arul turned it over in his fingers. It was warm and his hands tingled when he touched it.

'That Arul, is what I meant to use in the cavern.' Guru Pari pointed. 'Over that ridge and down the reverse slope. Follow the main corridor until you reach a shaft, then drop the disk in.'

'Why, what will it do?'

'I really don't know. It's an ancient artefact from the vaults of the Royal Academy. I studied wall carvings in a lost language only a few in the academy could read. They spoke of these disks of energy and when to use them.' Pari's face looked even more aged than usual. He grimaced in pain. 'Now is that time. Go!'

Arul and Keeran began to climb the hill, their faces tense.

'Don't forget to cut a branch for a torch! You'll need it in there!' Guru Pari called out as the boys re-entered the pine forest, white and dusty from the tower's collapse. 'After you drop it in, start running!'

Keeran froze in his tracks and turned around with an incredulous look. 'What!?'

Arul pulled on Keeran's arm. 'Come on! If he says run, we run!'

Following Guru Pari's directions, they walked away from the remains of the destroyed tower, cresting a ridge before hopping and sliding down a gravelly slope. Arriving at a flat, stony place, they eyed a towering cliff of jet-black stone with some nervousness. It was a desolate place with no greenery, the blue mountain sky contrasting sharply with the black rock. 'This place is really cheerful, isn't it?' Keeran said with a shudder.

Arul paused, listening to every sound.

Even the birds fear this place. It feels like this mountain is the keeper of something long forgotten.

They stood facing the entrance to an enormous artificial cavern, forgotten by all except a handful of

wise men. It was framed by massive granite blocks that made up a rectangular entrance, tall as a large tree in the Ancient Forest. Around the yawning entrance, snow drifts higher than a grown man lay heaped against the stone.

There were no carvings or writings of any kind visible on it. Unlike other ancient ruins that Arul had seen, the people that built this seemed uninterested in fanciful decoration. This was no temple. It spoke of practical engineering and an advanced ability to shape hard granite without tools. It was as though something had melted the rock like wax.

Keeran halted, his eyes fixed on the darkness beyond the gate. 'Where does this lead?' He croaked

'I don't know, but we have to go in.' Although the air was chilly, Arul broke out in a fear-driven sweat. 'We'll build a fire to light this torch,' Arul said, picking the leaves off a pine branch he had cut in the forest.

Keeran pulled out some pine twigs from his satchel, making a neat pile next to the gate, Arul sparking it to life with his flint and stone. The tiny fire spluttered to life beneath pine-scented smoke, Keeran holding the makeshift torch while Arul wrapped a rag around one end.

'Let me get my oil flask,' Arul murmured, reaching into his bag. He poured oil onto the torch, then dipped it into the fire, watching it ignite with a whoosh. 'A Forester never leaves home without fire-oil,' he said with a wide grin, pausing in front of the entrance, holding the torch above his head before stepping forward. 'Now stay close!'

Keeran didn't need convincing, following Arul so closely that he ran into him more than once. They made their way down a vast square tunnel that sloped straight down into the mountain, the granite walls smooth and featureless like black glass. They ignored the smaller side tunnels just as Guru Pari instructed, always descending,

After some time, Arul glanced back over his shoulder and saw the entranceway was now a tiny bright rectangle in the distance. He fought down a rising wave of panic when he thought about how far into the bowels of the earth they had walked.

Then Arul suddenly stopped and Keeran crashed into him with a grunt. They peered down a pitch-black shaft nearly twenty feet across, precise and smooth, obviously made by humans. Arul peered at the torchlight flickering off the shaft walls.

Who can make something like this? What did they use to pierce solid rock?

The pit vanished into the inky black of an everlasting night. Except it wasn't dark at the very bottom. Some kind of glow was coming from the very base of the pit, silvery blue, like pulses of moonlight.

There's light down there.

Arul stepped back in fear. 'It smells of burnt air. Some kind of fire?' Keeran whispered.

Arul shrugged, recovering his nerve and peering down hundreds of feet to the silvery glow. A river of light appeared to be flowing under the mountains, though for what purpose, Arul could only guess. 'It's moving from south to north, along the Meeru Ranges. It's source has to be in the south,' Arul said.

At that moment the light cut off, plunging the shaft into pitch darkness. 'Oh my! Ganesh! Vishnu! Shiva! Help us!' Keeran cried out.

'Any other Gods you want to call on?' Arul's said.

It doesn't hurt to ask for help,' Keeran said, a little hurt. 'I wonder if everything was once powered by this light?'

'You mean cities and whatever was up in these mountains?'

Keeran nodded, his face eerie in the flickering torchlight. 'Maybe that tower needed this light energy and went crazy when it began cutting out. Began humming.' He exhaled sharply. 'Let's throw that disk in and get out of this creepy place!'

Arul pulled out the black disc that his Guru had given him. 'Okay then, here it goes...'

breath and tossed it into the shaft.

They waited.

Nothing happened.

‘It didn’t work!’ Keeran breathed.

‘I suppose it must be too old,’ Arul sighed and turned away. Then out of the corner of his eye he saw a disturbance over the river of light. It began as a ripple, rapidly growing into bolts of pale blue lightning, racing up the shaft, pushing a blast of hot air into the boy’s faces.

‘Run,’ Arul said.

‘What?’

‘RUN!’

They dashed towards the entrance just as the lightning exploded from the shaft, filling the corridor with a terrifying blue glow. Running as fast as they could, the bright outline of the entrance seemed impossibly far. Arul felt the heat of the blast on his back, ready to turn them to ash.

We’re not going to make it.

Yelling, they tumbled out of the cavern and rolled to the ground, gasping like half-drowned men. Keeran recovered first, pulling Arul away from the gateway and across the stony ground. They flung themselves behind a boulder, cowering with their hands over their heads. The entrance to the cavern glowed with an unnatural flickering light. ‘Something’s happening!’ Arul shouted. The hair on his arms stood up as though a lightning storm approached, the odour of burnt earth filling his nostrils.

As Keeran prayed, wild-eyed with fear, a nearby pine tree exploded into flames.

Then just as quickly as it arose, the lightning receded into the depths, leaving the cavern dark once more. ‘I hope that was worth it,’ Arul muttered, his voice shaky.

‘Worth it? We don’t even know what we’ve done!’ Said Keeran, biting his knuckles nervously.

Under his vest, Arul’s amulet pulsed to life with a flickering glow that matched the river of light far below.



Chapter 19



Yearnings from the Heart

Arul and Keeran retraced their steps to the fallen tower, scrambling up the gravel slope, then jogging downhill through stands of pine trees. They found Guru Pari sitting where they had left him, looking a little better. He waved to them with a cheerful smile. ‘See anything interesting?’

‘You might say that!’ Spluttered Keeran.

Arul put his hands on his knees and caught his breath. ‘There was a river of light under the mountain.’

‘And why did you try and kill us with your disk?’ Keeran added.

Guru Pari raised an eyebrow at Keeran. ‘I wasn’t trying to kill you. I may have saved you, if the disk worked and restored the energy flow. I’ll tell you more when we make camp tonight.’

Arul unsheathed his knife and fashioned a crude walking stick for his Guru, leaving the fallen tower and crossing the meadow under a late afternoon sun. The butterflies had vanished, leaving an empty field, yellow in the slanting mountain light. Before Arul stepped into the ravine, he gazed back at the meadow and its masses of wildflowers, now fading into shadow.

I’d like to come back here someday. It must be the most beautiful spot on earth.

Yet deep inside he had a feeling that he would never see this place again. He didn’t know why, but a sense of dread swept over him. He followed Guru Pari through the cliffs, around the giant pine tree, and into the glade. They camped overnight, enjoying mounds of berries collected from the meadow, Keeran cramming great handfuls into his mouth and giggling as the purple juice streamed down his chin.

The light faded around the glade, fingers of sunlight trickling through the pine trees in deep orange hues. When night fell, they sat around the campfire listening to the wood pop and crackle, firelight pressing back the dark. ‘You promised to tell us about the river of light,’ Arul said to Pari, trying not to sound impatient.

‘Yes! Tell us, Guru!’ Keeran chorused.

‘What else do you know of the tower?’ Arul asked.

‘Well, actually this isn’t the only tower. They are found all over the Meeru Ranges, along the west of Kumari Kadam. The thing is, we don’t know why they were only built along the mountains.’ Pari sighed. ‘Alas, one of many ancient secrets we don’t understand.’

‘So we used to know about this stuff?’ Keeran asked.

‘Yes, well our ancestors did,’ Guru Pari said. ‘So Arul, what do you make of the marvellous work of your forefathers?’

‘My forefathers?’

Guru Pari reached for his pendant. ‘Your amulet, like mine, mark us out as descendants of the Navigators.’ He fixed his eyes on Arul. ‘In the old language it translates as, those you seek a way through the stars.’

Arul pulled out his amulet, almost dropping it as a beautiful silver glow began pulsing from its gem.

I’ve never seen it do this before.

‘The who?’ He said.

‘The *Navigators*, dummy!’ Keeran whispered.

Their Guru tilted his head back and laughed. ‘The gold pendant has been changed many times, but the stone is thousands of years old.’

Keeran and Arul stared at Guru Pari in awe. Finally, Arul spoke up. ‘So what *is* this gem?’

‘Your stone, like mine, were instruments of the Navigators who used them to manipulate great energy, far beyond my own abilities.’

‘So you *can* use your stone!’ Arul cried out. ‘Can you teach me how to use mine?’

‘Have patience, Arul. In time I will.’

‘Are these Navigators the same people that helped our ancestors reach Kumari Kandam from the ocean?’ Keeran asked.

‘I never heard of them!’ Arul said.

‘You don’t read as much as I do!’ Keeran replied smugly.

Pari smiled and warmed his hands near the flames. ‘What else can you tell us, Keeran?’

‘Um...that these Navigators found a way across the ocean for our people after the Gods destroyed our homeland of three kingdoms...or three suns. I can never get the translation right. The writings are similar to ours, yet quite different. Ancient and full of complex mathematical symbols.’

Guru Pari stood up and stretched, gazing at the stars, clear and bright as crystals. He looked down at the boys, face half-shadowed. ‘They didn’t find a way over the ocean. They found a path through all of that.’ He pointed into the night sky.

Arul and Keeran were silent for some time. When Keeran spoke, his voice quivered. ‘How can that be, Guru? What chariot can cross all of *that*?’

‘Vimana,’ said Arul. ‘Great Vimana. Ships that could cross the stars. They’re not made up stories, are they, Guru?’

Pari smiled. ‘No, Arul, they’re not fables. What’s more, beings that could cross the stars could certainly build rivers of light energy. And towers to do who-knows-what.’ He fingered his pendant. ‘Even make this stone.’

‘How come I don’t have a stone?’ Asked Keeran.

‘Because your bloodline does not come from the Navigators,’ Guru Pari replied, his eyebrow arching.

‘Oh, I see,’ Keeran said, his voice falling.

‘Don’t worry! Your ancestors might have been priests out there!’ Arul said. Keeran’s face brightened.

Arul looked up into the sky. ‘I wonder why the Gods destroyed our home in the stars?’

Pari sighed. ‘That Arul, is a question with a terrible and unknown answer.’

Arul imagined all those people fleeing some tragic apocalypse. Crossing unimaginable distances on star-voyaging ships. *His* people. A wave of profound sadness overcame him, washing over his heart like something half-forgotten and unimaginably ancient.

Are the Gods so cruel?

Keeran stared up at the sweeping constellations glittering overhead. ‘Do you think we’ll ever get to go back there?’

Pari had a wistful, faraway look in his eyes. ‘I wonder about that, Keeran, I really do. Perhaps one day.’

A soft wind sighed through the branches of the giant pine tree, silence blanketing the trio, each deep in his own thoughts. So many questions seethed inside Arul that he felt like bursting. ‘So the river of light feeds the towers?’

‘It and others like it. They’ve been feeding an inexhaustible energy supply to the coastal cities. Far too much for the light-lanterns that still remain in Ailas. We can only assume that in the distant past, our people

used great machines of some kind,' Pari said. 'The scriptures also mention a sister continent to ours that lies on the far side of the world. Ancient vimana landed there, while others came here. We do not know the land's name, nor have we ever found it, although I wish we had.'

'And the animals fleeing the mountains? How does that fit into what's happening?' Arul said.

Pari adjusted his cloak. 'That interruption in the flow of energy you described is, I think, the cause of the tower failing. The infernal noise it made drove the wildlife mad. Now that this tower has fallen, the animals will return. Sailem is safe for now. But...'

'But what?' Arul said, his face tense.

'These earthquakes occurred at the same time as the tower malfunctioned. It's just one tower of many. What happens when the river of light ceases to flow and all the towers fail? I feel that something worse than animals attacks will happen. Something far worse.'

That sent a chill down Arul's spine. Great and ancient forces were at work here. Forces that he didn't understand. 'All that effort to supply light and heat? Nothing more? That doesn't make sense.'

'In ancient times the energy conduits were probably used for other things, but we don't know what. When I was at the Royal Academy, no one knew its source, except that it is somewhere in the far south,' Pari said

'What's the Academy? Is it a school in the capital?' Arul asked.

'No, it's not in Ailas. It is actually in the mountains to the south, where our greatest minds study. I lived there for decades, studying mathematics, philosophy, science. You name it, we studied it.'

Arul stared at his Guru poking the campfire with a stick, gradually working up the courage to ask the one question that he really wanted to ask. Now was that time. 'Guru Pari, did you know my Amma?'

Keeran gasped. At first, Arul thought that Guru Pari wasn't going to answer him. The three of them stared into the fire silently. Nearby, the ancient pine tree sighed in the wind and seemed to be waiting with timeless patience.

'Yes, I knew her.' Pari's voice was thick with emotion. He took a deep breath.

'And?' Arul asked. He stared at Pari, feeling his chest tighten. 'Appa does not speak of her. He says I must wait until I'm older.'

'I must respect the wishes of your Appa, Arul. It's only right.'

Arul gazed at his feet, tears forming in his eyes. He thought that Guru Pari of all people would tell him the answer he craved. Pari fixed his eyes on Arul and thought for a long moment. 'Both Seri and I knew your Amma.'

Arul wiped his eyes. Pari took a deep breath. He looked so very sad. Old memories seemed to be ebbing and flowing across his face like an ocean tide. 'Seri and I brought her up to Sailem when she was pregnant with you, all those years ago.'

Arul swallowed hard. 'Brought her? From where? Where was she from?' He tensed, waiting for some terrible secret to be revealed. The trees creaked under a gust of icy wind, raining a shower of pine needles around them.

Guru Pari tilted his head. 'You always believed she was from the village, didn't you? Well, she wasn't. She was from Ailas. On the coast.'

'You mean the Royal City? But why come with you to live in Sailem? It's so far from everything and so... *nothing*.'

Guru Pari stoked the fire again, struggling with his next words. 'That part I cannot tell you without your Appa's permission, Arul. I...simply cannot.' Then he was silent again, the campfire hissing as sparks showered into the night like tiny suns.

Arul hung his head in despair, clenching his hands into fists as hard as rocks. He could feel the truth

about his Amma fleeing from his grasp. He knew that his Guru had nothing more to add. Arul lay down, his heart full of sadness. Keeran quietly put his hand on Arul's shoulder, close to tears himself.



The stars wheeled overhead as the night deepened, the fire burning down into a heap of glowing coals. Arul watched the ancient pine tree long after the others went to sleep, grief like a dark river inside his heart. As he dozed, he heard a voice heavy with age reach into his mind.

Patience, Child of the Mountains.

Arul opened his eyes and raised himself on one elbow. 'What was that, Guru Pari?' But his Guru was fast asleep. All he heard was the soft creaking of the giant tree's branches. Puzzled, he lay down again and continued to stare into the night sky.

Overhead, the planet Chevaai, abode of war, gazed unblinking at him. Arul gazed at the red planet for hours, as if in a deep trance. Then the descendant of the star-voyaging Navigators cried himself to sleep.



Chapter 20



Enemy at the Gates

Arul woke to the insistent twittering of a red-throated bulbul. He blinked and let the light fall on his eyes, the golden colours of dawn brightening into a clear blue morning. Guru Pari was sitting cross-legged near the ashes of the campfire, eyes closed, his back very straight, meditating. Arul jerked himself upright. ‘Guru, why didn’t you wake me at dawn?’

Pari opened one eye. ‘Hmm? Well, you needed the sleep, don’t you think?’ He was right. Arul felt exhausted, and the long rest had done him good. They had to wake Keeran though, and it wasn’t an easy task.

It was late morning before they broke camp and hiked downhill to the mountain road. Arul found it a lot easier going downhill, and his breathing became effortless once more. As he walked, he mulled over all that he had heard the night before.

Am I a Navigator? What does that even mean for me?

They journeyed all day until the sun was low on the horizon as they stood on the pass overlooking the lake, the failing light turning the water the deepest blue. A thin column of smoke rose lazily from the campsite hidden behind a ring of boulders. Arul wanted to be with Navira and Jaya so badly that it hurt. Grinning, Keeran clapped him on the back and pointed. Jaya was running like the wind towards them, barely slowing on the steep climb.

Arul waited with a huge smile on his face as Jaya sprinted into his open arms, knocking him over and licking him in a frenzy of affection. It pushed Arul’s grief about his parents back into the dark places of his mind, although he knew like the outgoing tide, it would return in time. Pari had often said that life was so much like an ocean.

Guru Pari beamed at Jaya and began to stride downhill towards the lake, humming some old village folk song. Down by the lake, Navira and Master Seri figures appeared from behind a boulder, waved madly. Arul hurried downhill, waving as Jaya leapt about, tail wagging madly.

