

Judith Bali



The Belt of Lapis Lazuli

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Chapter 1. Belt in a Box

The first time the belt disappeared, it was my uncle who took it. So Raju and I blamed him when it was stolen again.

“Gulab must have taken it,” said Raju, his voice subdued.

It was my mother’s belt. Strands of blue lapis lazuli petals twined with golden leaves, our family’s treasured possession. Precious to Gulab because it had been his sister’s.

Doubly precious to me now that my mother was dead. The belt brought my mother close. The belt and the jackfruit tree she had planted for me in the courtyard when I was small.

The belt, the jackfruit tree, the holy man, the tiger. Strands of a story woven together like the jewelled chains of Ma's belt.

The belt was blue like the river when it sparkled in the sunlight, flowing by barley fields to the golden walls of Sindhapur. It was the river, Pa said, that gave us life, pouring from the mountains down our valley to the ocean. Fish and dolphins danced in its water, cranes and crocodiles and blue ducks rested at its edges, crops ripened beside it and forests spread beyond it to the sky. It flowed past my father's warehouses crammed with cloth and jewels and timber to the harbour where his ships loaded pots and beads and spices for lands across the sea.

Every spring the city honoured the river with a great bonfire on the river bank. On the day the affair of the belt began, I left the city with Devi Auntie and Raju and Bhoomi to collect wood for the celebrations. Auntie, our housekeeper since before I was born.

Raju and Bhoomi, her grandchildren.

“Not so fast,” Devi Auntie said, leaning into her cane. “Have some respect for my old bones. And Bhoomi is a small girl. Her legs aren’t as long as yours, Raju.”

Raju nodded, slowing to match his grandmother’s pace, his heavy face solemn. Auntie was tiny beside him and even I looked down on her head as I walked beside her.

The air seethed with excitement. Cows and goats and donkeys were draped with ribbons, door frames were hung with fronds of neem and acacia leaves. Women wove flowers in their hair, men bound their hips with gold-embroidered sashes, children raced through the streets bumping into legs and tripping over feet.

The year before, I had hollered in the streets with the other young people. But this year there was no

Ma to send me off with a kiss on the top of my head, to remind me to water the tree, to braid flowers in my hair and pleat my skirt exactly right.

One day she slumped over the pot of lentils bubbling on the hearth.

“Stir this for me,” she told me, placing the spoon in my hand. “I’ll rest for a moment, then I’ll be fine.”

That day, a moment was all she needed, but before long she could do nothing but rest, struggling to swallow mixtures from the herb seller, groaning when Auntie wiped her forehead. Her face was sunken, her smile the only part of her that was familiar.

And then she was dead.

“Accept that she’s gone, Simi. Her time has come,” said Pa.

“If you grieve so, Simi,” said Auntie, “her soul won’t find peace.”

Half a year later, I was still sad, but the fields and sky, green and clear blue like the parrots flitting in the trees, lightened my heart. The air was sweet, warmed by the sun and cooled by a breeze at the same time. I threw myself into my search for fallen wood.

“Only a few pieces,” Pa had said before we left. “Just so you give something to the bonfire. Leave the forest a share of what it offers us so freely.”

Raju, with his earnest face, stocky body, and shiny black hair, swung the empty basket on his back as he walked ahead, pleased that he was in charge of the wood we collected. Devi Auntie was too frail, hobbling with her shoulders bowed, one hand supporting her hip and the other pressing heavily into her walking stick. Bhoomi was too tiny, long

braids and thin legs, skipping at her grandmother's side, halting to gaze up through the leaves at the sky. I was strong - I could carry as well as Raju - but Devi Auntie forbade it.

"You're the lady in the house now, Simi," she said. "You have your father's honour and your mother's memory to uphold. You can't bend your back under a load of wood like a servant."

The flower basket under my arm was a different matter. A young girl with flowers brought joy to the world, she said.

Near the gate we passed Manu, who was speaking with the other herders taking their cows to graze.

"My cows are the smartest," he announced, flinging his hands with enthusiasm.

His hair flopped, his pendant swung around his neck.

“Bring flowers for Kamli and Phul,” he called to us, scratching the cows behind their ears. “I’ll make them beautiful garlands.”

We did not go deep into the jungle, just far enough to find what we needed. We knew that silent creatures moved among the trees and rested in the undergrowth. Tigers and snakes had the same heart beating inside as we had, but I was afraid of their sharp fangs.

I found some pink and white blossoms on a bush almost as soon as we were under the trees. We walked for a while, finding nothing more. The air stilled, the light dimmed. Birds called and monkeys scolded.

Then Bhoomi pointed in delight. Glowing in a beam of sunlight, blossoms like tiny red cups climbed up a tree trunk. I plucked some gently, just a few, so not to destroy their beauty. My tugs pulled away part of

the vine from the tree, and a dry stick that had lodged behind fell free.

A snake shot past my toes and disappeared in the dimness. We stiffened, my hand still outstretched toward the blossoms.

“His wife may be near. Don’t move,” said Raju.

I looked uneasily at the fallen stick, half afraid it would transform into another slithering body and flickering tongue.

Raju prodded with the stick around the old tree roots. There was nothing but the croaks and trills of birds and the rustling of leaves above us. He threw a chunk of wood for each of us and one for Pa in his sack. I added one more for Ma. Then with relief, we hurried from the jungle into the bright air, running along the path, stopping and chattering sometimes to let Devi Auntie catch up.

At the gate, two men, probably at Pa's order, hung over the edge of the huge ramp, cementing a patch of loosened brick. I was proud that the city's care was in the hands of Pa and the other city fathers. Ahead of us, the wall stretched out on either side, gleaming in the sun. The towers of the gate reared into the blue sky, so high my eyes ached to look up at them.

A guard monitored the flow of people and carts and animals through the gates.

"What do you have today?" he asked in a booming voice.

He fingered the wood in Raju's bag and glanced at my basket, then bowed with folded hands. I presented him with a flower, which he tucked behind his ear, smiling broadly.

"Go with the gods, daughter of Bhagat," he said.

Inside the city, Devi Auntie tried to walk fast along the bricks, but soon slowed, breathing heavily.

“Run ahead,” she said to Raju, “and ask Bhagat-ji if he needs anything. We’ve been a long time. Have the maid take him some food.”

When finally, exhausted and grimy, we dragged our feet through the entrance of our courtyard, a surprise awaited us. My uncle from the mountains, Ma’s brother Gulab, sat cross-legged under the jackfruit tree. His legs were long, his knees reaching almost to the edge of the seat. His moustache curled out like the horns of a mountain sheep. The clothing wrapped round his lean frame was a gaudy swirl of orange and green and blue that filled our quiet courtyard.

The story of the belt was about to begin.

Raju and a servant carried out a cushion for Pa, who

settled himself under the tree in his white *dhoti* and plain gold neck chain.

I bent to touch Gulab's feet. He patted my head and clasped my shoulders.

"It's sad about your dear mother," he said. His moustache sprang up and down as his lips moved.

I looked down at a spider scurrying across the bricks to hide the tears in my eyes.

"I travelled here as soon as I could. You've lost a mother. I've lost a sister."

His voice trembled.

"It was not in our hands," said Pa, looking up to the heavens.

I carried a tray of vegetables and *chapatti* from the

kitchen to the jackfruit tree, setting the food on the low carved tables in front of Gulab and Pa.

“Go and eat, Simi,” said Pa, “and then rest. You’ll be late to bed tonight.”

I drifted back to the kitchen to sit with Auntie and Bhoomi, until the servant gestured to a fresh pile of *chapatti* and smiled at me. I stepped out into the fading light of the courtyard.

A firepot smoked by the tree. Pa and Gulab were deep in conversation.

“...for Simi,” I heard Pa say.

They were discussing me. I stopped in the shadows behind them to listen.

“Kindly forgive my boldness, brother-in-law,” said Gulab, ‘but I am compelled. It must come back to

our family. It has been with us for generations.”

“Her mother meant it for her, my brother,” said Pa.

“Again forgive me, but a daughter of mine, if I am so blessed, should wear it,” said Gulab.

They were speaking of Ma’s jewelled belt.

Pa kept it at the warehouse where there was always a watchman or two. Sometimes, when Ma was alive and the three of us were alone in Pa’s office, Pa would move the clutter off the old chest in the corner and lift out a cloth-wrapped package. He would break the seal and hand a small box to Ma.

I always held my breath while she lifted the lid, thick with animals carved around the edge, and carefully unwrapped the priceless band of golden flowers and blue beadwork. Ma’s belt, presented by her family when she came to be Pa’s wife.

Gold and lapis lazuli, Ma said, like stars spangled across the clear night sky, like sun reflected from sheer wet rock in the mountains of her childhood. Glowing in the lamplight of Pa's office, the jewelled belt beckoned us into a world of mystery and elegance. Sometimes Ma would wrap it for a moment around her hips.