The party reunited down by the lake with a flurry of hugs and laughter. ‘So you *did* sneak off after them!’ Navira said to Keeran. ‘We had no idea where you’d gone, although I suspected you’d followed them.’ Keeran lowered his head, ashamed of his recklessness.

‘Don’t worry, Navira,’ Guru Pari said. ‘I knew he was behind us all along.’ Keeran dropped his head even lower.

Soon it was dark, and they sat around the campfire listening to Arul’s account of the journey. Navira’s eyes grew round as he described the meadow and all of its wonders. Later that night, Keeran and Arul told Navira about the river of light, the tower, and the Navigators.

She shook her head. ‘That can’t be true, can it? My head feels like it’s going to explode!’ She stood up and rubbed her arms. ‘But it’s good to know our village is safe from those predators.’ Then she smiled. ‘It’s nice to know that we came from such greatness.’ Arul and Keeran happily agreed on that point. They, like their ancestors, were children of the stars.



The night grew colder and the sky filled with black rainclouds, a steady wind pushing in from the west. They ate a meal of spiced lake fish and fried onions before stretching out around the campfire. Before long it began to rain, heavy drops of freezing water splattering off the rocks, turning the lake into a bleak grey expanse.

They ran for the shelter of Seri's hut, huddling in the gloomy interior as the rain thundered down. 'Someone needs to go to the capital and warn the King of this problem with the towers. He needs to help other villages. The ones near towers, if any of them still stand,' Navira said.

'I'll go to Ailas and confer with the King. We've had some dealings in the past, so he might listen to my pleas,' Guru Pari said. The others regarded him with wide eyes as thunder ripped through the air with a deafening crack.

'You've actually met the King?' Arul stammered.

Seri chuckled softly in the corner. 'Had *some* dealings? I'd say you've had *some dealings* with His Majesty. I wonder if he'll listen to you or execute you.'

'What does he mean?' Asked Keeran.

Pari coughed. 'Well...the King and I had a difference of opinion regarding the right of one's children to choose who they marry.' He glanced at Arul.

'Who got married?' Arul said. But his Guru didn't say any more, shifting closer to Seri and talking to him in a hushed voice.

They stayed inside all night as the rain lessened, but kept up a steady patter on the roof. Arul stood near a shuttered window and thought about who would go to the Royal City with Guru Pari, and who would go to back to Sailem. He lay down, covering himself with his cloak and yawned, a feeling that he would see Ailas in the near future settling over him.

It was a good feeling.



The morning was cold and damp, mist lying over the lake in white clouds like mounds of cotton. Seri stood at their camp to bid them farewell, keenly observing the flurry of activity. They were packed and ready soon after dawn.

Seri shook hands with all of them in turn, pausing in front of Navira. He handed her a rolled piece of leather. 'You do remember what I've taught you about the kinds of healing herbs and plants in the mountains?' He said. 'Study this scroll well. Perhaps we shall meet again.' Then he shifted to Arul and patted him on the shoulder, leaning close and speaking in a low voice. 'Guru Pari told you that we knew your Amma did he? Come back and see me sometime and I'll tell you more.'

Arul looked curiously at Seri, wanting to ask him so many things. But there was no time. He grasped Seri's rough hands. 'Thank you for helping us. And thank you for helping my Amma.'

Seri clenched his jaw and nodded, eyes filling with tears. Arul smiled at him and turned south to the Brown Hills, knowing it was time to leave the valley of the Blue Lake.



Chapter 21



Flight to Sailem

They had barely reached the southern end of the lake when Navira turned to look at the valley, a gusting wind whipping her hair about her face. ‘Who’s that up there?’ She cried out, her voice echoing off the cliffs. The rest of the party spun and looked in the direction of her pointing finger. A man riding a horse was visible high on the north pass, his spear glinting in the morning sun, a black cloth talaipakkai barely visible on his head.

‘Is he one of ours?’ Arul asked Pari.

Guru Pari stood motionless for a long moment before speaking, his voice edged with tension. ‘Not ours. If I’m not mistaken, the style of his talaipakkai makes him an advance scout of the Korkai army.’

Navira blurted out, ‘But what would a Korkai soldier be doing in our kingdom?’ A second scout on horseback joined the first soldier, appearing to talk to each other for a moment. They turned their horses around and trotted down the far side of the pass, vanishing from sight. Navira’s eyes widened as she realised the answer to her own question. ‘Oh! You mean...?’

‘Invasion,’ Arul stated flatly. He knew from Pari’s lessons that Korkai was the next city-state north of Ailas, followed by Kavatapuram on the very northern tip of Kumari Kandam. The three kingdoms had been at peace for centuries, but by the looks of things, Korkai had other plans.

Seri waved at them frantically from across the lake. ‘He wants to speak to us,’ Pari said, striding towards his old friend.

They jogged towards Seri as he hobbled around the lake, his skinny legs slipping on the gravel. He paused when he reached them, trying to catch his breath, his watery eyes fixed on Guru Pari. ‘You need to go back to your village to warn them. Then go to Ailas and tell the King about this. Those scouts will be back with an army, mark my words.’ He wheezed and coughed, his voice going up in pitch as he became agitated. ‘They’re looking for a way through the mountains. They’ll reach the Royal City before the King can mobilise our army!’

Guru Pari looked thoughtful. ‘It’s possible that their spies have reported all of the earthquakes and chaos in the mountains. If Korkai wanted to invade, it would make sense to take advantage of our troubles and strike.’

Seri’s eyes widened. ‘Could be, Pari. Korkai has used the peace to build up their forces. The snakes!’

‘It’s a surprise invasion? Like what happened five hundred years ago in the Vallanadu Forest?’ Arul said, his heartbeat rising.

Master Seri gripped Arul’s shoulder. ‘Yes, just like that. Go now! They won’t bother an old hermit like me. Especially if I’m a little crazy, eh?’ He cackled as he waved goodbye. ‘May Vishnu guide you!’

They left Seri and walked at a brisk pace towards the Brown Hills, Keeran and Navira whispering excitedly in the rear. Guru Pari called out to them. ‘We need to move fast! I don’t know how far behind the main enemy force is.’

They left the dark cliffs of the lake valley behind and following the road south, entering the open landscape of the Brown Hills. Angry clouds swept across a windy sky, the unending grass rippling in shimmering waves.

Briefly resting at midday, Arul chewed on strips of tasteless dried fish without much enthusiasm. When it was time to go on, the teens rose with a collective groan, racing to catch up with Guru Pari who was already striding over the winding road, his footsteps brisk.

After many hours of walking, they reached the place where Arul and Pari had battled the sabre-tooth lions. Arul stared at the carcasses, now stripped of their flesh, his arrows lying amongst the bones like wooden ribs. 'Must have been jackals,' he said. Navira shuddered and tugged Arul's hand, willing them past this place of dark memories. Even Jaya took a wide detour around the corpses, sniffing the air, his eyes wary.

Arul settled into the mind-numbing routine of walking mile after mile, his body straining to keep up the pace through the grassy hills. The day passed without incident, the dry brown land holding up a featureless blue sky. The only visible animal was an eagle circling far above, a dark smudge in the endless blue.

Although they reached the ruined inn by mid-afternoon, Guru Pari didn't stop to make camp. 'We must hurry! We can walk another few miles before sundown,' he urged.

Keeran moaned as they passed the desolate inn. 'Can't we sit down for a minute?' For once, Navira looked at him with sympathy in her eyes.

Jaya on the other hand, would often trot ahead and look back at them. *Why are humans so weak and slow?*

Arul looked at Jaya sharply. *Is that you inside my mind?*

Who else?

Arul rubbed his face vigorously. *Could be my exhaustion playing tricks.*

No, it's not. It's me, Jaya. I've always talked to you, but you seemed to be deaf.

Arul focused his mind. *But no human can hear animals this way!*

I know. But you're a descendant of ancient Star Navigators. You bear the stone of Vishnu.

Arul grasped his amulet, feeling a little awestruck. *Vishnu? Did he really make this?*

You should ask him someday.

Arul staggered, his head spinning. *What's happening to me? Is this what it feels like when someone goes mad?*



By the time they made camp for the night it was spitting icy rain, a grey sky masking the sunset, the day fading into a gloom that matched Arul's mood. The teens shivered as they lay exhausted on the grass, their bodies pushed to breaking point. Guru Pari ordered them to eat and drink before they fell asleep, huddled together with Jaya for warmth.



Their Guru stood guard through the night, looking out over the sea of hills, so dark that he couldn't make out where the horizon was. The sky grew heavier with rain, the icy drops of water ever larger. Distant thunder rolled over the lonely hills, Pari tugging his hood lower and hunching his shoulders.

Sometime past midnight, he abruptly staggered from exhaustion, his body swaying. Steadying himself with some difficulty, he reached into his cloak and touched his pendant. The jewel burst into light for an instant, Pari closing his eyes as warmth filled his body. For the remainder of the night, he stood alert, his body infused with the strange energy.



The next day was even worse. It rained without pause, utterly soaking them to the bone. It was like walking through an unending grey curtain, the smell of wet grass and mud seeping through every pore.

Guru Pari appeared to be unaffected by the cold, irritating Arul immensely. He studied Pari with awe, unable to understand how his Guru could stay awake all night, yet not be tired. Arul shivered uncontrollably, staring miserably at his sandals splashing through pools of freezing water, gleaming like metal on the grey stone road.

Guru Pari glanced back at the stumbling teens and came to a stop, rummaging around his pack in search of something. The teens gathered around their Guru, blinking water out of their eyes. Withdrawing his hand from his pack, Guru Pari produced a small clay vessel, and breaking the red wax seal, handed it to Arul. 'Take a small sip.'

Suspiciously eyeing the container, Arul put it to his lips and took a small gulp. He coughed violently, his throat burning. Just as he thought the day couldn't get any worse, he felt a warm glow in his stomach, the heat spreading outwards through his body, until even his fingers felt warm.

Keeran and Navira took a sip in turn, then they looked at Guru Pari with their mouths hanging open. They were soaked and tired, but it could have been a warm summer's day for all they cared. Arul found himself picking up the pace, and they covered a good distance that day, the effects of the medicine lasting well into the night.

When they camped at sunset, it had finally stopped raining, allowing Arul to light a campfire. He tended it until it was steadily burning, a column of thick white smoke billowing up like steam from a boiling pot of rice.

What I'd give for a bowl of hot rice...

In the far distance between two hills, Arul spied the dark line of the forest. He suddenly longed to see his Appa. Hot tears sprang in his eyes, his chest tight. He stared into the night sky, praying for the forgetfulness of sleep. Ragged clouds blew across the inky sky. In the spaces between them, sharp points of starlight shone cold and white.



Arul woke as raindrops splashed off his face, running down his neck in icy rivulets. Opening his eyes with a gasp, his eyes focused on a leaden sky, clouds hovering so low that they appeared to touch the land.

Another day sloshing through the wet.

Navira and Keeran looked at their Guru with gloomy faces. 'I'm sorry but there's no more medicine left I'm afraid,' said Guru Pari. The teens gnawed at cold leftovers, slouched in their soaked clothes and looking quite miserable. Jaya was already further ahead on the road, watching the deep green outline of the forest.

They began walking as dawn cast its sullen light over the hills, the distant forest growing ever larger as the morning wore on. In time, Arul made out the tops of the trees, hazy in the rain. He wasn't aware of how far they walked, but when his tired eyes flicked up again, the forest loomed close, glistening dark and wet. Pale white trunks stood out like ghostly sentinels, pattering raindrops almost as loud as the warning screams of monkeys in the canopy.

'Everyone get down!' Guru Pari barked. Arul and Navira leapt off the road and dived into the tall grass without thinking. Keeran stood frozen, mouth opening and closing like a fish, his sagging face frozen in a blank stare. That is, until Navira crept back and grabbed his hand, pulling him off the road with an angry frown.

The teens watched Guru Pari crouch motionless, staring at something far out in the hills. Without warning, Pari threw himself on the ground, grunting with exertion.

Arul softly whistled for Jaya, and soon his wolf lay next to him, ears cocked, sniffing the air nervously.

Everything smelled of wet grass and rain to Arul, but he knew that Jaya could smell far better than him. Right now his wolf could sense something, or someone out there.

Guru Pari poked his head above the grass, gesturing for Arul to join him. At first, Arul could see nothing but rain, gusting across the land and flattening great swathes of grass like a celestial hammer. Then his eyes widened when he saw a single mounted soldier crest one of the hills and rein in his horse. 'How did you know...?' Arul began to ask. But his Guru raised a finger to quiet him.

The horseman twisted in his saddle, studying the land before urging his mount onwards, riding down the slope and out of sight. Behind, a long column of cavalry followed. A line of spears appearing like a moving forest as hundreds of soldiers rode east.

'Stay down!' Guru Pari told Navira and Keeran while he and Arul continued to watch the black and red uniforms of Korkai march by. Hundreds of archers, swordsmen, and spearmen, clustered in regiments according to the type of weapon they carried.

Wiping rain from his eyes and squinting through the driving rain, Arul gasped when he saw the first war-elephant lumber into sight. An enormous bull with bronze-sheathed tusks, glinting wickedly through the rainstorm. A wooden platform housing multiple archers swayed on its back, while straddling its massive neck, a handler used a hooked stick to guide the animal. Arul counted at least fifty of the beasts as they swayed like land-ships through the hills, his mouth going dry as he imagined how ferocious they would be in battle.

The last elephant paused on top of the rise, Arul straining to make out the tiny figure of an archer looking in their direction. He ducked his head and tried to peer over the top of the swaying grass. The archer stood up on his platform and shielded his eyes, staring for a full minute before turning and shouting something to the horsemen in front. Four cavalymen spurred their mounts, racing towards Arul through the driving rain, hooves flying over the sodden earth.

'Put your faces to the ground and don't breathe!' Guru Pari hissed. They threw themselves on the ground, faces pressed to the grass. The smell of the wet earth came up to meet Arul, the ground shaking as the horses approached. With a great deal of neighing and snorting, the cavalry came to a stop, the odour of horse and leather strong. Arul's heart pounded so hard that he thought the enemy would surely hear it. He could feel Navira's hand on him, her fingers rigid with fear.

Arul heard the four horsemen dismount, their weapons clinking as they fanned out in a semi-circle, shouting to each other in a dialect he found difficult to follow. The rasping of iron on leather sounded as they drew their formidable curved aruvals, stabbing at the long grass, moving towards him in a line.

Searching.

Arul bit his lip, skin crawling with fear. Caught out in the open, there was no way to escape.

If they find us, we're dead.

Jaya, who had until now been sitting next to Arul quietly, suddenly leapt up and streaked away like a thunderbolt. Arul froze, choking back a scream.

The soldiers shouted in surprise as they watched Jaya race towards the forest. Realizing it was just an animal, they laughed in deep harsh voices, thumping each other on their backs. Joking amongst themselves after the false alarm, the cavalry mounted up, and spurring their horses on, raced to re-join the column, the sound of thumping hooves fading swiftly. Arul let out a pent-up breath, his body sagging as though suddenly empty. Jaya had saved them.

Again.

It took another half hour before the enemy passed, the rear of the column consisting of dozens of large ox-drawn carts filled with supplies and support troops of every description. They appeared to be peasant farmers pressed into service, poorly clothed and half-starved.

The last wagon passed and Arul was about to leap up when Pari held him down with surprising strength. Arul waited impatiently for another hour, the rain pattering over his back like ice. He understood Pari's caution when the army's rearguard appeared, standing in their saddles and scanning the surrounding countryside. Then they too disappeared east.

The grassland was empty once more, still blanketed by a curtain of unending rain. Arul struggled to his feet, his legs cramping, staring out over the hills before turning to his Guru. 'Are they enough of the enemy to defeat our forces?'

Guru Pari looked north with a searching gaze. 'Only if they surprise us. Attack is more difficult than defence. Remember, they've travelled far and are tired. *Our* army will be fresh and on home ground. A big advantage.'

'But it's such a huge enemy force!' Said Keeran in a panicky voice.

'How come you saw them? I thought we were supposed to be keeping our heads down!' Navira hissed at him.

'I only had a little look!' Keeran whispered.

'We must be alert from now on. There will be enemy scouts everywhere,' Guru Pari said. 'The invaders are moving east towards the plains, so we'll go south to Sailem.' He began to walk briskly towards the dark forest, Arul trotted beside him, struggling to keep up. 'I hope we reach Sailem before those scouts do. They're probably looking for villages to ransack for supplies.' He paused. 'If only we still had our ancient weapons.' Pari muttered to himself.

Arul's eyes swivelled to his Guru. *What ancient weapons?*

As they hurried into the gloomy forest, Arul stepped around the ruined archway a little apprehensively. For the second time he eyed the carved letters, now glistening wet. The archway looked even more ominous than before, as though the writings were warning him not to go any further. He suddenly felt cold, as if an invisible shadow had passed through him.



Chapter 22



Captured

They hiked through open woodland, the straight road gleaming in the rain like an iron sword. After only a single rest at midday, they entered the Ancient Forest proper, its mossy trees hazy in the rain, deafeningly loud after the open hills, sheets of water cascading off the canopy like a million waterfalls.

Arul adjusted his pack and gripped his spear, staggering with exhaustion. Hunching his shoulders, he rubbed water from his face with a loud sigh, drawing unsympathetic looks from Navira. He blinked at the road ahead, strewn with twisting roots and water-filled hollows.

‘Once we reach Sailem, they can send runners to the plains. There must be mounted patrols somewhere who can deliver our warning to the King,’ Guru Pari said. Arul barely heard him speak, such was his fatigue. His feet grew ever heavier as the miles wore on, leg muscles screaming in protest.