"Won't you wear it outside?" I would beg.

It was too rich for our simple life, she said.

"It's beautiful! How sad to hide it away!" I said.

"When you look at it, Simi, you are moved by its loveliness," Pa said. "Others might be moved by baser emotions. Better to let their envy sleep."

Ma folded the belt in its cloth and laid it in the box. Pa bound the outer wrappings with lengths of twine. He pressed a lump of clay over the loose ends with

his seal, leaving a perfect impression of a tiger pacing through tall grass.

“This belt,” said Ma. “One day it will be yours. My grandmother gave it to me. She had it from her aunt. And before that, a mother or a grandmother or another aunt, perhaps. It’s very old.”

Now, in the courtyard, Pa and Gulab were quarrelling over that very belt.

“It’s Simi’s belt,” Pa said. “I won’t betray that trust.”

I stepped in front of them with my tray of *chapatti*. They looked up.

“Many thanks, Simi,” said Gulab. He laid his hand on my head.

So affectionate. Did he really mean to the belt from me?

Chapter 2. Stranger by the Fire

In the kitchen, I sat on the floor beside Bhoomi. Devi Auntie piled hot food in front of us, then sank into the faded brown cushion she said was the most comfortable in the house.

Later, Raju and I carried cups of milk to the men. The day had cooled down, and they were sitting inside Pa's room.

Gulab spread his arms wide, looking at Raju.

“Raju, are you serving my brother-in-law well?” he asked. “He's a great man. Learn everything he teaches you.”

“Yes, Gulab-ji,” Raju said.

“Does he obey you?” Gulab said to Pa. “Is his work satisfactory?”

“He does as I ask,” said Pa. “He’s young. He has much to learn.”

I caught Raju’s stormy eyes in sympathy.

Auntie limped in with a bowl of nuts.

“Devi Auntie,” said Gulab, “Bhagat-ji and my niece are well. That’s to your credit.”

Auntie straightened and smiled. She treated Gulab like a son. They were from the same village, far up the river. When Ma married Pa and came to the city, Auntie came too, to care for her. And for me, after I was born.

One year, when Gulab arrived from the north with the caravan, Raju and Bhoomi were squeezed in one of the carts beside bundles of woollen blankets and shawls.

“Here are your grandchildren, Auntie,” Gulab said. “Their father has left this world, caught in a rockslide.”

Auntie clutched her chest, realising her son was dead, then limped over to take the baby in one arm and guide Raju into the kitchen with the other.

I was sorry her son would never come again.

He had arrived every year with the caravan, bursting into our kitchen to eat and drink and amuse us with tricks. He would make rings or pebbles vanish, then pluck them from my braid or Devi Auntie’s ear or Ma’s fist. And juggle with brightly coloured balls, light-footed as a dancer, his long pointed nose

marking the rhythm.

So full of life, he died under a fall of rock, and Raju and Bhoomi were turned into orphans.

The small boy Gulab had lifted from the wagon was different from his father. Raju was solid, with serious eyes, and feet planted on the ground. But if he did not have his father's twinkling eyes and pointed nose, he had his enthusiasm for juggling and sleight of hand.

Just last rainy season, Pa had joined us one evening by the hearth in the kitchen.

“A silver piece for you, Bhoomi. For Simi and Raju too.”

We closed our hands around our new wealth. Pa was generous when it occurred to him.

“Oh no!” Raju cried abruptly, spreading his empty palms. “I’ve lost my coin.”

He glanced up at Pa.

“Forgive me, Bhagat-ji,” he said, “but would you be so kind as to move your foot?”

Auntie gasped. People did not joke with Pa. Pa looked at us one by one, as we held our breaths in suspense. He lifted his foot. There was the coin, under his toes. Raju flourished it in the air. Pa laughed the loudest of all.

Now, on the day of the spring bonfire, Raju’s face was glum. Back in the kitchen, he crunched almonds and gazed morosely at nothing.

“Why are you so bad-tempered all of a sudden?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” he muttered, pieces of chewed nut spraying out of his mouth.

“You were cheerful in the jungle this morning. Is it Pa again?” I asked.

“He thinks I can’t do anything right. And now he’s giving Gulab the same impression.”

He picked at the nut crumbs spilled on his lap.

“Yesterday I weighed beads the whole afternoon. They were happy with me. Just one bag was short”

“That’s good,” I said.

“Then your father came. ‘Weight must be accurate,’ he said. As if I didn’t understand.”