As dusk approached, the forest gloom thickened until Arul could barely see beyond his plodding feet. Glancing up, he saw faint outlines of huge overarching trees against the grey sky. Jaya had wandered out there amongst the trees to hunt, and Arul knew that although Jaya was invisible to them, he still knew exactly where the teens were.

Arul passed the spot of the tiger attack without noticing. That is, until he stepped over a pile of blackened ashes, now washing away in the rain like a pool of ink.

Our campfire.

He froze when he saw that there was no sign of the tiger’s body. Keeran walked up to Arul. ‘Some hunter took it. Tigerskin’s valuable in the cities, so stop looking so weird!’ Arul looked doubtfully at Keeran.

No blood. No remains at all.



They continued on. Towards the end of the day, Navira held on to Keeran’s arm and swayed like a drunk, her stamina at an end. Somewhere in the twilight another sound grew louder through the rain; the forest stream where they had camped many days earlier. The sound of a thousand bells.

It felt like a lifetime ago.

Arul walked ahead of Guru Pari to take a better look.

Someone’s here. I can feel it.

In the darkness under a great tree, yellow firelight glowed. Flickering on the ancient bark, wildly distorted shadows danced like creatures with giant heads and spindly arms. For a moment Arul shrunk back in fear, imagining ogres waiting to attack them.

I’m reacting stupidly! They’re men, not monsters.

Guru Pari raised his hand, and the teens halted. Arul levelled his spear, nodding to Keeran and Navira. They followed his lead, spreading out on either side of the road, spears at the ready, advancing on the campfire and rounding the tree without a sound. When they stepped into plain view they saw a group of men sitting around the fire. As the men’s heads swivelled to the teens, they shouted in confusion and

scrambled for their weapons, eyes round with fright.

Arul swallowed hard when he recognised their faces. The man that held his gaze was the last person on earth that he wanted to see. 'So, it appears that we have finally caught the criminals, haven't we, Master Pari?' It was Kapilan, The Elder. He smoothed his thinning hair self-importantly and smiled.

He's always smiling, even when he slips a dagger into you.

Then from out of the darkness came the chilling sound of Jaya growling. One of the men cried out in panic and dropped his spear, but the other three displayed more nerve, pivoting towards the jungle and crouching in a fighting stance.

'It's one animal!'

'No! It's a pack of wolves!'

'Shut up and keep your guard!' Kapilan shrieked, hurriedly positioning himself behind his men.

They'll kill Jaya if he attacks. There's too many of them.

'Run Jaya, RUN!' Arul screamed.

The growling faded into the forest, leaving Kapilan's guards peered into the shadows. They could find no sign of Jaya, and whispered amongst themselves.

'Demon wolves can vanish like a ghost. Did you know that?'

'So he's a ghost? Oh, God, I want to go home.'

Kapilan stepped out from behind his guards with his hands on his hips, face twisted with arrogance. 'You have broken the King's law and hidden these youngsters from the Royal Scouts. They are most displeased. You and this brat's father have conspired to remove them from Sailem,' he said as he thrust out his chin at Arul, his thin smile never reaching his eyes.

Guru Pari began to speak. 'Not at all, Master Kapilan. All we have...'

He was cut-off by Kapilan, who waved his bony hand dismissively. 'I order you to surrender your weapons! You are under arrest! You will be escorted to the village to be judged accordingly.' His grin widened even more. Arul thought that it was impossible for a human being to grin that much.

He's actually enjoying this.

As Kapilan's men advanced threateningly with their spears, Arul's hand dropped to the hilt of his aruval by instinct. He noticed Guru Pari fingering his own pendant, as though weighing up something in his mind.

Could he use it as a weapon?

'There's no need for violence against these children, Master Kapilan. We will lay down our weapons and surrender. This is all a terrible misunderstanding,' Guru Pari said, his voice level and calm.

Arul hesitated from drawing his knife. He saw that Navira and Keeran were waiting for his lead, faces grim in the firelight. Arul spat and threw down his spear. His friends followed his example and dropped their weapons on the soggy ground, their faces dark with fury. 'And your bow,' Kapilan said, examining his fingernails casually. Arul ground his teeth as he unstrapped his bow and quiver from his back, dropping them in an untidy pile.

I'd like to strangle that idiot's skinny neck. He has no idea what's at stake here. Navira had similar feelings, glaring at the nearest villager until he stepped back uncertainly. Kapilan's guards collected their weapons and motioned for the group to sit down on one side of the fire. Arul sat next to Keeran, staring into the flames, his face unreadable. Eventually he lifted his eyes to the guards standing across the fire. Their eyes flicked from the teens to the forest, occasionally stealing fearful glances at Pari.

Why do they fear him so much?

Occasional raindrops hissed onto the fire like an angry cobra, the rain easing as a fresh wind moved through the forest. The nearby stream masked the teens voices as they spoke quietly to each other. 'He's made up all these lies about us!' Keeran said, holding his head in despair. 'What will my parents think when

they hear such evil untruths?’

Navira’s eyes fixed on Keeran. ‘If you start crying in front of these...these...*people*.’ She struggled for the right word. ‘I’m going to kill you.’

Keeran stifled a sob and wiped his nose. ‘It’s up to us to stand up for Guru Pari and tell the truth. He’s a good person, and I’m not letting a sneak like Kapilan get away with this.’ Something in Keeran’s voice made Arul regard him with newfound respect.

As the night wore on, the constellation of The Seven Sages rose to its zenith, peeping between the dark outlines of hurrying clouds. Guru Pari gradually inched his way towards Arul, careful not to let his captors notice. ‘I’ll be gone in the morning. *You* Arul, will have to look out for Navira and Keeran. You’ll need to figure out what to do once you reach Sailem.’

‘Going where? I can’t handle Kapilan by myself, let alone the Royal Scouts. We need you!’ Arul pleaded, his stomach nauseous with panic.

Guru Pari smiled. ‘I’ll follow this stream east until it reaches the Pichavaram swamp in the lowlands. From there the Palar River will take me to Ailas. I’ve used that route once before.’ A pained expression clouded his face. ‘But that was long ago.’ He turned and held Arul’s gaze for a long moment. ‘I need to get to the King. He needs to know about the invaders.’

Arul stared at Guru Pari with a pleading face. No one in Sailem would listen to him. No one would believe his side of the story. Not without his Guru. Pari searched Arul’s troubled face. ‘Your time is coming, Arul. But you’ll have to stand up and become who you are meant to be, not the boy you were.’

More strange words from my Guru. Why is he leaving me?

‘I’ll see you in Ailas. Look for me there.’ He squeezed Arul’s shoulder. ‘Your story...’ He paused. ‘*Our* story isn’t finished yet, Arul.’ With those words, Guru Pari closed his eyes.

Ailas? How would I get to Ailas, it’s two weeks away over the plains!



After the rains, the Ancient Forest was alive with a deafening orchestra of croaking and screeching. Unused to the jungle, Kapilan kept looking about wildly like a man possessed, the whites of his eyes shining in the firelight.

Arul let a tiny smile cross his lips.

I hope he’s really scared of Jaya.

He touched Pari’s feet and brought his fingers to his forehead, silently asking for his Guru’s blessing. He followed Pari’s example and closed his eyes, but in truth he was quite exhausted. That night, troubled dreams haunted Arul. He tossed and turned, looking for answers, but they never came, always seeming to dance out of reach. He heard a woman’s voice sing to him, her face so very sad. When he called out to her, she vanished. From the darkness he heard the sea calling to him, its distant roar like thunder.



Arul slept fitfully for the rest of the night, waking when Kapilan prodded him at first light. The guards were shouting as they searched the surrounding jungle, crashing clumsily through the underbrush and stabbing their spears into the scrub.

Guru Pari had disappeared.

Kapilan pushed his face close to Arul and growled, ‘Where has your Master run off too? Is he that much of a coward that he leaves *you* and escapes to safety?’ Kapilan spat at Arul’s feet, then walked over to Navira. ‘Where is he? What did he tell you?’ Navira stood her ground and said nothing.

Fast as a cobra, Kapilan slapped her.

Arul's amulet glowed.

Your Amma didn't want you. She hated you.

Rage.

Arul stepped up to Kapilan and threw him to one side with an unnatural strength before the guards could react. The Elder cartwheeled onto the damp grass, tumbling head over heels, skinny limbs tangled, the smile wiped from his face.

The guards surrounded Arul, spears dangerously close to his throat, eyes bright with fear. Arul could feel his amulet pulsing with heat, yearning to release its energy. A sensation of something ancient and powerful beyond imagining prickled his skin.

'Arul! Stop!' Navira yelled. Her voice snapped him out of his rage, and he lowered his fists, his breathing ragged.

Did the amulet give me the strength to do that?

Kapilan dusted off his robes and sneered at Arul. 'Saved by Navira. Not much of a warrior, are you *boy?*' He looked down at his muddy clothes. 'It's your fault I'll be filthy until we reach Sailem!' His empty grin changed to a look of dismay. He slapped Arul hard, then quickly stepped back, glancing at the amulet.

Navira shot Arul a warning look. *Don't react.*

Kapilan eyes narrowed, his mouth opening and closing. 'You're like your Amma, aren't you? Running off when things get tough. Scared that the Royal Scouts might recruit you.' He sniggered and spat on Arul. 'A family of losers!'

Arul went rigid, rage flooding back.

No! Now is not the time. It was Jaya's voice in his head.

Jaya! Where are you?

Safer than you, Arul.

Kapilan shouted at his guards for failing to protect him, ordering Arul's wrists to be bound for the rest of the journey. One of them, a man with close-set eyes and stringy hair, took out a length of hemp rope and tied Arul's wrists, his eyes glittering maliciously. 'The Royal Scouts told us that they're searching for someone. I wonder if it's you, *boy?*'

Kapilan led the way with one guard beside him; the other three following behind the teens. It had stopped raining, but the trees constantly dripped, splashing them with heavy drops of water as they trekked south through the forest.

They stopped at midday, but kept up a steady pace all day and the next until they came out into the Green Hills. Even Navira barely gave the wildflowers a glance, her eyes downcast.

Seeing these hills as prisoners certainly takes the joy out of things.

Kapilan was in no hurry, strutting at the head of the group like a peacock, following the winding road downhill to the plantation. They camped at the edge of the jackfruit trees at dusk. Arul stared at his feet miserably as he sat by the ruined archway, feeling that Jaya was watching them, even though he saw no sign of him.

A few scattered rain-clouds flared deep purple in the sunset, backlit by halos, bright as polished silver. Before long, a crescent moon rose in the east, a luminous arc floating in a twilight sky. Looking up, for a moment Arul felt his captivity was but a small matter next to the eternal sky above. Fresh hope seeped into him, although he had no idea what to do next.

The guards lit a fire and took turns keeping watch, offering the teens water, but no food.

It was an uncomfortable night.

The next day they entered the plantation, bright green after the rains, smelling of wet soil and rotting fruit. Endless stands of jackfruit trees rolled past as they walked for hours, hunger gnawing at the teen's

bellies.

One of the guards prodded Navira with the butt of his spear. As she spun around, the man opened his mouth to say something. Then he caught Navira's scowl.

He didn't shove her after that.



Chapter 23



The Corruption of Sailem

As they neared Sailem, Arul's eyes constantly looked for signs of his wolf in the dense scrub under the jackfruit trees. He had a feeling that Jaya was out there following them. He knew that Jaya would track him across the whole continent if need be. It was a comforting thought.

Jaya, are you there? Can you hear me?

There was no reply. Arul flexed his bound wrists and breathed the familiar smell of jackfruit, now stronger than ever deep in the plantation. His stomach ached with hunger, but their captors showed no interest in feeding them. The guards discovered an overripe jackfruit lying in the grass, arguing as they sliced into it with their aruvals. They feasted greedily, chattering like myna-birds while Kapilan sat apart from his men, refusing offers of the fruit. He looked to be thinking hard. Calculating.

That afternoon they exited the plantation not far from Arul's house, rasping cicadas falling silent in their hidden places as the teens passed. After the forced march and lack of food, Keeran was half-asleep on his feet, swaying unsteadily until a guard cuffed him on the ear.

As Arul passed his home, he frowned at a jumble of broken pots lying outside the front door. Keeran and Navira came to a stop, staring at the water trough where Ori's bow lay half submerged, cleanly snapped in two. Arul's stomach tightened as he realized something was very wrong. He turned to Kapilan. 'Where's my Appa?' The elder smiled, his eyes full of malice. A rough word from one of the guards forced the teens on, and they crossed the empty pasture, entering the village gardens in single file.

Where is everyone?

Kapilan led them over the swiftly flowing stream on the village outskirts, silver fish darting away like arrows as he crossed. Trying to balance himself with bound wrists, Arul heard voices coming from the village square. Heated arguments.

They walked between rows of huts and entered the square, finding themselves in the midst of a large crowd. The entire village had turned out to witness their disgraced return. Teenagers whispered to each other, while old men shouted at small children scampering through the crowd. Off to one side, the village women whispered to each other, studying the teens with accusing eyes. Keeran looked to be on the verge of tears, his fingers twisted into knots, the anxious faces of his parents floating amongst the villagers.

Arul searched the mass of faces for his father, only to meet Chozan's sneer, his thick arms crossed triumphantly. The villagers fixed the teens with curious eyes as they were herded in front of the pañcāyattu hall. Kapilan wiped his hands nervously and disappeared inside.



Arul waited in silence for what seemed an eternity, his eyes downcast to avoid contact with the villagers. The nervous muttering of the crowd rose and fell like waves, falling silent when Kapilan emerged with Viyan the Headman. They stood on top of the stairs and faced the expectant crowd, Viyan's face looking drawn and rather ill. He fidgeted while he studied Arul and his friends for a long moment. 'I have just been

informed by the Royal Scouts that Master Kapilan is our new Village Headman.’ Viyan stepped to one side with his head bowed, a murmur rippling through the crowd. Then there was a movement behind Viyan and Kapilan.

Three robed figures stepped out.

The Royal Scouts.

They wore robes of yellow and red, marking them out as royal ambassadors under the King’s protection. Each wore tall red hats woven with elaborate designs, their bearded faces stern and commanding, clearly expecting complete obedience. The villagers shrank back, bowing their heads. Some did it from fear and others out of respect. Many bowed just because they were following everyone else.

Still smirking at Arul, Chozan let out a snorting laugh. His father, a mean-faced blacksmith, cuffed his son hard. Chozan cringed and gripped his head, glaring at Arul with a feral expression, lips raised in a snarl. Then something unexpected rose in Arul’s mind and unfurled. An understanding that cruelty and violence must be nurtured to grow. The hate he felt towards Chozan died in that very moment, an immense weight lifting from his heart.

The middle scout, an older man with a short goatee and a downturned mouth stared down at Arul, speaking in an emotionless voice. ‘Master Kapilan, are these the ones who ran away with the assistance of the Elder, Pari?’

Kapilan bowed and nodded, reminding Arul of the bobbing head of a chicken. He pointed a thin finger at the teens. ‘Yes, yes! It’s them! Just like I told you.’ He made a little hop, his face delighted.

Arul had heard enough. Fighting back tears, he squared his shoulders and screamed, ‘I did not *run* away! I tried to help the village by finding out what’s causing the attacks. We tried to help all of you! None of you have a clue what’s going on up there in the mountains. There’s an entire invading army out there, but you don’t even want to know!’ Just in time, he stopped himself from mentioning the towers or the cavern. They would think he was quite mad.

There was complete silence, even from Kapilan. The villagers began shaking their heads disbelievingly. Then Kapilan eventually found his voice. ‘These are the rantings of a foolish boy out to save his own neck!’ He smiled when a majority of the villagers nodded their heads in agreement.

Navira spoke, fighting back tears. ‘No! He’s right! I’ve seen the army myself! We all have!’

The scouts displayed no emotion, perhaps bored by petty village politics. Arul watched their faces, trying to figure out what they really wanted.

The wellbeing of Sailem is not their concern. They wouldn’t particularly care if the whole village starved in winter. Or burnt to the ground by Korkai’s soldiers.

‘I don’t know about invaders, but where is their leader, the one called Pari?’ Inquired the youngest of the three scouts, a round-faced man with a stubby nose.

Kapilan licked his lips nervously. ‘Um...ah...you see...he ran away into the forest after we captured him.’ He backed away from the Royal Scouts. ‘It’s not my fault!’

The tallest Scout ignored Kapilan’s excuses. ‘Keep them under guard until morning. Your village council can judge them. When captured, Master Pari and Ori the Forester will stand trial in Ailas. Interfering with our mission is a serious charge.’ He turned to Kapilan with a thin smile. ‘Try to ensure these three don’t escape like their Guru.’

‘No! My father can’t be tried! He didn’t do anything wrong!’ Arul yelled. Then he lowered his voice. ‘Is this the King’s justice?’ More than a few villagers nodded, whispering to each other.

The Royal Scouts wore shocked expressions, unused to being yelled at by anyone, particularly a village boy. Kapilan bowed to them apologetically before slapping Arul on his head. The guards pushed the teens away from the village square. Kapilan seemed rather nervous, tripping over his own cloak at one point.

Suddenly one of the scouts called out. 'You two boys! Come here!'

Keeran's eyes flicked towards Arul nervously. 'Don't say anything about me!' Arul whispered as Kapilan pushed them back to the pañcāyattu hall. The tall scout gestured for Kapilan and his guards to stand well back. He called Arul and Keeran over. 'Did you really see an invading army up there?' Arul nodded.

The round-faced Scout stepped forward, his eyes narrowing. 'Strange that our guard posts have not mentioned anything on our journey here...'

'Maybe that's what the invaders wanted,' said Keeran. 'To keep it secret.'