“You know that’s how Pa is,” I said. “At least you don’t have an uncle who wants to take away what

your mother gave you - the most beautiful thing ever.”

That caught his attention. I told him what I had overheard.

“Maybe that belt really is your uncle’s,” he said.

I scowled. Raju was supposed to be on my side.

“Anyway,” he said, brushing almond shells from the folds of his *dhoti* as he stood and stalked away. “I have a plan. When your uncle leaves for the north, I’m going with him. I’ll hide in the carts if he won’t have me.”

Now I was the one sitting morosely, staring at nothing.

When Manu returned with Kamli and Phul, I gave him the flowers from my basket. At least he and the

cows could be happy.

We arrived at the bonfire site to find men unloading bundles of wood from a cart. The priests started chanting as the dark closed in. I pulled my shawl tight in the night air. Children laughed and shouted from behind as the flames flared up. Auntie said we could pour all our mistakes of the past year into the wood and the fire would carry them away.

Pa and I threw our branches in the fire together. Gulab tossed in the piece I had collected for Ma. My eyes were filled with the flames' brilliance and the blackness of the night.

"We can return home now," Pa said. He lit lamps from a torch at the corner of the holy ground.

I turned to look once more at the dying fire. Over to the side Gulab was deep in conversation with another man. When he gestured with his lamp, a

twisted scar on his companion's face leaped out of the night. I had never seen the man before.

Chapter 3. New Clothes for Everyone

In the morning, Auntie and I braided flowers into my hair and pleated a yellow skirt around me. I was to help Pa give out new clothes to the household and the workers at the warehouse.

In the courtyard, I watered the tree while Pa recited the morning prayers and Manu led the cows toward the gate. Manu's *dhoti* was weathered into a drab grey, his shawl ragged, but as promised, both animals wore red and white garlands around their necks.

"Manu, don't leave without your new spring clothes," said Pa, holding out a folded yellow *dhoti* and blue shawl. Manu's eyes opened in surprise

under the rough fringe of hair, and his face lit up with a wide grin.

“You see?” he said. “The holy man in the forest knew. Deep in my heart there was a tiny wish for a beautiful new suit of clothes, and my holy man knew. He has done this.”

He pressed his hands together and bowed, his bird amulet swinging across his chest.

Pa took another folded cloth from the pile beside him, his pale cheeks prominent against his oiled hair and beard. I laid the cloth, smooth and bright, smelling of new dye and sunshine, over Raju’s arms. Raju’s serious face looked straight ahead, his fingers clasped over his stomach.

The cloth for Auntie was white as clouds, for Bhoomi golden as sunshine, for the servants the brown of earth and the blue of sky. There were shell bangles

for Bhoomi and even Pa laughed in delight to see her excitement.

“Now to the warehouse,” said Pa.

Raju hoisted the bag of cloth, and he and I followed Pa through the gate.

“Raju, secure the closing on that bag,” said Pa. “The contents are about to spill out in the dust.”

“Yes, Bhagat-ji,” said Raju. I could see that he struggled to hide his resentment.

Pa’s workers were gathered in the big courtyard with their families. The storeroom doors were firmly closed. No one was sorting or weighing today. Children shrieked as they darted about the adults’ legs.

I approached the first worker. Just as Ma had done

the year before, I gathered together lengths of cloth for everyone in his family, even his baby grandson, and Pa put the stack of yellow and blue and red in his hands. The other workers lined up. Raju held the bag, I counted out colours for each family, and Pa gave his blessing and piled their arms with bright cloth.

Moustache curled high, Gulab suddenly appeared from inside the building. What had he been doing there? Checking merchandise while the rest of us were enjoying spring festivities outside?

I thought of Ma's golden belt, with its rows of deep blue beads, sealed in the chest in Pa's office.

"Pa, let's look at the belt today," I said. "Just like last year."

"Not today," said Pa.

There were sweets when we returned home. Raju and I bent our heads low over the platter and shoved the sweetmeats in our mouths so quickly they had no chance to drip. The honey was smooth as melted sunshine, and I rolled my tongue so every part of my mouth could have a taste.

“You’re needed at the cowshed, Raju,” came Pa’s voice behind us. “Manu has returned with Kamli and Phul.”

Raju sprang toward the door.

“If you remember on your own, I won’t have to ask you,” said Pa.

I went out after Raju. His face was stormy. I walked beside him to the cowshed where Manu was leading the cows into their stalls. Kamli and Phul still wore their flower garlands, faded against their hide. I nuzzled their necks while Raju and Manu settled

them ready for milking.