'Do either one of you have parents that were born in Ailas?' The head scout inquired, taking off his hat and stroking his grey hair. Both boys shook their heads from side to side. 'Do you know of anyone like that in your village?'

Again, they shook their heads.

The Royal Scout looked disappointed, his frown deepening. 'You may go now.'

Is that what Guru Pari meant when he said they're looking for me? But why?

Kapilan took them into his house, one of the grandest in the village, carved wooden panels and brightly painted doors indicating the new Headman's considerable wealth. They entered through a side door and were marched to the rear of the house, the guards shoving them into a large storeroom. The door squeaked shut, a metal bolt rasping on the outside. Arul looked at the piles of bulging grain sacks piled up against the walls. Kapilan had obviously been stockpiling grain in secret.

At least Kapilan won't go hungry this winter. He'll just watch everyone else starve.

Arul sat down on a sack, looking about with a glum face. A barred window sat high in the back wall, the afternoon sun spilling through in yellow beams. When his eyes adjusted to the dark interior, Arul noticed a sleeping figure huddled in a corner. 'Psst! There's someone here!' He whispered to his friends.

Keeran hurriedly stepped behind Navira and peered over her head. 'Maybe they've locked us in with a murderer so he can kill us!'

'That's the dumbest thing you've said in your entire life,' Navira replied, shaking her head.

Arul gradually inched towards the stranger in order to get a better look, kneeling on a sack of rice to get close. The stranger suddenly looked up, the light catching his face. Arul broke into a smile, his first in days. But his smile soon turned to dismay when he saw his Appa's bruised face. 'Who did this to you?' He said through gritted teeth.

Ori looked up through one eye, his other one blackened and swollen shut. 'Take a guess.'

Arul's anger rose swiftly, his hand resting on his amulet. Ori reached out and held his son's hand. 'Don't do anything without thinking. Don't let your anger control you.' Arul stared at him blankly, his mind filled with thoughts of revenge. 'You definitely didn't think when you stole my map and dragged Keeran and Navira off into the wilds,' his father added.

'I'm sorry,' Arul muttered.

'Arul, I understand why you wanted to help the village when no-one was doing anything. It's in your blood to lead. You get that from your Amma.'

'I do?'

His father nodded. 'Your mind is far more powerful than your body. Use it instead of fighting your way through things.' Ori squeezed Arul's arm, his rough hands warm and comforting.

Keeran put his hand on Arul's shoulder. 'He's right, you know. That sneak, Kapilan has the upper hand here. What can we do?'

Arul sighed. 'I'm not sure. But I need to tell Appa about everything that happened to us.'

It was very late at night by the time Arul finished his story with the help of Keeran and Navira, who added little bits here and there. Ori shook his head in amazement. ‘Guru Pari knew about all of that? Underground energy and ancient towers?’ He lay back down with a painful groan. ‘I’ve never seen any of that in all my wanderings. You must have visited some pretty remote spots up there.’

Navira sat down hard on a bulging sack of paruppu grain, a cloud of dust puffing out. ‘I just hope Guru Pari’s safe. If he gets to Ailas first, he’ll tell the King the truth about all of this nonsense. The lies.’

‘In any case, we all need to get some sleep now,’ Ori said. ‘We’ll need our wits in the days to come.’ Arul gently hugged his father before collapsing onto a pile of empty sacking, thinking long and hard about their situation, trying to conjure up some kind of escape plan. At some point he fell into an exhausted sleep without realising it, strange images flickering through his mind almost immediately.

Jaya was howling at a blood red moon, hanging bloated above jagged grey mountains. Then Arul became Jaya, now howling at the sea. The sea roared back and began to rise up like a dark mountain, full of vengeance, sounding as if the world was shattering into dust.



Covered in sweat, Arul woke up with a cry, looking around in a panic, breathing hard. Navira leant over him. ‘What is it? What’s wrong?’

Arul took a few minutes to calm himself, smiling weakly at Navira. ‘It’s okay. Bad dreams, that’s all.’ No hint of moonlight was visible through the window and not a sound could be heard from the guards. Somewhere an owl hooted.

Being locked up with piles of smelly sacks is beginning to get to me.

Arul rose and stood restlessly under the high window, noticing it was quite old, the cement cracked and weak. Then his father groaned fitfully in his sleep. Arul searched for a discarded sack to use as a blanket, gently laying it over Ori before lying down again, listening to an army of crickets filling the night with their chirping. He thought about Guru Pari, wondering if he was alone in some stinking swamp or being chased by the enemy. Then he had an idea that would either free them or get them killed.



Chapter 24



Childhood Lost

Fighting off his need to sleep, Arul called Navira over. ‘Help me with these sacks,’ he whispered. ‘I have an idea.’

Navira helped Arul drag a number of sacks under the window until they had a pyramid shaped stack that reached halfway up the wall. ‘Can you please tell me what you’re up to?’ Navira whispered.

Arul didn’t answer her, instead, climbing on top of the stack with a grunt and peering through the small window. The night was dark and fragrant with the aroma of flowers, a guard snoring directly beneath the window. Beyond lay a stretch of grass bordered by a thick stand of ginger plants.

Arul turned to Keeran. ‘Psst! Go stand by the door. Warn me if someone’s coming.’ Keeran nodded and jumped up, a mouse fleeing with a squeak at the sudden movement.

Arul hopped off the sacks and studied Navira. ‘What?’ She asked.

‘Think you could fit through that window?’

Navira tilted her head and stared at the barred opening. ‘Hmm...maybe. It’s quite small.’

‘Okay, but that’s not all. See that iron weight over there? They use it to weigh grain. *We’re* going to use it for something else.’

Navira went over and hefted the iron disc. She placed it on the pile of sacks and looked at Arul curiously, hands on her hips. ‘What exactly am I doing with this?’ Arul leaned forward and explained his idea in a whisper.

Ori had woken up and now stood near the window watching Navira climb the sacks. After Arul handed her the weight, Navira manoeuvred the top half of her body through the iron bars with some difficulty. She held the iron disc in her hands, positioning it directly over where she figured the guard’s head must be. It was a calculation that could go horribly wrong.

She let go of the heavy disk.

There was a sickening thud.

Arul listened hard.

Nothing.

Navira pulled her arms back through the window and sat down, her face a little shocked. She tapped her head and nodded to Arul. ‘The guard’s knocked out.’

Keeran grinned and rubbed his palms together. ‘Yes!’

Arul climbed onto the sacks and pushed at the bricks under the window. He kept shoving until his arms ached, then motioned for Keeran to take over. Ori followed Keeran, and the bricks started giving way bit by bit. With a final shove, several bricks tumbled onto the soft ground outside. Arul looked at the ragged outline of the broken window. It seemed big enough for them to pass through. He motioned for Navira to go first, watching her huddle on the broken ledge before jumping into the dark.

Keeran followed.

Ori looked at the window, already knowing how painful the next few moments would be. ‘It’s too small

for me, Arul.’

‘We’ll widen it.’

‘No Son. We’d need a hammer.’ He held Arul’s shoulders. ‘I have to stay. But *you* must leave. Right now.’

Arul looked at his father with tears in his eyes. ‘I can’t leave you! Not now.’

His father wiped his eyes and gazed back at him Arul. ‘Get away from Sailem. As far as you can. Kapilan has corrupted this village for his own gain and convinced everyone that we’re criminals. He’s framed Guru Pari and I because we’re the only ones that’ll stand up to him. He’s trying to make himself into some kind of village-king.’

Arul clenched his fists. ‘What about the Royal Scouts?’

‘Kapilan’s misled them, and they seem more interested in their mission than village politics.’ Ori stood back. ‘You need to go. *Now!*’

Arul hugged his father hard. ‘I *will* find you, Appa. Wherever they take you, I’ll come for you.’

‘I know you will, Arul. I know.’ His father blinked away tears. ‘Your Amma would be so proud of you. Remember. I’m not in this prison. Not really. I’m with you wherever you go.’ He put a finger over Arul’s chest.

Arul didn’t want to lose his father just like he’d lost his mother. The very thought tore him up inside. He choked back the pain, shoving it down with great effort. What he did next was the most difficult thing he’d ever done in his life.

He turned away from his father, his face twisted in grief. Climbing up to the window ledge, he looked back into the storeroom. The last thing he saw was his father’s anguished face, half visible in the dark. ‘Arul! I’m so sorry. I should have told you about your Amma long ago,’ his father said.

‘And now it’s too late,’ Arul whispered to himself. With a sob, he leapt into the night.

He landed next to the unconscious guard sprawled on the grass, spotting Navira and Keeran crouching behind the ginger bush, their anxious faces peering above the pointed leaves. Navira squeezed Arul’s hand. There was nothing more to say. None of them knew when they would see their families again.

Arul inhaled the spicy aroma from the crushed leaves as they crawled through the bushes. It reminded him of a ginger infused dish that his father regularly cooked on *sani-kizhamai*; his rest-day. He swallowed hard, his chest aching. Then taking a deep breath, he pointed east to where thickly forested slopes rose towards the mountains. They kept low and ran into the trees, silent as ghosts.



High on the slopes, the teens shivered as they watched the village. Sailem glowed with a handful of dim lamps, ignorant of the outside world and full of self-importance. Behind them the mountains rose in a series of hulking shapes that towered into the black sky. ‘Now we wait,’ Arul said, his face full of grief.

The hours crawled by uneventfully until Keeran rubbed his empty stomach, sniffing the air and crawling off a short distance. After a little while he whispered for Arul and Navira to join him. They found him next to a gooseberry tree, cramming the green fruit into his mouth. ‘How could you smell them?’ Navira asked, a little awestruck by his foraging ability.

‘I dunno. I was hungry,’ Keeran replied, sending bits of fruit flying out of his overstuffed mouth.

‘We’ll wait up here until they take Appa from Kapilan’s house. We need to go back for our weapons,’ Arul said.

‘Why?’ Keeran asked with a full mouth.

‘Because we’re going to rescue Appa.’

Keeran spat out his fruit and began hyperventilating.



An hour before dawn the sky lit up with a faint grey wash, a lone sparrow tweeting in the trees. Then a rooster crowed, the sound of clanking pots drifting up the mountain as the village began to stir. The teens heard shouting as Arul's eyes focussed on Kapilan's house. 'They've found the guard!' He hissed.

'Boy, mustn't he have a sore head,' Keeran said.

They heard Kapilan's high-pitched yelling. Navira chuckled. 'Imagine the trouble that liar's going to get into with the Royal Scouts!' More villagers swarmed around the house in a great commotion, so the teens moved higher up the slope, concealing themselves behind a large stand of deodar trees, the smell of resin heavy in the air.

Some villagers half-heartedly searched the lower slope of the mountain before moving north. 'I bet they think we've made a run for the jackfruit plantation,' Navira whispered.

'Now we wait,' Arul said with a gloomy face.



Dawn came swiftly in a haze of purples and reds. Much of the village was enveloped in a heavy fog, drifting between the houses like clouds between mountains. Arul spied the Royal Scouts approaching Kapilan's house with a group of villagers. Minutes later they walked out with his father.

Keeran held Arul's arm, sensing that his friend might do something stupid. Arul gritted his teeth, watching his father walk into the fog and out of sight. 'Get ready to sneak down there. Get your stuff and grab some food. It's a long way to Ailas.'

'What!?' Exclaimed Navira and Keeran at the same time, searching Arul's face with uncertain eyes.

'We're going to Ailas?' Navira asked.

'I thought we were going to rescue your Appa here in Sailem!' Keeran said, his voice tense.

'Shh! Listen to me!' Arul hissed. First, they're taking Appa to Ailas right now. No time for a rescue here. Second, Guru Pari told us to meet him in Ailas. With his help we can free Appa. Maybe rescue him.'

'But I don't want to go to Ailas!' Keeran whispered.

'Would you rather go see your parents and explain things to them?' Navira said. 'Why you ran off in the middle of the night and why you're under arrest now?' Keeran cursed softly and scrambled to catch up with Arul, now crawling downhill towards Kapilan's house.

The house was empty and silent, all the guards having followed the Royal Scouts. The teens crept up to the back wall under the broken window, then around the house to a side door. Arul poked it with his finger, Navira wincing as it creaked open on rusty hinges. 'They certainly left in a hurry,' Keeran remarked.

They entered the darkened interior and waited a minute for their eyes to adjust. In the kitchen, they found their packs and cloaks in an untidy pile. 'Ugh! My cloak is still wet!' Navira complained.

Arul put his finger to his lips. 'Shh! They'll dry in the sun as we walk.'

Leaving Kapilan's house, they kept low and made for the outskirts of the village, the dawn fog concealing their movements. They made a wide detour through the vegetable gardens until they reached the stream. The villagers normally used it for washing and drinking, but at this early hour it was deserted.

Arul stopped and closed his eyes. *Jaya, are you there?*

'What are you doing, Arul? Have you gone mad?' Navira hissed.

Arul merely smiled and motioned for them to wait.

Jaya, come here! He repeated in his mind.

A black shape streaked from a clump of tall grass and leapt onto Arul, tail wagging furiously. Navira crouched and hugged Jaya with all her strength, studying Arul with wide eyes. 'How did you call him

without saying anything?’

‘I’m not quite sure,’ Arul said. ‘I just thought it.’

‘You mean you and Jaya...’ Keeran’s mouth hung open. ‘With your *minds*?’

‘Guess so,’ Arul replied.

‘Is that even possible?’ Navira whispered to Keeran as she patted Jaya’s broad head.

The teens crossed the stream and followed it east down the valley, only hiding once when a woman emerged from the fog to dip her clay pot into the water. They soon left Sailem behind, the land sloping downhill as they followed the watercourse.

Arul turned to Navira and Keeran. ‘We’ll follow the stream to Karur Village. The Scouts will take the trail parallel to us, and since they don’t have horses, we should be able to keep up with them.’



Hours passed as they trekked in silence, the cool damp fog pressing their faces. Climbing a rise above a mango grove, Arul paused and looked over the unfamiliar landscape surrounding Karur Village.

Maybe it’s better if I leave Sailem. I never really fit into the village, now that I think about it. They never let me forget that my Amma was an outsider. They never accepted me.

Deep bitterness washed over Arul. It was worse than being angry. He felt as though he was lost on an endless field of ashes. Jaya quietly sidled up and allowed Arul to hug him tightly. His wolf always seemed to know when he was hurting inside.

Arul saw Keeran and Navira looking in the direction of Sailem with wistful expressions. He smiled at them half-heartedly, knowing that a current of great change had caught them like leaves in a river, sweeping them to some unknown destination.

I wish Guru Pari were here. I feel like I’m walking blind into the night.

Arul trudged onwards with a heavy heart, conflicting emotions surging and ebbing inside. The murmuring stream was their constant companion for many miles through shady woodlands and bright green plantations. The teens gazed at the water as it flowed through stands of tall reeds, always moving towards the distant ocean. The ocean which so terrified Arul in his dreams.

Great stands of banana trees filled the land, their huge green leaves unmoving in the still air. The odd farmer threw curious glances in their direction before returning to their labour. Yellow lizards scurried underfoot, and on one occasion the teens paused to let a cobra pass, golden and majestic.

As always, Keeran managed to find something to eat. They gorged on sweet bananas, tossing the yellow skins aside and watching black ants greedily swarm over them. Arul looked anxiously in the direction of Karur, cicadas chirping noisily in the midday heat.

We might catch the Scouts on the road after Karur, although I don’t know how we’ll defeat the Royal Guards. Everything’s stacked against us.



By day’s end the stream led them to Karur, a larger village than Sailem and the last settlement before the plains.

We can’t enter the village. The locals will betray us because they fear the Royal Scouts.

Arul voiced his thoughts to Navira and Keeran. Navira nodded towards a grassy hill rising above the jungle. ‘What about that hill to the north? We can watch the entire village from up there.’

Arul took a deep breath and nodded. ‘We have a few hours until dusk, so we’ll make camp and keep a look out for Appa.’

They left the path and climbed the hill, black volcanic boulders scattered on its slopes like the remains of

some ancient city. From there the entire village of Karur lay below them like a map, haphazard and untidy, as though its folk didn't care much about things. Piles of refuse lay in fly-infested heaps and the huts seemed badly maintained.

That's how our village will look after Kapilan is headman.

The valley was much wider than around Sailem, and Arul could make out green plantations stretching for miles to the south. The teens threw themselves down on a patch of soft grass at the very top of the hill, Arul idly watching a flock of screeching mynas in the trees below. 'The sitting around part is much better than walking,' Keeran grunted as he massaged his feet.

Like a pool of molten bronze, the late afternoon sun turned deep yellow, its golden light falling onto the hill. Navira studied Arul for a moment. 'Keeran and I will take watch tonight. You look terrible. Go to sleep.'

Arul nodded, lying back and untying his sandals, the tension of the past days tensing his shoulders like rocks. Exhaustion cloaked him like a warm blanket, and soon he was fast asleep, his dreams swiftly descending, terrible and disjointed.

He stood by a glassy lake that reflected the surrounding mountains like a mirror, his eyes finding a small island in the middle of the water. A white marble statue of a woman stood alone on the island, a gatekeeper to somewhere else. He kept trying to see the face of the stone figure, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't see her face. Terrible anguish gripped his heart.

Then something shook him awake.

It felt like an earthquake.



Chapter 25



Skirmish at the Falls

‘Wake up stupid!’

An insistent voice drifted into Arul’s consciousness, a pair of hands shaking him hard, the voice louder now. ‘Hey *stupid*, wake up!’

With a gasp he sat up. ‘I’m not stupid!’

‘Yes you are!’ Said Navira, still shaking him. ‘Especially since they’re moving your Appa while you’re fast asleep!’