“I wish I could hug these cows forever and nothing bad would ever happen,” I said sadly.

“Simi-ji,” said Manu, “I think you are troubled. I’ll take you to my holy man in the forest.”

He fingered the small clay bird hanging on a chain around his neck.

“He gave me this for happiness,” he said. “He’ll make you joyful too.”

“He doesn’t even know me,” I said.

“Is it far?” asked Raju.

“I’ll show you,” said Manu. “I’ll come at dawn.”

Devi Auntie arrived with the maid and took the milk

basin from its shelf on the wall. Raju and I left them to the milking.

“Tomorrow,” Manu called after us. “I’ll be wearing my new clothes.”

Chapter 4. Woman at the Gate

Raju and I were arguing by the cowshed, waiting for Manu.

“It’s too dangerous,” said Raju.

“It will be an adventure,” I said. “and we’ll be fine. The forest is Manu’s friend.”

“For you, Simi, it’s easy,” Raju said, “but for me, I’ll never earn your father’s trust if we’re hurt.”

“Here you are, thinking you can journey with Gulab across I don’t know how many forests and rivers and mountains, but you can’t go a tiny way into one forest with me?” I taunted him.

“A caravan is different,” he said. “For one thing, your father won’t be there to frown at me.”

“Don’t worry about Pa. When he learns it’s a holy man we’ve gone to see, he’ll say ‘Good, good.’”

Mist was still clinging to the fields when Manu led us into the trees. This part of the forest was darker than the sun-dappled path we had walked along two days before.

“Is it safe here?” Raju asked.

“It’s always safe when I go to my holy man,” said Manu.

Monkeys and birds called out from the trees as we pushed through the undergrowth. Tree roots caught at our sandals, making us stumble. The air grew warm, but we pulled our shawls tightly around us because of thorns and insects.

Manu paused by a pool to pull some fringed orange blossoms from an *ashoka* tree.

“Take these, Simi, for my holy man,” he said, his smile flashing.

I breathed in the fragrance as I walked.

Suddenly Manu dropped to the ground, pressed his forehead to the earth, then popped back to sit cross-legged. Raju and I slipped down beside him. I looked up.

Two hands rested on white, *dhoti*-covered knees. A hollow stomach breathed slowly in and out. A thin white beard framed a square jaw. A white top-knot was twisted on the top of the head. Drooping eyelids almost hid his eyes.

The holy man. Motionless, except for a tiny black ant darting across his arm.

His eyes opened. I leaned forward to set the orange flowers at his feet.

“What do you want?” he said.

“Dharm-ji, I have brought my friends,” said Manu.

“Yes,” said the holy man, closing his eyes again.

The ant wandered onto his ribcage.

I turned my head toward Manu. He was grinning with delight, his eyes fixed on Dharm-ji. Raju’s head was bowed.

The holy man’s eyes slid open and stared straight at me.

“What do you want?” he said.

“The gods have taken my mother. I wish she could

come back,” I said.

“Of course,” he said. “What else?”

“My friend wants to leave. I want him to stay.”

“Of course,” he said.

He was silent. Our audience was over. He gestured toward the path and we stood and bowed, then slipped back into the forest. We sat under a tree to share the dried fruit and nuts and water jar Raju had tied around his waist. Dharm-ji’s calm eyes, his square jaw with its fringe of beard, floated in my head.

Manu left us at the edge of the city and turned back to find the other cowherds. Raju and I joined the crowd moving slowly up the ramp to the entrance.

‘Of course,’ Dharm-ji had said. Of course I was sad. It

was just as it should be.

On the ramp, I breathed deeply, gazing at the jungle stretching to the horizon, fields filmed with new green, birds flying black against the wide sky.

I grinned at a man with a small bright-eyed monkey on his shoulder, at a little girl, not much older than Bhoomi, leading an old man by the hand, at three children crouched in a bullock cart, three different sizes but all with the same wide brown eyes and spiky hair.

A woman poured a stream of words at the man ahead, who balanced a heavy sack on one shoulder and looked back over the other to answer her. He stumbled, and hands from the crowd shot out to steady him. I laughed in delight.

I remembered Manu's promise.

“The holy man will make you joyful,” he had said.

We were almost to the gate when the line around us faltered and stopped. A young woman was confronting a guard. She shook her head vigorously, swinging the huge golden hoops in her ears. Two more guards with spreading legs and folded arms stood on either side.