‘What?’ Arul croaked, staggering to his feet unsteadily, blinking into the early morning light. Far below in the village, tiny figures of local villagers went about their business. But Arul’s eyes were drawn to the middle of Karur, where some kind of commotion was happening.

A knot of locals stood near a large wooden building, probably their pañcāyattu. The Royal Scouts stood unmoving in front of the meeting hall, their gold buttons shining brilliantly in contrast to the dull clothes of the villagers. Behind them stood Ori, surrounded by four Royal Guards, their uniforms like splashes of red dye against the dusty ground.

With a terrible feeling churning in his gut, Arul watched as a four-wheeled ox-cart was brought around to the front of the building. The Scouts and their guards mounted their horses while Ori was prodded onto the cart and chained. Two local drivers climbed up, their movements nervous. With the sharp crack of a whip, the cart rattled off in a cloud of reddish dust, the Scouts taking the lead, the Royal Guards in tow.

‘No!’ Arul moaned. ‘We can’t keep up with them on foot!’ He threw down his spear violently, his breathing ragged.

Navira stood close to him. ‘All we have to do is make it to Ailas and find Guru Pari. It doesn’t matter if we can’t catch them now. We know where they’re going.’

‘If we had caught them on the open road, then what? Defeat so many armed men?’ Keeran added. Arul slowly nodded, resigning himself to this new reality, recognizing that he had to be smarter about things if they were going to make it through in one piece.

Then Navira spoke urgently. ‘Uh...could you take a look down there next to those haystacks?’

Arul looked towards the village. A cluster of men stared up the hill at the teens, pointing excitedly and jabbering amongst themselves. Then they began to run up the slope like a swarm of ants.

Very angry ants.

‘Time to go!’ Arul yelled, tying his sandals. He grabbed his things hurriedly while his eyes scanned for escape routes. Navira clutched Keeran’s arm and yanked him away as he stood gaping at the onrushing villagers.

They fled from Karur, heading east down the far side of the hill through scrub and grass. Arul kept parallel to the road for some time before angling away, the land sloping downhill, deep red volcanic rocks sprouting from the earth like raw wounds.

The sun had passed its midday zenith by the time they walked out over a barren outcrop, the rock

blazing hot under their feet. A steep series of cliffs bordered a forested valley below, the dark canopy stretching as far as they could see. Keeran stood next to Arul, while Navira kept rearguard, watching for pursuers. The faint sound of a waterfall could be heard somewhere close.

Arul looked to the cliffs and saw a winding trail, the sheer rock-face glowing ochre and yellow in the early morning. To the right of the path, a vertical drop plunged at least a hundred feet to the valley floor. 'I think we've reached the eastern border of the highlands,' Arul said, motioning for Navira and Keeran to go on ahead.

Arul knelt behind a scrubby bush, a perfect ambush spot. As Navira passed him, she paused. 'I think they're gaining on us. I could hear shouting back there.'

Arul nocked an arrow, flexing his fingers. 'I'll give them a scare that should give us more time. You keep going along that path with Keeran.'

Navira touched his head fleetingly. 'Be careful, Arul.'

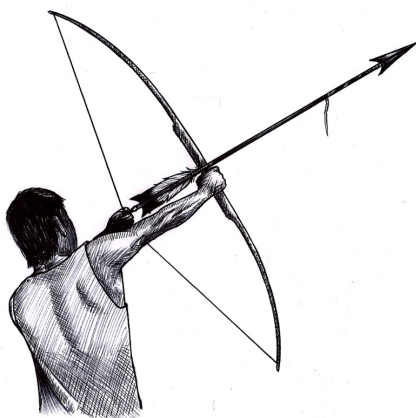
It didn't take long before the lead pursuers came into view, raggedly dressed and carrying crude spears. They saw Arul and urged each other on with shrill voices. Arul exhaled and let fly a warning arrow, the men leaping back as it clattered off the rocks, the stone arrowhead flashing sparks. The villagers came to a stop and crouched with their spears at the ready.

Arul had another arrow nocked by the time they regained enough courage to advance. This time he intended to strike his target.

Without warning, a dark blur flew out from the cover of scrub, knocking over a villager with a scraggly beard. He yelled the foulest curses in Arul's direction, his companions running off in all directions. In-between the confusion and shouting, Jaya leapt at another man's arm, biting him savagely, a scream of pain echoing off the cliffs. Jaya kept running past the villagers towards Arul, reaching cover before the villagers had time to react.

Jaya stood next to Arul, eyes fixed on the closing danger. Arul whispered into Jaya's ear, pointing to the cliff path. His wolf took off like a flash, vanishing around the bend as a hastily thrown spear clattered onto the stone. Villagers were very superstitious people, doubly so if a wolf was involved. The hunting party muttered about spirits and wolves, fear creeping into their eyes.

Arul turned back towards the villagers, now regrouped and cautiously advancing. The man who was bitten groaned and staggered back towards Karur, holding his injured arm close to his body.



One down.

Rising up from behind the bush like an avenging spirit, Arul aimed his arrow to injure. The bowstring thrummed, an arrow flying straight into the leg of the closest villager. The man shrieked and collapsed into a writhing heap.

The others crawled back to whatever cover they could find, shouting to each other, fear etched across

their faces. The villager he'd shot gaped at Arul, blood streaming from his leg.

I've never injured someone with my bow.

Arul closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath. Taking advantage of the fear he'd created, he ran towards the stone path on shaky legs. The thundering waterfall grew louder as he rounded a corner, his hand grasping at the crumbly rock. He couldn't help but glance at the swaying treetops far below, a wave of dizziness unsettling him.

Then he was past the cliff, coming out onto a broad rock ledge, the air blanketed in a fine mist. Looking around, Arul licked drops of icy water dripping off his face, tasting like melted snow. The ledge was at least thirty feet wide, all bare rock and glistening wet, the roar of the falls deafening. Navira and Keeran looked at him, their faces desperate.

They were trapped.

The swift torrent of water had cut out a channel over many centuries, splitting the rock ledge in two. Foaming water rushed past and flung itself over the cliff, creating a great waterfall that cascaded for a hundred feet or more, a white mist drifting over a rock pool far below. From there, the water emptied into a greenish-blue river which flowed beneath the dark boughs of an unknown forest.

Jaya paced nervously, unsure of the thundering water. Arul knelt and patted his wolf. 'Good boy. You really showed them a thing or two.' But Jaya kept looking at the waterfall as if to ask, *what is this thing?*

Then Arul saw Navira standing near the cliff's edge, looking down at the waterfall. 'Navira! Get back from there! You're making me nervous!'

Keeran walked up. 'Hey Arul! Some place, huh?' He gazed around. 'Uh, now what?'

Arul looked at him square in the eyes. 'We need to climb down from here or else we'll be captured. Or killed.'

'What? Climb? No way!' Keeran stepped back in horror.

'Keeran, listen. I don't think those villagers will be too kind to us. I shot a few of them back there.'

'Oh no!' Keeran groaned.

Arul continued. 'Look, if we keep to this path, they'll trap us. They know this land better than us.'

Navira joined them. 'You shot someone?'

'Yes. Only to injure. Now let's look for a way down.' Arul shuffled to the cliff-edge, lying down flat and squirming on the wet rock until his head protruded off the rock. Then he saw it. A way down. A series of small ledges behind the waterfall. He called the others over and pointed it out. Keeran wouldn't even hear of it and backed away, only changing his mind when the first arrow skidded off the rocks less than ten feet away.

The teens crouched and searched for the archer, Arul reaching for his quiver and focussing on the point where the cliff-path exited onto the ledge. 'There!' He shouted. A man's head poked out from the corner and glanced about. He spotted Arul and hastily pulled back with a squeal.

Moments later, Keeran lowered himself off the ledge, his face contorted with fear. Navira followed closely, her jaw determined, but her eyes telling a different story.

They were all scared.

Arul called Jaya over and pointed across the chasm. On the far side of the ledge, the path seemed to continue along the cliff-face.

I'll just have to trust him to find the long way down.

Jaya studied Arul for a moment then backed away from the chasm. He crouched and accelerated in a tremendous burst of speed, clearing the foaming water in one great leap, pausing for a moment to look back. Then he was gone.

Now for those villagers.

His father had taught him that kneeling made him a smaller target. Arul knelt and waited for the villagers to reappear. After a minute, the same man he had seen before crawled around the rock face, clumsily raising his bow.

Too late.

Arul brought up his weapon and fired it in one fluid motion, the arrow burying itself in the man's shoulder. He rolled over, mouth wide open, his screams drowned out by the waterfall.

Arul almost vomited, biting his lip to focus, dreading the possibility of taking someone's life. After a moment, another villager belly-crawled to the injured man, dragging him back by his ankles. Arul used the distraction to sling his bow over his shoulder. Then he lowered himself over the cliff with shaking hands until he felt the narrow rock ledge with his feet.

I need to slow down. One slip and it's all over.

Arul moved sideways towards the waterfall, its deafening thunder shaking the very air, his fingers gripping every crevice with all of his strength. Freezing vapour clouding his eyes, he blinked to clear his sight, groping for the next handhold. Under his fingers the rock shook with the tremendous force of the water.

Navira and Keeran crept along beneath him, fumbling for one ledge after another. Out of the mist an arrow hissed past Arul's ear, only to be seized by the falling water and hurled down into the forest. Cursing, Arul scrambled towards the cover of the waterfall as yet another arrow went wide, lazily arcing into the valley. Now hidden behind the waterfall, he moved as fast as he dared. The small ledges could be navigated by moving in a zigzag fashion, and soon he was just above Keeran.

'Stop shivering and keep moving!' Navira yelled up at Keeran.

'He's scared, that's all!' Arul shouted.

Momentarily distracted by Keeran, Arul's fingers slipped on a patch of slick moss. He tried to hold his weight with his other hand, but it too skidded off the wet rock.

Arul's heart leapt in his chest, an awful realization that death approached. In the blink of an eye he felt his body tipping backwards into empty space.

Navira screamed.

Arul understood that what he did now would cause him to live or die. He kicked himself clear of the cliff face and into the waterfall, gasping as the cold water hit like a sledgehammer and drove him straight down.

He was tumbling out of control.

If he landed flat on the water, he knew he would shatter half the bones in his body.

Desperate, he struggled to draw up his knees and pivot in mid-air, head pointing down. He forced his arms out into a diving position, hoping he wouldn't hit the rocks.

Arul barely had time to suck in a gulp of air. He hit the surface of the pool with a crack, his quiver and weapons ripping away from him. His breath violently shoved from his lungs, Arul plunged deep underwater. The light faded to dark green, the water vibrating with the force of the waterfall. He started to black out as the pool swallowed him, his mouth filling with icy water, the bright glow of the surface receding like a sunlit window.

Arul struggled and thrashed as his air gave out.

Then it was strangely quiet. Peaceful.

Am I dead?

Unexpectedly, the face of a woman materialised above him like a gathering mist. Her beautiful face smiled, calling him upwards.

Who are you?

From her neck, a glowing amulet shone with ever-changing colours. A living rainbow.

His amulet.

In a blink she was gone.

The silence dissolved into the muffled roar of the waterfall. With whatever energy remained, Arul kicked and fought to get to the surface, hazy clouds shimmering above. With a final surge, he burst through the surface and sucked in a huge gasp of air.



Arul found himself lying on a warm rock, although he had no idea how he got there. The sun was definitely lower in the sky than he last remembered. He squinted into the glare and blinked, suddenly vomiting water from his lungs. Sound returned to his ears. He heard Keeran and Navira screaming his name, their hands gripping him, crying and laughing all at once.

With his next gulp of air, Arul smelt the green of the jungle. Rotting leaves. Mullai flowers. The damp explosion of life.

Nothing ever smelt so good.



Chapter 26



The Rock Pool

Arul munched an overripe banana with a look of disgust. He didn't enjoy its mushy texture, but it gave him strength. The previous night was terrible, his body hurting from the fall in more places than he could count.

Keeran's concerned face hovered over him.

'I'm okay. Really!' Arul said, throwing away the blackened peel. 'Any sign of those villagers?'

Keeran looked up past the waterfall. 'No unfriendly faces up there!' He laughed and slapped Arul on the arm.

'Ouch! That hurts! Everything hurts.' Arul winced and lay back on the warm rock. He gazed at the line of cliffs behind the pool, dull orange streaks running across the darker basalt rock like painted brushstrokes. Somewhere inside him, an awful feeling of dread stirred, like something terrible was getting closer.

Something dark.

Then Navira walked out of the jungle with an armful of mangoes. Keeran rushed over with a salivating mouth. 'Let me help you carry those!'

Arul laughed. He knew Keeran. His friend intended to eat every one of those mangoes. It felt good to laugh, although it made his head ache. He groaned and shifted gingerly, feeling his body throb with pain.

It took the better part of the day for Arul to feel strong enough to walk, Keeran and Navira spending the time sleeping or tossing pebbles into the water. Navira would mix up a foul-tasting herbal concoction every so often and force Arul to drink it. He hadn't the energy to refuse her remedies, but felt that his recovery was surprisingly rapid.

Imagine Navira being like Inba the village-healer one day. She'd be even grumpier.

Resting in the slanting rays of the warm afternoon sun, it was the best Arul felt since Blue Lake. Except for his anxiety about Jaya. Every so often his eyes would search the cliffs, straining for signs of his wolf.



Another night passed, the waterfall a roaring sheet of white under a full moon. In the morning, ghostly herons waded through swirling banks of fog as Arul and Keeran stood by the river. Under an overhanging branch, they held their spears high and waited.

Arul was about to give up when he saw something shimmer under the water. With a grunt, he plunged his spear into a decent-sized perch, Keeran jumping up and down enthusiastically, no doubt imagining grilled fish for dinner. 'You eating fish these days, Keeran?' Arul inquired casually.

Keeran came closer for a better look. 'I'm so hungry, I'll eat anything these days!'

'And your parents? What will they think? Being strict vegetarians and all.'

Keeran looked down at his toes. 'They probably think I'm a criminal anyway. I don't know if I'll ever go back home...' He said what Arul thought about constantly, but never voiced it.

Going home seemed a distant fantasy, Arul's chest hurting just thinking about it. For the first time in his life, he knew what it was like to be without a home. But right now he had to be strong for the sake of his friends.

Arul slapped Keeran on the arm. 'We'll always stick together. You and Navira are my family now. Keeran! Are you even listening?' But Keeran was staring across the river with a grin that kept getting wider.

On the other bank stood Jaya, calmly watching them.

Dappled shadows played across the wolf's black fur as he stared at the river. Then he leapt in with a loud splash, swimming against the current until he crossed over, shaking his body vigorously and drenching the two boys. Keeran held up his arms and laughed hard. It was a good sound to hear.

Arul hugged Jaya, while Navira came running over. Then they sat by the river, laughing and joking. They didn't need a place to call home. Being together *was* home.

Arul eyed the river as it swirled into the forest, screeching birds echoing from the shadowy riverbank. The plains were not far off, and on the far side of it, the Royal City.

It's time to move on. Somehow I have to rescue Appa, although I don't know how.



Days later, high on the cliffs where Arul had fought off the villagers, corpses lay sprawled like broken dolls. Some had arrows through their necks. Most lay with vacant bulging eyes. Fingers clawing at their throats as if they had choked to death, faint black lines traced on their faces like spider webs.

Rain began to fall in a fine mist, covering the rocks in a sheen of water, shining under a dark sky. At the falls, men in black clothes sifted through the teen's campsite, searching for anything that might tell them where the boy had gone. At a sign from one of the trackers, they swarmed over the boulders and into the jungle like predators.



Leaving the cliffs far behind, Arul stared at the surrounding trees. Unfamiliar leaves hung in huge clusters, and even the birdcalls grew strange as they trekked east. This jungle was quite different from the highland forests of Arul's childhood. Navira wiped her face. 'How do people live in this sticky air?'

At least the river was cool, flowing in a gentle downward slope, gradually broadening on its way to the plains. The teens followed its winding course for days until stands of water-rushes began to appear, clinging to the muddy banks like tall spears. Arul pointed. 'I've never seen those before.'

'My uncle says that in Ailas, they pound this into sheets for writing,' Keeran said, breaking off a stalk and sniffing it.

Navira wiped more sweat from her face. 'If you don't shut up, I'll pound *you* into paper.'

Fish were plentiful in the river, as were fruits and berries in the jungle. They ate well, so long as they did not eat from unfamiliar, possibly poisonous plants. Navira had run out of spices, so they had to make do with plain grilled fish. This didn't discourage Keeran's appetite at all, since he had taken quite a liking to fish. During their days following the river, Navira taught him how to gut and clean fish, just as *her* mother had taught her. One night she turned to Keeran and said, 'You're a bit less of an idiot, at least as far as fish are concerned.' Keeran eyed her suspiciously, unable to decide if he'd been insulted or praised.

On the third day out from the waterfall, they came to an open woodland where the grass grew in wide swathes between huge branching trees. Under the soft green light, herds of spotted deer roamed freely, their alarm calls sounding eerily like children.

Keeran decided to climb one of the taller trees to get a better view. Navira chuckled. 'He's a good

climber, isn't he? Like a giant monkey.'

Arul yelled out, 'Hey monkey! See anything?'

Keeran shaded his eyes, scanning the forest in a slow circle, then nodded to Arul and climbed down. After a few minutes he dropped onto the grass from a low branch and spoke breathlessly. 'Smoke! There's smoke in the north!'

'Do you think the enemy are burning villages?' Navira said, her eyes nervously swivelling north.

Keeran shrugged. 'Couldn't tell. Back east, I can see the cliffs that we climbed down. Westward I thought I saw a hazy line of ridges. Maybe the plains begin there.'

Should I find the main road to Ailas, or follow this river east to the plains?