“Daughter, you are concealing something,” said the guard. “I know. I know when a person has something to hide.”

Again, the woman shook her head. The buzz of conversation faded as the crowd stared.

“Daughter, give me what you’ve taken. I want to help you,” said the guard.

I moved closer to watch. I blinked when the brightly-dressed figure of Gulab Uncle strode from inside the

city toward the guard.

“Good, you’ve caught her,” he said through his ornate moustache. “I’ve been following her.”

“Merchant-ji,” said the guard, “is this person known to you?”

“You’ll find she carries a piece of jewellery belonging to my family,” said Gulab. “I saw her steal it from our warehouse.”

The woman looked up at Gulab with fiery eyes.

“I stole nothing,” she said, tossing her head, setting her braid and earrings swinging. Gulab looked away.

“Don’t make your situation worse,” said the guard. “You’ve heard the words of this man. Return the jewellery to him.”

Slowly, from the folds of a red and green shawl, she pulled a small cloth packet. Gulab reached out, but the guard took it first.

“This is what you seek, Merchant-ji?” he asked as he drew gleaming links of gold and blue from the wrapping.

Ma’s belt.

The guards took the woman away. The belt settled in Gulab’s hand like stars reflected in a pool. His yellow and orange clothing was garish beside the deep blue of the stones.

His head jerked when he noticed Raju and me in the crowd.

“Why are you here?” he asked. “Come home, where you’re safe.”

We found Pa in the courtyard. He was astonished when Gulab poured the belt into his palm.

“I noticed her slipping into the office and thought little of it,” said Gulab. “Then I saw her wait until the watchman’s back was turned to go out the gate. By the time I caught up with her, she was already challenged by the city guard.”

Gulab and Raju and I walked to the warehouse with Pa. The old chest sat in the corner with folded fabric piled on top as always. Pa set the cloths aside and took the little box from inside. His tiger sealing was intact but the strings came loose as he tugged them. They had been cut through, and the box was empty.

Pa laid the belt in the box, solemn as a priest pouring oil on a fire. He even looked a little like a priest, with his white *dhoti* and simple necklace. He wrapped cord around the box and knotted it intricately. Not a word was said by any of us until he finished by

pressing the tiger seal into the clay.

I wandered with Raju over to the entrance. There were two watchmen. They squatted with their arms around their knees beside a fire in a clay pot.

“To frighten the gnats by day and the cold by night,” the older man said.

“Did you open the gate to let that woman in today?” I asked.

“Little mother, I did not,” said the old man. He chewed on a straw as he waited for my questions.

“Did you turn your back on the gate today?” I asked.

“Little mother, I did not,” he said.

“My uncle saw the young woman come in by the gate and leave by the gate,” I said.

“He may have done,” said the old man.

He stared unmoving at the ground. I knew he would say no more.

“Do you think that woman really came here?” I asked Raju as we walked home.

“I know what you want, Simi,” Raju muttered. “You want me to think your uncle stole the belt, and then I won’t join his caravan. That’s what you hope.”

Chapter 5. Water for Dharm-ji

Gulab. My uncle. Ma's brother. Pa's friend and business partner.

Would he steal from his own family? I remembered the young woman's eyes when Gulab accused her of taking the belt. She looked at him without flinching. It was Gulab who had seemed uneasy.

In the morning, I watered the tree, then sat in the kitchen. Devi Auntie rested on her old brown cushion, sipping a cup of milk and sorting dried lentils. Her head with the tight grey bun nodded over the platter. Raju pulled a pebble out of Bhoomi's ear. Bhoomi squeezed her fingers over her mouth to muffle her giggle.

Pa appeared at the kitchen entrance, casting a stern look at Raju, who lowered his eyes and folded his hands on his lap.

“So, Raju,” said Gulab, following Pa into the room, “you remember those tricks of your father’s, I see. He used to amuse us well on our journeys.”

“Good to have learned from your father,” said Pa. “Be brave and strong like him too.”

“Yes, Bhagat-ji,” said Raju.

Pa and Gulab settled under the tree in the courtyard with hot *chapatti* and milk. Raju and I began a game throwing pebbles into the air and catching them.

“It’s just lucky chance that you’re winning,” I told Raju. “You know I’m the better player.”

“Who cares?” said Raju. “It’s just a game.”

Devi Auntie gasped and pulled my arm, leaning toward the courtyard. Pa's conversation with Gulab had flared into anger.

"Brother-in-law, the belt stays here," Pa's voice thundered. "It's Simi's."

I peeked around the door frame.