I don't care either way. I'm just following you. It was Jaya.

Arul gaped at him. *Some help you are!*

Fine, I'm going to lie down. Jaya loped off with his tail in the air.

Navira gave Arul a searching look. 'Listen, Arul. I think we should find the Royal Highway and follow it. It's safer, and they're so many towns to find shelter. What do you say?'

Keeran's face looked doubtful. 'What if those scouts told the townsfolk to watch for us? Isn't it safer to follow the river where there are fewer people around?'

'Let me think,' Arul said, walking over to Jaya. His wolf was sitting under a flowering tree, tiny red flowers sprouting from every branch like points of fire. He sat down and rubbed Jaya's neck, feeling the soft fur under his fingers. The forest canopy whispered under a steady breeze, calming Arul's mind.

Suddenly he rose, his mind made up.

'We'll take the road directly to Ailas. I don't know how many weeks it will take, but I don't think the scouts would bother to tell people to look for us. They're too many towns, and most folk wouldn't care either way.' He kicked at a pebble. 'Maybe we can blend into the crowds.'

Navira nodded, but Keeran was still uncertain. He adjusted his satchel and looked at Arul. 'Two to one. I guess I'm tagging along.'

They continued following the river as wound through the woodland like a vast blue-green serpent. Tall water-rushes grew in great swathes along the muddy banks, and from time- to-time they startled lone egrets, the birds protesting noisily before flying off in a rush of white feathers.

On the fourth day from the falls, Arul spied a sturdy wooden bridge. The forest was cleared on both sides of the river, probably to furnish the necessary timber for the bridge-builders. Arul slapped his hand on the wooden rails. 'Royal Engineers must have built this. Look how the bridge is so precise and sturdy. Villagers can't make things like this.'

'Ugh! It smells of mud and rotting wood,' Navira said, her nose crinkling.

Arul crossed the bridge, stopping midway to gaze into the swirling water where an enormous eel swam leisurely through clouds of tiny red fish, scattering them like glowing embers. The teens flopped down on the soft grass of the far riverbank, Navira undoing her sandals and placing her feet into the river with a sigh. The murmur of the water soothed them with its hypnotic sound, as though they were back in Sailem and all was right with the world.

Except that it wasn't.

They were far from home and lost.



Chapter 27



Trapped

Arul sat on the bank of the river and prepared a supply of arrows; a skill learnt from his father during long winter nights in Sailem. He had long since run out of iron arrowheads, so as he journeyed he'd kept an eye out for suitable stones, chipping them into sharp points. It gave his arrows more penetrating power than plain bamboo.

Useful against enemy soldiers.

He inserted the arrowheads into little splits he had cut into the bamboo shafts, then using hemp twine he bound them tightly. As Keeran watched, Arul opened a tiny leather pouch, the pungent smell of sap wafting out as he smeared the sticky glue onto the arrow's rear-end. Then he carefully stuck trimmed duck feathers on, a useful leftover from the previous night's dinner.

Only twenty more to go.

Arul tilted his head and listened to Navira singing, her voice weaving itself into the sound of the river. She sung of a bird in the mountains flying away from its home and becoming lost, her voice rising and falling softly until she abruptly stopped, stifling a sob.

Wiping away a tear, Arul thought of Sailem and felt terribly homesick, his stomach knotting. Everything down here felt alien. The smells, the light, the *air*. He began to understand why mountain folk didn't like to spend time in the lowlands.



In the late afternoon the land was bathed in a warm golden glow, a gentle breeze moving through the trees. Keeran was fast asleep on the grass, a faint smile on his lips.

Navira suddenly stood up. 'Arul! Can you feel that?'

Arul stopped binding an arrowhead and looked at her blankly. 'Feel what?' His head swivelled to Jaya, now staring at the far bank, his ears alert.

Navira gestured for Arul to touch the river-mud. 'Some kind of vibration.' Arul put his ear to the ground and closed his eyes. At first, he heard nothing but the gurgling of water, but moments later he felt the ground shaking, raising his head as Jaya started growling.

'Horsemen!' Arul said in a terse voice. 'Quick! Under the bridge!'

Keeran woke with a start and blinked. 'Who's under the bridge?'

Navira was the first to duck her head and crawl below the bridge, Keeran yawning behind her, the sloping mud-bank giving them enough space to crowd in with a bit of jostling. Arul called Jaya to sit between them, stroking the wolf to calm him. They waited in the damp hiding spot, the tension building like lightning.

Then Jaya's pointy ears swivelled towards the opposite end of the bridge.

Something was approaching fast.

They heard the thunder of horses at full gallop rising over the sound of the river, the ground shaking

with their approach. The horsemen didn't slow for the bridge. They flew over it, hooves pounding over the wooden planks in a deafening rumble, the riders shouting to each other above the racket.

They're speaking in the dialect of Ailas! They're our cavalry, and they're fleeing from something.

Arul counted at least half a dozen horse passing overhead. Then came long swooshing sounds. Dozens of arrows whistled overhead before splashing into the water on both sides of the bridge, some of them piercing the wooden planks with loud *thunks*.

The teens heard a loud shriek, looking on in horror as a rider tumbled off the bridge and splashed into the river, sending up a huge spray of water. The arrow sticking out of him wasn't a crude hunting type. It was a heavy iron-tipped war arrow.

The kind soldiers used.

Navira stifled a scream as she saw the soldier die. 'He's one of ours! Look at his uniform!' Arul stared at the body floating down the river, the man's head cloth unravelling like a yellow ribbon.

What makes Royal Cavalry flee like this?

The teens didn't dare move until all of the horses passed, the galloping quickly receding towards the south like a moving storm front. 'What should we do now?' Navira whispered, her voice squeaky.

But Arul could already hear the sounds of the pursuing cavalry closing fast. 'Stay still!' He hissed. 'Here they come!

'Who's coming?' Keeran shrieked.

'The enemy, you idiot!'

The riders flew across the bridge in hot pursuit of the Ailas cavalry, thundering away into the distance. Some minutes later and further behind, a column of slower moving horses clopped across the bridge.

To Arul's horror, they came to a halt.

A couple of riders dismounted midway on the bridge, chattering excitedly about the corpse drifting downstream. Their companions halted on both sides of the river, their manner confident and leisurely. The teens heard the soldiers dismounting and stretching, groaning loudly, their bodies cramped from long hours in the saddle.

The bridge was now in enemy hands.

Minutes passed, the teens hardly daring to breathe. Then Arul froze when he saw he had left an arrowhead on the riverbank. One of the enemy soldiers stood next to it, surveying the river. From his hidden position, Arul could only make out the man's dusty leather sandals, brown and cracked with age.

The cavalryman shifted his feet, kicking the arrowhead accidentally. He reached down to pick it up.

Oh no...

His jaw unbearably tight, Arul prayed that the soldier wouldn't look towards them. He didn't, instead taking the arrowhead back to his companions and talking in a low voice. As he huddled in the shadows, Arul saw the enemy fanning out on either side of the bridge, looking through the grass for more arrows. They gave up the search eventually, preferring to stand in groups, drinking from their freshly refilled waterskins. Arul listened to the strange dialect, but could barely understand it.

We must have had a common ancestral language once. One people. Yet here we are killing each other.

He looked at his friends and silently mouthed, 'They're the same army we saw up in the Brown Hills. From the Kingdom of Korkai.' Navira and Keeran nodded their understanding, shrinking further into the shadows. These troops wouldn't be interested in taking prisoners.

Arul curled his fists into balls, panic rising from his gut.

We're trapped!

The hours passed with unbearable slowness as the invaders continued to keep watch on the forest bridge. The teens could hear the soldiers gather wood and build a fire, laying their bedrolls out around it. While sentries paced over the bridge, other soldiers conversed softly, their weapons never far.

The shadows lengthened as the sun began to settle in the west, the water turning deep red. Under the bridge, the teens relieved their cramps by straightening their legs and arms from time to time. Jaya on the other hand, seemed quite contented, staring at the flowing river with great interest. The light faded as night fell, the soldiers lighting torches made of dried rushes, placing them on tall poles along the bridge. Outside the pools of firelight, it was a dark and moonless night.

Perfect for moving unseen.

Arul put his hand on Keeran's shoulder. 'Let's wait until they fall asleep.'

'What about the sentries?' Navira whispered. 'They never sleep!'

'But they'll only be two of them awake. Much better chances for us,' Arul murmured, raising his hand to touch the wooden planks above his head, feeling the footsteps of the sentries as they walked up and down. Moments later, the two soldiers crossed the bridge to the far side, where judging by the smell, a meal was being prepared. Arul realised that they hadn't eaten anything all day. He slouched uncomfortably and drifted to sleep, his rumbling stomach disturbing the quiet.



Arul woke from dozing with a start, blinking in confusion as he remembered where he was.

Then he wanted to forget where he was.

Keeran and Navira were still asleep, but Jaya raised his head just as voices sounded on the far side of the bridge. 'Have you seen a boy and his companions in this jungle, Commander?' The voice was calm and faintly threatening in a manner that made Arul shiver.

A gruff voice answered. 'We've secured this bridge. No one else is here.'

'Keep looking. If you capture any children, do not kill them. Send word to us and we will come with gold for you.' The voice paused. 'The new Headman in Sailem village gave us detailed descriptions of the children, although he asked for a very handsome payment. Perhaps we should have tortured him and saved the gold.' The stranger laughed mirthlessly.

'We will keep looking as you wish,' the gruff voice said, a slight hint of fear obvious in his tone. After that, there was nothing more to be heard except for the nervous murmurings of the soldiers.

Why are they looking for us? That other voice didn't seem like a Korkai soldier. He seemed worse, somehow.

Deep into the night, the sentries stopped pacing the bridge, preferring to stand around the campfire. At a touch from Arul, Navira and Keeran woke and removed their sandals, tying them around their necks, their eyes bright with fear.

'Now!' Arul whispered, leaving the cover of the bridge and crawling downstream along the riverbank. Ignoring their cramped legs, the teens headed for the nearest cover of reeds, swaying tall and dark along the riverbank.

They groped their way through the gloom and the mud, at one point disturbing a bullfrog, watching it leap into the river with a loud plop. They froze and listened hard. Low voices floated across the water, occasionally interrupted by deep laughter. Arul waved Navira and Keeran forward, then resumed his crawl through the reeds, mud sticking to him like glue.

If we disturb a sleeping bird, we're finished.

Jaya flatly refused to walk through the mud, and instead slunk onto the riverbank, crossing the dirt road and melting into the forest. They crept through the shallow water until they rounded a slight bend in the river. In complete darkness they stood and walked into the cover of the forest, Keeran leaning on his knees

and letting out a huge sigh.

The trees rustled like a thousand rasping insects, a cool breeze springing from the north as distant stormclouds flashed lightning. From the forest, Arul glanced upstream to the bridge. The soldiers from Korkai were hunched in their cloaks, peering into the dark with nervous faces as their fires blew out in the rising wind.



Chapter 28



Spirit of the Tiger

Arul led the way through the dark forest for nearly an hour, pausing to sight the stars from time to time. The night sky shone bright through gaps in the dark canopy, lighting patches of ground with a silvery glow. ‘We’ll rest here tonight, or whatever’s left of it,’ Arul said.

Navira nodded groggily and threw off her satchel. ‘We haven’t anything to eat,’ she said, eyeing a nearby guava tree. ‘I just want to check that tree for fruit. I’ll be back in a little while.’

Meanwhile, Arul and Keeran spotted a grove of flame trees that would provide good cover. Stumbling from exhaustion, they rounded one of the colossal trees.

And ran straight into a pair of enemy scouts.

The soldier’s heads snapped up. They stared at the teens, the whites of their eyes bright.

Murderous eyes.

‘Watch it!’ Arul whispered to Keeran. ‘Army scouts are elite soldiers. Dangerous.’

Once the men overcame their surprise, they jumped to their feet and moved with breath-taking speed. One scout brought up his bow as the other one levelled his spear at the boys. Arul was equally fast, drawing his knife in a blur and moving in at an angle to launch his attack on the spearman. At the last second, the scout slammed his spear horizontally, the violent blow catching Arul on the jaw and sending him reeling against the tree.

Keeran’s face contorted in anger as he hurled his spear at the man with all his might. The soldier collapsed, clutching his leg and groaning.

Unarmed, Keeran straightened and turned towards the scout with the bow, charging him with a terrific cry. But an almighty kick caught him in the stomach and flung him backwards. Winded, Keeran watched the bowman advance on him, stepping on his chest and unsheathing his kattari dagger.

A close range killing weapon.

The kattari drew back, starlight catching its razor edges.

Arul lay sprawled on the red soil, struggling to rise, his head ringing. His vision blurred and his limbs felt powerless. His legs gave way and he fell back, a helpless scream catching in his throat.

Keeran’s going to die.

Then something entered into his mind. A powerful presence.

In a waking dream, Arul saw the very tiger he’d killed staring at him, its eyes clear as two lamps shining in the dark. He saw beyond the eyes, into a place where the tiger’s spirit moved into him.

A voice in his mind. *I see you, child. My destiny was to die, so that you may live. Much depends on you.*

Arul’s eyes burned with a new fearlessness. Intense. Clear. He rose into a crouch with his aruval at the ready. In the blink of an eye, he leapt behind the soldier and drove the knife up through his ribs.

His kattari arm still drawn back, the scout went slack with a groan, falling onto Keeran, the metallic smell of blood seeping through the air. Keeran screamed and thrashed about in the dust. ‘Help me, Arul! He’s killing me!’

Arul felt as though he was returning from another world, his hands shaking as the tiger's spirit left him like a sudden wind. He flung off the dead soldier's body with surprising ease, his eyes sweeping Keeran for wounds. Fortunately, there were none. Arul pulled Keeran up and embraced him in a crushing bear hug.

Then Jaya's presence flooded his mind. *Arul! Get down!*

Arul jerked towards the ground as an arrow whizzed past his head, glancing into the shadows beneath the flame tree. The injured scout leant against the trunk with a grimace, Keeran's spear protruding from his thigh. With bloody hands he fitted another arrow to his bow.

But behind the soldier, the pale eyes of Jaya shone in the dim moonlight. The wolf growled and charged the scout with the speed of a striking cobra, the archer struggling to turn and fire.

Too late.

Jaya leapt at the enemy's throat just as he fired his bow. There was a terrible scream as the arrow went arcing into the dark. Wolf and man went down in a thrashing confusion of limbs and snapping twigs.

Then deathly silence.

Arul stood next to Keeran, his hands shaking like leaves. From the darkness Jaya emerged, staring at Arul with bloody jaws before silently turning away and vanishing into the night.

Keeran moaned and collapsed, the shock of the fight overwhelming his body. Gripping his aching head, Arul squatted next to Keeran, unable to speak, blankly staring at the enemy corpse. Around the dead scouts, starlight fell from the night sky like a rain of silver on the blood-soaked earth.

After a few moments, Navira ran up to the grove, her arms full of fruit. 'Oh my God! What happened?' Arul looked away, unwilling to think about the savagery of what had just occurred. Eyes filling with tears, he picked up his weapons and walked off, Navira and Keeran hurrying after him.

Keeran kept touching his body and shaking his head. 'Jaya killed that archer. Ripped out his throat. As for the fellow who tried to kill me with his dagger. Well, Arul acted very strangely. He was moving weirdly. Not himself. It was scary.'

'It's his Amma's pendant,' Navira said in a low voice. 'It's magical.' Keeran eyed Navira and shuddered, the teens weaving through the dark forest towards the plains. On a distant ridge, a pack of wolves began to howl as they caught wind of the fresh blood.



Chapter 29



The Colonel

The teens hiked for some hours through open woodland, seeking to re-join the highway down to the lowlands. Arul turned his face towards the sky, where the last of the night's constellations wheeled overhead. 'We'll rest under that neem tree until dawn.'

They flopped down under the tree, its canopy large enough to shade a small village. Its endless medicinal benefits were well known in Sailem, and the neem leaves seemed to repel mosquitoes. It was a good place for resting. As dark memories flooded his mind, Keeran sobbed quietly, turning his face away from the others.

After sleeping for a few hours, they ate bush guavas rather unenthusiastically, longing for hot food. A colony of bats suddenly shrieked past and wheeled north under the starlit sky. 'What was that?' Keeran blurted out.

'Just bats!' Navira replied irritably. 'Don't you know anything?' Then her expression softened as she turned to Arul. 'What happened to you back there?'

Arul took another bite of guava and remained silent, looking up at a hunting owl as it landed on the tree in complete silence, staring back at him with eyes like black pits.

'Keeran said you acted strangely,' Navira gently said, trying to coax Arul to talk.

Arul swallowed and took a deep breath. 'The tiger. The one we killed. It helped me.'

'What? How can that be?' Navira said, her eyebrows arching.

'It...it came into me. It's soul...or something. Gave me so much strength.'

'And saved Keeran, thank Vishnu,' Navira added.

Keeran shrugged and looked at Arul's knife. 'I wish I had a hunting aruval like that. You could teach me to use it.' Navira nudged Keeran in the ribs. 'I mean, you could teach *us* to use it.'

'I suppose I *could* do that,' Arul replied. 'Both of you have certainly earned that right.' Keeran and Navira beamed at such high praise.

Arul frowned. 'Where we'd get two aruvals from is another thing.'

'We'd steal them, of course,' said Navira without hesitation. Keeran and Arul laughed, amused by Navira's practicality. 'Why didn't you take those dead soldier's aruvals?' Navira asked Keeran.

Keeran's face dropped. 'It's very bad karma to take things from the dead!'

But Arul wasn't taking notice of them anymore. 'Can you hear that?' He said tersely. They fell silent, letting the background sounds of the forest wash over them.