Gulab sprang to his feet, slamming one fist into the other.

"You are my elder," he said, loudly and slowly, "but I cannot agree. The belt belongs to me."

His body jerked as he slammed his hands together again and again.

Devi Auntie grabbed the edge of the hearth for support, her mouth slack with shock. Bhoomi hid her face in Auntie's skirt. Raju's shoulders quivered

with tension.

“You defy me?” Pa said. There was sadness in his voice.

“I speak as I must,” Gulab said, his chin raised.

“You, a guest in my house, like a younger brother to me, you defy me?” Pa asked again.

“I speak as I must,” Uncle repeated.

For a moment there was silence. Then Pa stood straight. He shook out the folds of his *dhoti* and straightened the shawl over his shoulder. His eyes were like black fire, his lips flared. He thrust out his arm, his finger jabbing the air in front of Gulab.

“Gulab, be it known that you are no longer...”

“No! No! No!” shouted Devi Auntie clapping her

hands together.”

She hobbled from the kitchen and threw herself to the bricks at Pa’s feet. Bhoomi tried to run after her grandmother, but Raju wrapped his arms around her to hold her back.

“Bhagat-ji,” Auntie cried, “don’t speak this thing.” She grasped Pa’s ankles. “Don’t tear your daughter from her uncle, darken her memories of her mother, rip apart two families who have walked together for generations. Don’t do this.”

Pa looked down at Devi Auntie, his face stony.

“You two are sworn friends,” said Auntie.

“Reconsider, Bhagat-ji, I beg you.”

Pa put his hand to his forehead and was silent. His eyes cleared. He helped Devi Auntie to her feet. Auntie winced and stumbled as she stood upright,

and Gulab rushed to support her, too.

Pa looked at Gulab.

“Gulab brother, this belt makes us forget our duty. We’ll talk of it again when our tempers have cooled. Leave it now.”

He saluted Gulab with folded hands and sat under the tree, pulling his shawl around him. Gulab bowed and walked through the gate.

Auntie picked up the breakfast trays and returned to the kitchen. She settled herself painfully on her cushion and fanned her face with her shawl.

Pa raising his voice, Auntie giving orders to Pa. That had not happened before in our household.

“Weed the herb garden,” she said to Raju and me.

We were happy for something ordinary to do.

“I don’t like it when they’re angry with each other,” I said.

“They’ll sort it out,” said Raju.

“We could help them,” I said. “Help them sort it out, I mean. Do you remember the way to the holy man?”

“It’s not safe,” said Raju, but he started toward the gate.

We left quickly, before Devi Auntie could ask us where we were going. Raju led me from lane to lane until we reached the main road and the public gardens. A brightly-coloured figure stood there under a tree. I recognized him even though his back was toward us.

I pulled Raju back into the crowd gathered around a drinks stall.

“Gulab,” I whispered.

“Where?” mouthed Raju.

I pointed toward the tree in the park. Gulab was talking to the scar-faced man from the spring bonfire.

“Let’s watch,” I said.

“If he sees us, he’ll send us home,” said Raju.

He took a coin from his *dhoti* and exchanged it for a fruit drink from the vendor. He handed me the pottery cup.

“Hold this up to your face. Maybe he won’t notice you,” he said, moving back out of sight.

Gulab shrugged at the man with the scar. The man jerked his head and waved his hands through the air, then stopped gesturing and shrugged, too. The two men bowed to each other and separated.

I thought Gulab noticed me as he walked past my corner, for his eyes twitched, but he ignored me.

When Gulab was out of sight, Raju and I ran down the street to the city gate, going through unnoticed by sidling close to a large family with two carts.

The jungle was eerie without Manu to guide us. The cries of birds were startling in the quiet of the afternoon. We came to the pool where Manu had picked *ashoka* flowers. The remaining blooms were too high from the ground to reach. I dipped the clay cup from the drinks vendor into the pool and filled it with water, after scouring it carefully with a handful of leaves. Holding it in front of me, I followed Raju into the clearing.

The holy man sat under his tree, one knee up and one knee flat. His eyes were closed, his ribcage prominent above his sunken abdomen. To our surprise, Manu sat cross-legged on the ground, dressed in his new blue *dhoti*, his spiky hair uncombed, his bird amulet crooked on his chest.

I set the cup, beaded with water that had slopped over, at the holy man's feet. Manu widened his eyes, then grinned at me. As before, we sat in silence, watching Dharm-ji's peaceful face, his strange, squared-off beard, the wooden beads hanging over his barrel chest.