Crickets chirping, bats squeaking.

Wind.

'There!' Arul whispered. The sound of a galloping horse travelled on the wind, sometimes louder, then fading. The sound came and went as the wind changed directions.

'Get down!' Arul said, his voice sharp.

They lay flat so that the rider wouldn't see their silhouettes amongst the trees. Arul stared hard through

the sparse forest as the sound grew louder. A galloping horse crossed from left to right, not more than a stone's throw away, riding east towards the plains.

'A scout?' Whispered Navira.

'Trouble,' replied Arul.



They took turns keeping watch for the remainder of the night, but saw no more horsemen. Rising with the dawn, they walked right through the next day with only the briefest of stops. Great white clouds floated through the cobalt sky, pressing humidity onto the land like a hot dosakallu, the flat iron pan used in village kitchens. Occasionally Arul spotted Jaya slinking through the trees, dried blood still visible on his jaws. Human blood.

Arul shot two pigeons for lunch, easy targets for his arrows as they waddled on the forest floor. Keeran stood looking at Arul pluck the birds. 'I've broken my vegetarian vow by eating fish. I'm not going to add birds to it.' Arul grunted and nodded. Keeran could eat whatever he wanted, so long as he didn't starve to death. That would only add to their considerable troubles.

Arul searched for wild yams to throw onto the hot coals. They often grew near water, and didn't take long to find. He and Navira cooked the yams and pigeons, a delicious roasting aroma filling the campsite. Keeran grinned as Navira tossed him a hot yam, wincing as he bit into its steaming yellow flesh. Much later that night, Jaya crept into the camp, picking at the pigeon bones quietly.



The country turned increasingly arid as the forest petered out into a few spindly trees. Tussocks of yellow grass grew amongst clusters of thorny bushes, their red flowers like erupting drops of lava. Arul crinkled his nose at the peculiar smell. It was like something rotting mixed with a sickly sweet perfume.

'That smells of sour milk,' Navira said.

'More like old sandals,' Keeran added while pinching his nose.

Arul searched for a safe spot to camp for the night, spying a small rocky outcrop surrounded by wild gooseberry bushes. Swarming over the plants like bees, they collected the tart berries with great enthusiasm.

Navira was the first to spy a hidden cave behind the thick undergrowth. 'Arul, what do you think's behind here?'

Arul poled at the bush with his bow. 'More importantly, what does Jaya think?' At a signal from Arul, Jaya came over, sniffing at the dark entrance.

Arul looked at his wolf. *If there's a snake in there, you'd growl, right?*

Jaya's voice touched Arul's mind. *Of course I'd growl. You'd blunder straight in.*

Arul rubbed Jaya's neck. *It doesn't bother me that you had to kill that enemy scout.*

Jaya's ears twitched. *Good.*

Arul smiled. *Well, it did bother me a little.*

It should. It took me some time to calm my bloodlust. I'm not a dog, you know.

'You're definitely a wolf, that's for sure,' Arul replied out loud, pushing through the gooseberry bushes and entering the cave. The air was damp and muddy, the space no larger than five paces across. Navira and Keeran followed, surveying the dim interior. Sunlight filtered through the bushes outside, giving the cave a pleasant greenish tone.

Arul rearranged the disturbed bushes to cover their tracks. Jaya settled near the entrance while the others lay down against the back wall, eating gooseberries and drinking from their waterskins. It wasn't long before they nodded off one by one, Navira sideways on the ground and the boys slouched against the rock wall.

Arul woke when he heard Jaya growling in the dark. He crawled forward to the entrance and quieted the bristling wolf, trying to peer out through the dense foliage. More than a dozen flame torches were moving towards the cave. Searching.

Maybe they're friendly.

But his jaw tightened when he heard the guttural voices of men speaking in the Korkai dialect.

They had no way of escaping.

Arul shook the others awake frantically. With a racing heart, he waited in silence, watching the flames getting brighter with each passing moment, until the clink of weapons sounded mere feet from the entrance. Someone prodded the gooseberry bush, no doubt wondering about the dark space behind. The teens shrank back against the rear wall, holding their breaths.

'We're no match against a whole troop of soldiers,' Keeran whispered. 'They're going to chop us into little pieces!' By now Arul had fixed an arrow to his bow, aiming it towards the cave entrance, planning on how many soldiers he could shoot before they got to him.

'The ground's shaking! Can you feel it?' Navira whispered. From somewhere they heard the thundering of horses and the shouting of riders. The enemy began yelling to each other in panic as the galloping became louder, the unseen cavalry bearing down in a swift tide, a fearsome war-cry sounding in the night.

There was a fearsome war-cry, followed by a tremendous clash of arms as the riders swept by, the galloping fading away. 'They're coming around for another charge!' Arul cried, his jaw tightening as another war-cry sounded. After the second charge the torches vanished, plunging the cave into pitch darkness, the pitiful moans of wounded men filling the air.

Arul crawled forward, peeking through the bush at the victors as they walked through the battlefield, stopping to prod the bodies of the fallen. There was a strangled cry as a wounded enemy soldier was put to death. Arul slid back into the cave, his stomach heaving as he tried to ignore the foul smell of blood.

Eventually, the soldiers began dragging an enemy body from in front of the cave. With a grunt, one of them fell sideways onto the gooseberry bush, his head thrusting into the cave entrance. He shouted when he saw Jaya's gold eyes shining in the dark, scrambling backwards in a panic and screaming.

Moments later, torches and long spears were thrust into the cave. A rough voice spoke. 'Whoever you are, you have one chance to surrender before we smoke you out!' Keeran tried to shrink into the back of the cave, his body shaking uncontrollably.

Arul put his hand on Navira's shoulder. 'They're speaking our dialect! They must be...'

'Must be our army,' Navira murmured.

'What if the Royal Scouts told them to arrest us?' Keeran whispered. 'What if they chop us up anyway?'

Navira shot him an impatient look. 'Do you think with a war on, our army would be given a stupid job like that?'

Arul chuckled and patted Jaya. 'Stay here,' he told everyone, crawling out over the flattened bush. Immediately, strong hands seized him and he was hauled off his feet. Two men dragged him to where the cavalry had reassembled, the smell of leather and horses overpowering. The moon had risen, its light making the ranks of horsemen appear pale and ghostly.

Menacing.

Close behind, soldiers dragged Navira and Keeran out of the cave. 'Let go of me!' Navira screamed. The soldiers only laughed, dumping the teens on the ground unceremoniously. While Keeran jumped up and dusted himself off, Navira continued to sit, glaring at the men.

Jaya poked his head out of the cave and looked around. 'That animal in there is mine! Don't harm him!'

Arul shouted.

The lead rider was seated on a magnificent black horse, the ornate reins and studded saddle gleaming under the moon. He rubbed his broad nose and stroked his moustache, peering at the teens with eyes that radiated authority. 'Be quiet! You've been found hiding among a squad of Korkai soldiers, so I'll ask the questions. And your answers had better be good! I'm tired and short on patience.' He rested his hand on his wooden shield, gleaming with decorative bronze discs.

Arul hurriedly dropped his head to avoid the commander's fierce gaze. When his eyes flicked up again, the officer was stroking his impressive moustache and speaking with his companions. Arul tried to be as polite as possible. 'Excuse me, Mister Horseman, we're from Sailem Village. Have you heard of it?'

The rider to the left of the commander spoke angrily. 'It's Anipathi Iniyam, not Mister Horseman!' The other riders looked at each other and laughed, unsettling their mounts.

When the horses calmed down, the Anipathi spoke up. 'I'm Colonel of the Fourth Kudhiraipadai. My name is Iniyam.' He saw their blank expressions. 'Cavalry Corps.' His words slowed, as if talking to imbeciles. 'I'm Colonel of the Fourth Cavalry Corps based near Ailas.'

Navira spoke up. 'Can you help us get to Ailas? We're on a religious pilgrimage and became lost. Then those awful soldiers from Korkai attacked us.'

Arul's eyes widened. *Was she always such a good liar?*

The burly Colonel looked at her and adjusted his bronze helmet, its polished surface glittering in the moonlight. 'Well, you're a little young to be spies, so I'll take your word for it. We intend to ride to the plains and rejoin the main body of our corps. We'll be heading towards the Royal Highway, so I can take you as far as the last ridge before the plains.'

Arul eyed the colonel's impressive armour. *These are elite troops of the King. We need their protection.*

'We'd be pleased to accept your offer, Colonel Sir, but does that include my wolf?'

The Anipathi laughed heartily, his armoured chest heaving. 'A polite young man, isn't he?' He stroked his moustache and studied Arul for a long moment. 'Hmm...wolf you say? You mountain folk have strange pets, and even stranger ways.' He shifted in his saddle. 'Very well, your wolf can run alongside, so long as he doesn't attack my men.'

Arul dipped his head to the Colonel. Navira and Keeran offered their own thanks as strong arms pulled them onto separate horses. Arul was offered a seat with the Anipathi's second in command, a weather-beaten cavalryman wielding a three-pronged trishula spear.

They waited as a group of soldiers piled the scattered enemy corpses onto a bed of dry brush. Arul looked on in horror, swallowing hard. Using flaming torches, the men set fire to the bodies, standing back as the flames roared into the pale sky. With a hand signal from the Anipathi, the cavalry moved off, leaving behind the burning corpses. As the troop rode off, Arul twisted in his saddle and glanced back at Jaya. His wolf sat like an unmoving shadow, watching the column of ashes rise into the pale grey sky.



They rode until dawn flared over a series of ridges to the east, Arul forcing his eyes open as sunrise washed the surrounding cliffs in a blood-red light. As they rode through the morning, he dozed on and off, totally exhausted.

Suddenly, a strong jolt woke him as his horse stumbled over a dip in the ground. He rubbed his sore neck with a grimace and looked around. Jaya was running alongside the column at some distance, still eying the horses uneasily. Arul realised that far more than his neck hurt.

How do they do this all day long? Riding's so painful.

The cavalry troop dismounted every hour to give the horses a break, the men walking to relieve their

stiff bodies. During the breaks they offered the teens food and water in a kindly fashion.

Arul chewed on a stale rice-pancake and focussed his mind on Jaya. *Are these are the same men who killed all of those soldiers last night?*

Jaya fixed his eyes on Arul. *They're men, Arul. Far harder to understand than animals. You're not in Sailem anymore, remember?*

Arul threw Jaya a puzzled look. *How do you know about men?*

Jaya yawned and lay down, his thick tail wrapping around him.

Arul sighed. *Fine! Stay silent. See if I care.*



Towards midday, they rode up a steep incline, and from the crest of a ridge came into view of the Royal Highway to Ailas. Emerging from a forest, it ran past a traveller's hut before plunging down a series of steep switchbacks to the plains.

Arul leapt off his horse with a painful groan and stood before the dusty Colonel. 'I cannot begin to thank you enough, Anipathi,' he began.

The Colonel waved him off. 'No need, young fellow. I'd suggest you keep clear of the plains. There's trouble brewing down there, I can tell you.' He urged his horse forward. 'Where's the rest of my bloody corps got to? Someone go and scout ahead!' He bellowed.

Surrounded by a cloud of dust, the troop cantered off down the road. Arul and Keeran laughed when they heard the Colonel's fading voice shouting. 'Stop gaping at me like speared fish! Do what I say!'

The sound and smell of horses faded away, the teens feeling rather lost. Distant thunder sounded somewhere in the mountains, a fresh breeze pushing eddies of dust along the road. Under the huge banyan trees that lined the highway, masses of leaves slowly tumbled, sounding like strange rasping insects.

Arul felt uneasy. Inside, he could feel some horrible darkness getting closer. He exhaled. 'Well, this is it. The end of the highlands. It won't be the same after this. Ever.'



Chapter 30



Edge of the World

The teens wandered towards the brick shelter, no doubt built by the authorities for people journeying along the highway. Keeran blinked and looked around with red-rimmed eyes, his face white with dust. 'I'd hate to ride a horse for a living,' he complained. 'It hurts too much.' Arul chuckled and slapped him on the back, dust exploding from Keeran, both boys laughing and coughing at the same time.

Navira shook her hair vigorously, adding to the growing dust cloud. 'How did we end up here? I hadn't even been outside Sailem before we left. Now I'm about to walk to Ailas. Our guru and your father are prisoners, *and* there's an enemy force on the loose.'

'I don't know. I don't understand any of it,' Arul said. 'I'm only sure of one thing.' He smiled. 'I'm happy that you two are with me.'

'We'd better get going then,' Keeran said. 'After I have a decent sleep in that shelter. Trying to nap on a moving horse was pure torture!'

'We all need a rest,' Navira added, heading to the hut. She poked her head inside and surveyed the sparse interior, unfurnished apart from a single bench running along three walls.

As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, Keeran clapped his hands in glee. 'Look! Someone's left bananas in here!'

'Keep some for me,' Arul said, walking towards the well. He drew a bucket-full of water, calling Jaya over for a long overdue wash, scowling as blood dripped off the wolf's mouth and sank into the red dust. Then Arul poured a fresh bucket over himself, dust running off in muddy rivulets, wonderfully cool in the oppressive heat.



As the day wore on, Arul left Keeran and Navira to sleep and went to view the Great Eastern Plains. The blinding white disk of the midday sun hammered the land with a fierce intensity, forcing him to look for shade. Under the spreading branches of an ancient banyan tree, he gazed down over the most extraordinary landscape he had ever seen.

Shielding his eyes, Arul squinted at the multitude of villages and inns that clustered around the Royal Highway. Radiating out on both sides of the great road, a patchwork of rice fields knitted together to form an emerald landscape that spread out like a vast tapestry. In-between, irrigation channels shone like miniature sheets of beaten silver.

At the edge of his sight, almost lost in a blue haze, was the great royal city of Ailas. Arul knew it was his destiny; his *karma* to enter it. He felt like an ancient pilgrim in search of great truth. The sunlight brightened momentarily, his eyes fixing on a golden halo glinting from a vast domed structure. Beyond, a distant blue line glimmered faint on the horizon.

The sea.

Arul dreamt of it all his life, and soon he would stand on its shores and challenge its power over his

dreams. An empty space inside flared with hurt. The place his parents once filled. The space where Arul the child once lived. Pain flowed through his veins, filling his entire being, forging the beginnings of Arul the man. He thought of his father, his guru, and his mother. All taken from him.

Yet a powerful sense of resolve surged through Arul. Determination to rescue his father and guru. A burning desire to find his mother. And something more. Something deep that called to him.

He held his mother's golden amulet tightly, feeling a deep shift inside his being. A sense of endless possibility took hold, and the world of his childhood evaporated in that moment. It was as if the very land was watching the lone figure of Arul, perched at the edge of the world he knew.



Arul sat unmoving, watching the sun turn into a golden orb that floated downwards like a brilliant lantern. Navira and Keeran joined him and stood silently for a moment, awestruck by the immensity of the Eastern Plains.

'I think I'll take a look from up in this tree,' Keeran said. 'I'll never get another chance to see a view like this.' He studied the enormous trunk for footholds, untying his sandals and dropping his satchel. Wedging his feet into whatever he could find, Keeran climbed into the rustling canopy. 'You could build a house up here!' He called down. 'I'm going to the top!'

'Crazy as usual,' Navira said, a grin creeping across her face.

'What can you see up there?!' Arul shouted.

'More of the plains, I guess. Hang on, let me look the other way.' There was a long pause. Arul looked up, but couldn't see Keeran above the mass of deep green leaves.

Keeran's voice sounded. 'Arul?'

'Yes?'

'You know those Royal Scouts? I can see them coming. About a mile away.'

'What!?' Navira yelled. 'I thought they were *days* ahead of us!'

'We made up lots of time riding with the cavalry,' Arul said.

Navira blew away a strand of hair tickling her face. 'The scouts must have stopped somewhere. It's the only explanation.'

Arul's hands balled into fists. 'We need to set up an ambush before they get here!'

'Keeran! Get down here!' Navira yelled.

'What? It's so nice up here!'

'NOW, KEERAN!'

Arul was already walking towards the shelter. 'The light's getting bad, so if we hide in this hut until they pass we'll take them by surprise.' Behind, he heard Keeran scramble down the tree and thump to the ground.

'But you're the only one with a bow, Arul. All we have are these spears,' Navira said. Keeran nodded furiously, trying to catch his breath.

Arul stopped and looked at his friends, a single word coming from his lips. 'Jaya.'

Keeran grabbed Arul's shoulder. 'What are you talking about?'

Arul pointed down the road. 'I'll get Jaya to sit on the road over there to distract the Royal Scouts. Then we'll come out of the hut behind them and tell them to surrender.'

Keeran studied Arul, his eyes filling with fear. 'And if they don't?'

'I'll shoot them.'



The teens crouched in the gloomy interior of the hut and waited, twilight creeping over the land, turning the trees a shade of deep red. Keeran's nervous whisper sounded. 'Is Jaya still on the road? He hasn't run off, has he?'

Arul stuck his head through the open door. Jaya was sitting in the middle of the road less than twenty feet past the shelter, the dimming sunlight making him nearly invisible. He looked at Arul and yawned, eyes shining like yellow flames.

'Still there,' Arul whispered. He turned and stared west. The road gently curved and disappeared behind a stand of deodar trees, the rattling of cart-wheels sounding in the distance. 'They're coming!' His heart pounding, Arul withdrew into the shelter, squatting against the cool brick wall. He pulled an arrow from his quiver and fitted it to his bow. 'You-two stand on either side of me with your spears. We're stronger together.' Keeran and Navira looked as if they might be sick.

But in their eyes there was an iron that Arul hadn't seen before.

'We'll get through this, Arul,' Navira said, her jaw tight. 'We'll be right next to you.'

The clip-clop of horses became steadily louder above the creak and rattle of the cart. 'One cart-driver, three Royal Scouts, and four guards if I remember correctly,' Arul whispered.

Navira nodded. 'Those Royal Guards will be the problem.'

The column passed by the shelter at a leisurely pace, the teens shrinking back into the shadows. Then the lead soldiers stopped, their horses snorting nervously. 'They've seen Jaya!' Navira hissed.

Arul crept towards the door, fingers tugging on his bowstring. 'Get ready.' His eyes slid to the drooping figure of his father chained to the back of the ox-cart.

Navira grabbed Arul's arm. 'Wait!'

Arul shrugged free with an annoyed scowl. It was now or never.

Navira grabbed Arul's face and turned it. 'What's that across the road? Those moving shadows?'

Arul moved back inside and hid beside the door. Squinting across the road, he saw movement in the jungle. Deeper shadows under the trees moving swiftly and with purpose. A chill ran up his spine. Cold fear that he couldn't explain.

Dark figures swept onto the road like oversized insects. Some wore red trim on their sashes, others completely in black. All were armed with bows and knives. The Royal Scouts swivelled in their saddles, fixing the intruders with emotionless stares. Behind, their mounted guards unsheathed their razor-sharp aruvals, turning their horses to face the threat.

The tallest Royal Scout shouted in an imperious voice. 'Who are you people? We are on the King's business!' He was clearly used to people making way for him. Obeying. The strangers glowered at him and came to a halt. More dark figures crept from the trees, fanning out into a semi-circle.

'I said...,' the Royal Scout began. Before he could finish, an arrow sprouted from his chest with a savage thump. With a surprised cry, he slumped forward in his saddle, his glittering hat falling into the dust.

'Oh my God!' Navira muttered.

Arul placed a hand on her shoulder. 'Stay out of sight! They're too many of them.'

'What do they want?' Keeran whispered, his voice hoarse.

'They look like that priest I saw near Sailem. In the plantation,' said Arul. He turned and looked at his friends. 'I think they want my amulet.'

Navira frowned. 'Why do you say that? I mean, how do you know?'

'I didn't tell you before, but as we slept, the priest used dark magic to try and take my amulet.'

'Vishnu preserve us!' Keeran said, his face aghast.

Navira looked at Arul. 'So they've tracked you here and are killing anyone in their path!'

Arul's fingers flexed over his bow. 'It's like they don't want anyone to know of their existence.'

Outside, even as the Royal Guards charged the attackers with ferocious sweeps of their aruvals, one by one they fell to a host of arrows. The remaining pair of Royal Scouts sat erect on their horses, completely unarmed. One Scout died as a black priest scrambled onto his horse, driving a dagger through his neck.

The remaining Scout shrieked as he looked down at three arrows embedded in his magnificent robe, his scream fading to a sigh as he sprawled on the dust, a dark stain seeping from under his body.

‘They’ll kill Appa!’ Arul cried, leaping to his feet and sprinting onto the road before Navira could stop him. His bow came up fast. Three arrows whizzed one after another into the mass of black robes. Three priests crumpled to the paving stones before they even noticed Arul, their bodies twitching as they died. This time Arul didn’t feel anything like regret. Instead of wanting to be sick, white-hot anger burned through him.

Harnessed in front of the cart, the huge ox bellowed as the driver slumped forward with an arrow through his neck. Keeran screamed from the hut. ‘Arul! Come back! They’ll kill you!’

The last Royal Guard fought on valiantly, his horse lying dead nearby. Although multiple arrows pierced him, he swung his aruval wildly, spitting blood. Black priests lay heaped about his feet until finally, a long dagger ripped into his back. As he died, he stabbed backwards at his killer, bringing the man down with a howl of grim satisfaction.

Arul aimed again, but this time the assassins turned in his direction, pointing and muttering amongst themselves. Two of them peeled off and ran towards the cart. The others, now numbering twelve, closed in on Arul, robes like black pits in the fading light.

‘Appa!’ Arul screamed.

‘Kill them all!’ A priest wearing a red sash yelled.

Arul fired, the man closest to him spinning backwards with an arrow in his shoulder.

The rest kept coming.

Unexpectedly, Jaya’s mind spoke. *Close your eyes, Arul. All three of you, or you will surely die.*

Arul whirled towards Jaya and screamed. ‘Die? What’s going to happen? Tell me!’

The Jewel of Vishnu wakes.

Arul reached under his vest and pulled out his amulet, its engravings delicate beneath his fingers. Some of the black priests shrank back, licking their lips nervously. But the one in charge urged them on, pointing at Arul. ‘Kill him!’ He roared.

Arul’s amulet hummed, a deep vibration sounding like the very earth had woken. Again Jaya’s mind spoke. *Listen, child. Think of all the hurt you have suffered. Losing your Amma. Always the outsider.*

Arul stretched into the river of pain that had always existed inside him as long as he could remember.

Tiny sparks danced over his amulet.

You’re nothing.

Tears slid down his cheeks like glittering trails of glass.

Outsider.

Hurt so deep it was ripping him apart.

Your mother hated you. That’s why she ran.

The sparks turned to blue fire, swirling over the amulet like dancing liquid. White-hot anger surged through Arul like a great storm, his hands shaking uncontrollably. Above, grey-blue clouds appeared, seemingly from nowhere.

Blue hail shattered on the road like tiny gems, the air suddenly freezing. ‘Keeran! Navira! Close your eyes!’

Arul felt his deep rage flow into the amulet like a great ocean, wild and untamed. Divine energy reached out from infinite space and time.

Why did you leave me, Amma?

Why?

In terrible silence, a light brighter than the sun streamed from his amulet.

Before the black priests could scream.

Before they could blink.

They were ash.

Arul's body went limp, sprawling unconscious on the ancient flagstones. Beneath the rage, a dark ocean of sorrow. An ocean filled with tears.

And light.

Amma loved me.

I am descended of Celestial Navigators who led our people across the stars.

I carry a divine jewel forged by the hand of Vishnu.

My name is Arul.



‘Arul! Arul! Wake up! Please!’

Lights flickered somewhere between this world and another like flames in the dark. Then Navira's voice reached him, hollow at first, as though listening through a long tunnel. Arul forced himself awake, the wet road uncomfortably cold beneath his back.

Above him, Navira's worried face hovered. Arul rolled sideways and gaped at Jaya, now sitting placidly under a tree. ‘Who *are* you?’

‘What? It's me! Navira!’

‘No, I don't mean you. I was talking to Jaya.’

‘Why ask him that?’

Arul closed his eyes. ‘Never mind. I'll explain some other time.’

Jaya's mind spoke. *Exactly. I'll explain some other time. Just remember, I'm here to look after you.*

Arul took a deep breath and coughed, suddenly remembering his father. ‘Appa! Where's Appa?’ Rolling onto his knees, he began crawling towards the shattered remains of the ox-cart. Patches of white ash swirled where the enemy died as they stood.

What power can turn people into that?

Reaching the cart, he recoiled in horror as grey ash blew over his arm. Human remains. On the side of the road, the cart-ox peacefully grazed, a strange scene amidst all the destruction.

‘Appa! Answer me!’

The motionless body of his father lay under lengths of splintered wood. Arul dragged himself closer, grabbing at the planks, his fingers stabbed by needle-like splinters. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he cradled his father's head in his lap. Navira and Keeran staggered up and began pulling wreckage off Arul's father.

‘Appa! No...no...no...’ Arul kept repeating as though in a trance, grief tearing at him, his heart falling into an endless pit. Navira collapsed next to him, sobbing out loud.

Ori's eyes blinked open, fluttering like butterfly wings. ‘Who's crying?’

Arul stared at his father. Wiping his eyes, he looked again. His father smiled. ‘I knew you'd come for me.’

Arul pulled his father close and wept like he'd never wept before. His chest heaved until it hurt, his eyes turning red and swollen. Above their sprawled bodies, ragged clouds sped inland, pink and yellow in the sunset. Ori coughed and closed his eyes. ‘Now, stop crying and get me out of this mess.’

They gathered under the giant banyan tree watching the great plain fade to shades of deep blue, the land suspended between day and night. Ori finally spoke. ‘No, I won’t come with you, Arul. Sailem needs me now. I’ll gather my brother foresters from far and wide and we’ll march on Sailem. On Kapilan. He and his followers won’t stand much of a chance, believe me.’

Keeran rubbed his hands with an evil grin. ‘I’d love to see *that!*’

Arul’s father gazed at the first stars shimmering high above the plains. ‘But you three need to go to Guru Pari as he requested. He needs your help.’

‘Why?’ Arul asked. ‘I mean, he’s *Guru Pari*. He’s so powerful.’

‘Because he’s been arrested and imprisoned.’

‘What!?’ Keeran nearly shouted, his face darkening.

Ori leant against the banyan tree. ‘When I was prisoner on the ox-cart, the Scouts made camp a day’s march from here. They waited for a mounted messenger to arrive from the plains. I think they sent for him while they were still in Sailem. He was given a message for the army to arrest Guru Pari. That’s why we were late reaching this place.’

‘Thank Vishnu for that,’ Keeran said.

Arul nodded slowly. ‘So the army will arrest our Guru on sight as soon as he enters the city gates.’

Ori considered Arul for a moment, his face shifting as though he had come to a decision. ‘You see, Arul, the King had another reason to dislike Guru Pari. It’s time I told you about your mother.’

It was almost dark, their faces barely visible under the ancient tree. ‘I think we’d better sit down for this,’ Navira said. They all crossed their legs, making a close circle on the ground, tension flooding the silence before the next words were spoken.

Arul’s father tensed, pain from long ago flaring. He turned and gripped Arul’s shoulders. ‘Your mother was the Princess Izhaiyini, daughter of King Kantaman, ruler of Ailas.’

Arul stared at his father blankly, unable to process the words. Navira and Keeran’s mouths fell open, eyes flicking to Arul, disbelief etched on their faces.

Arul could tell his father was trying hard not to cry. ‘The Royal Court was on a hunting expedition in the mountains. I was one of the foresters assigned to the King. Your mother and I fell in love, although such things are forbidden between a royal and a commoner. We secretly pledged to be together, and when she returned to Ailas, I found reasons to stay in the capital, seeing your mother without anyone knowing. After some months, I enlisted the help of a Royal Philosopher at the palace.’

‘Guru Pari!’ Keeran blurted out.

‘Yes, Keeran. He helped me smuggle the Princess out of the palace. She was pregnant with you by then, Arul.’

Arul looked at his father with tears streaming down his cheeks. ‘You wanted to hide her in Sailem. Your village.’

‘Yes, Son. The journey up the Palar River was hard. The swamps were hell. The King sent a hunting party after us, but we evaded them and reached Sailem in time for her to give birth.’

‘So why isn’t she with us now?’ Arul said quietly.

‘We were happy for almost a year. Then...’

Arul looked at his father silently, his teeth clenched. It was so unfair that something he had been waiting for all his life would only take a moment to say.

‘Then one day she disappeared. Maybe the King’s agents found us. Maybe she ran away. I wanted to go after her, but Guru Pari told me that I would be executed on sight, and that you needed a father.’ Ori’s body

sagged. 'So I stayed.'

'And you never saw her again, did you?' Navira whispered, her voice hoarse. She wiped tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

Ori shook his head, sobbing, the dark hiding his face. After a moment he breathed deeply, distancing himself from the unbearable pain. 'Arul, since you are the King's Grandson, you could ask him about your Amma. Maybe free Guru Pari.'

'*Maybe* we'd be thrown into prison,' Keeran said. 'Arul is an illegitimate grandson. Half commoner. Rulers sometimes kill people like him.'

Night fell, far-off villages shining like pinpricks in the dark expanse of the plains. Arul stood up and stared into the distance, time seeming to slow into an eternity. Then he turned and spoke. 'I'll go to Ailas. I have to free my Guru. I have to know what happened to Amma.' He looked at Navira and Keeran, a silent understanding passing between them. He nodded to his father. 'I hate to leave you again, Appa, but you're right. We must help Guru Pari.'



They rested that night and all through the next day, Arul telling Ori of their adventures, treasuring their last hours together. By late afternoon, they felt restored enough to part ways, the deserted road striped with long shadows under the setting sun.

It didn't take long for Ori to construct a decent spear. 'I'll get more weapons once I find the other foresters.' He gripped Arul in a fierce embrace. 'I'll be fine. Once I'm in the jungle, I'll be fine.'

'Yeah, I know, you're a Master Forester,' Arul whispered.

Ori's hands slipped from Arul's shoulders. 'Goodbye, Son.'

The teens watched Arul's father begin his long trek back to Sailem, his figure blurring until he vanished from sight behind the trees. Arul's lip quivered, his chest hurting as though encircled by iron bands. He sniffed and rubbed his nose, the smell of wild jasmine drifting in from the jungle, sweet and rich.

Navira spoke, the space between her words charged with emotion. 'Arul, your Amma didn't leave you willingly. I think she loved you more than even the Gods.' Her voice dropped. 'Something else happened. Something terrible.'

Arul breathed hard, grief uncoiling in his chest. 'I know. Somehow I feel it.'

Keeran hugged Arul, his eyes swivelling to the road. 'It's time to go, Navigator Arul.' The teens clasped hands and stepped onto the warm flagstones, now buttery yellow under the setting sun. They followed the steep road to the plains, three figures shimmering in the golden haze as though in a dream. Behind them, the Royal Highway stood empty once more, a silent witness to the power of a jewel forged in the stars by a God.

END OF BOOK ONE

EPILOGUE

Jaya sat on the highway gazing longingly towards the mountains, his ebony coat ruffling in the chill wind. Abruptly his ears swivelled, his body tensing like stretched cord.

Faint sounds drifted from the plains. The thunder of two armies manoeuvring for battle by the dying light of day. War elephants trumpeting. The clanking of thousands of weapons being readied for their bloody work. The wolf's fur bristled, and without pause he sprinted after Arul, his body a dark blur against the molten sun.

Glossary

Amma – Mother.

Appa – Father.

Anipathi – Ancient Tamil Cavalry Colonel or Commander.

Aruval – Knives and swords with curved blades from South India. Used in agriculture or warfare, and had many variations.

Dosa – A large pancake made of rice and lentils.

Ganesha – Elephant headed god. Son of Shiva. Remover of obstacles.

Karma – Destiny. Also means the actions and thoughts that determine our future, both here and in future lives. Therefore, according to Hindu belief, our current life is influenced by our past actions in past lives.

Kudhiraipadai – Cavalry Corps

Kumari Kandam – The ancient continent that legend says once existed to the south of India before it was destroyed in a great catastrophe (similar to Atlantis). Ancient Tamil records mention such a land.

Murugan – South Indian God known by many names. Also the god of war.

Oru Arakan – A demon.

Pañcāyattu – Village Council.

Paruppu – Pulses/lentils used to make lentil soup.

Shiva – Hindu God. Creates and destroys universe simultaneously.

Talaipakkai – A turban. A piece of cloth wrapped around the head.

Vetti – Loose pants made of one length of cloth, also called dhoti. Popular dress for men in South India.

Vishnu – Hindu God. Preserver of the Universe. Incarnates on earth in various forms to help humanity.

Recognition

I acknowledge the light that found me in the dark and reminded me of who I was. From that starburst, entire worlds manifested.

To those who helped me on my journey, you know who you are. Words are transient, like smoke in wind. Heartfelt gratitude is eternal; light that journeys through time untarnished.

Author's Notes

When you read about someone who looks like you, and perhaps sounds like you, it says that *you* have a right to exist in this world. The story of this world should not be told through the lens of only *one* culture. Children of colour the world over need more heroes like them.

India's ancient scriptures, particularly in the south of the country, have always echoed with whispers regarding a vast lost continent that existed in the Indian Ocean at about the same time as Atlantis existed on the other side of the planet. Thousand-year-old scriptures written in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu mention *katalkol*, or seizure by the ocean as the reason for the continents' disappearance.

During the Nineteenth Century, European writers began referring to this mythical continent as *Lemuria*. Like Atlantis, legends grew up about its advanced technologies and advanced civilisation. Perhaps these stories about flying craft and super weapons have filtered down through the ages, to appear in later Hindu religious texts such as the epic Mahabharata. I speculate that Kumari Kandam may have been the proto-civilisation of India, its survivors having brought their knowledge to India as refugees.

I believe that we are *all* storytellers, whether we know it or not. We are in the end, each of us, a unique and precious story unreeling within a larger cosmic saga. To you, the reader, in whichever way you can, go and tell *your* story to others.

Happy reading.

R.K. Singh

P.S. Don't forget to look up at the stars from time to time.

About the Author

R.K. Singh is a Fiji born, Australian author, photographer, and poet with a passion for history and stories that transport you to another time and place. He studied political science and anthropology at The University of Queensland and has a varied background in business and education. He is a fervent admirer of Star Wars creator, George Lucas and of the galaxy far, far away.

He woke up one day with an entire novel (possibly three) in his head. He lives in the subtropical city of Brisbane, Australia with his wife and two sons, and can be found taking landscape photos at the oddest of times. He is currently writing the Jewel of Vishnu trilogy and a number of short stories.

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THE JEWEL OF VISHNU



CHRONICLES OF A LOST CONTINENT

R.K. SINGH

THE JEWEL OF VISHNU

R.K. SINGH

6000 Years Ago

Kumari Kandam

A fabled lost continent in the far reaches of the Indian Ocean. A people said to have come from the stars.

A boy searches for his mother, carrying his only memory of her, a jewel forged by a God.

His homeland threatened, Arul races against time to save his world.

The story of South India's ancestors, the mighty Cholas, can finally be told in book one of a three part epic.

THE JEWEL OF VISHNU