His eyes opened. He cleared his throat and coughed. He reached down for the cup, taking a small sip and replacing it on the ground. Manu smiled in delight. Raju sat with folded hands, his mouth a serious line, his eyes almost unblinking.

“What do you want?” asked the holy man.

“My father and uncle and Raju’s grandmother are quarrelling over a belt,” I said.

Dharm-ji said nothing. I wondered whether I should explain.

After a time, he lifted his arms, palms upward. “Their mouths speak of the belt, but their hearts long for your mother,” he said.

He pointed to the cup of water. I lifted it to him with both hands. He drank a mouthful and motioned for me to put it down.

“Be at peace. It will be well with them,” he said.

We saluted him with low bows and backed away.

“Manu, accompany this girl and boy,” he said. “They are not at ease in the jungle.”

Manu touched his forehead with his amulet, then folded his hands.

Dharm-ji's lids drooped over his eyes and he was silent.

Chapter 6. Promise to Hun

Manu trotted ahead of us into the trees.

“You came back to see Dharm-ji,” he said. “Good. I knew you would like him.”

“Manu, who’s watching the animals today?” I asked.

“Don’t you know Dharm-ji watches over everything?” he asked, his smile full of mischief.

“But don’t worry,” he continued when Raju opened his mouth to protest. “Do you remember that I have cousins? They help me so I can help Dharm-ji.” He spread his arms wide.

We walked quickly. The light was fading, and Devi

Auntie would be looking for us.

Manu became uneasy. He peered backward and to the side, his head swivelling. He stopped and squinted through the trees. I listened for rustling leaves or breaking twigs, but heard only insects and birds.

Raju tugged at my arm. Then I shrieked. A man stepped out of the shadows.

“Bandits!” breathed Raju.

“We won’t harm you,” the man said.

Three more men, clubs at their sides, fanned out around us.

The man who had spoken with Gulab. Even in the gloom, I recognized the scar across the man’s chin and the wild hair bound with a ragged cloth. He

folded his hands in peace.

Manu clutched the clay amulet dangling on his chest, raised it to his lips and blew. A long note, sweet as birdsong, filled the air.

He blew once more, and the note swelled again.

“Whoever you whistle for, there’s no need,” said the man. “You’re safe.”

He turned to me.

“I, Hun, chief of the bandits and son of the jungle, salute Simi, daughter of the great Bhagat and niece of Gulab.”

He folded his hands and bowed. I did the same, calmed by the sound of my father’s name.

Then Hun’s men stiffened once more, their clubs

raised. Without a sound, the broad golden face of a tiger glided toward us from the trees. Striped muscle and sinew, silent paws, gleaming eyes fixed on Hun of the forest.

“Stay still, Simi,” muttered Raju, his eyes wide from fear. “Don’t draw his attention.”

But Manu had no such fear.

“Sher-ji,” he called, and embraced the animal around its powerful shoulders.

The men bent, ready to swing their clubs. Hun raised his hand to hold them back.

“Sher-ji,” said Manu, “I called you to help, but I had no need. These sons of the forest are good men, I think.”

The tiger rubbed his cheek on Manu’s arm, then

turned back into the trees.

Hun joined his palms and bowed to Manu.

“Herder,” he said, “a friend of tigers is a friend indeed.”

Manu folded his hands in acknowledgement and grinned broadly.

“Now, daughter of Bhagat,” said Hun, “sit and I will tell you a tale that will make you weep.”

Manu crouched down. Raju and I hesitated.

“Sit, sit,” said Hun, motioning with his hands. “Gulab has already offered his assistance, but I wish to have the force of your help.”

He paced back and forth across the path, his foot turning sharply in the dirt, his mud-coloured *dhoti*

billowing around his legs.

Raju and I settled on the ground. Hun cleared his throat, peering at us past his wild hair and beard.

“At the edge of the mountains, there lives a trader, a wealthy trader,” Hun began. “Many people serve him in his large stone house, where they sit from dawn to dusk counting his treasures. Blankets stitched in swirls of azure and scarlet. Great bales of cloth stacked to the ceiling, deepest crimson, palest rose, all the colours of the earth, the dawn, the sunset. Sacks of lapis lazuli and carnelian polished blue and red. So many precious things the eyes are drowned by them. And every spring, this trader sets out from his mountain home...”

Hun drew mountain shapes in the air.

“...with an endless train of carts and people and merchandise. Men crack whips, bullocks pull, and

the trader's fortune begins a long journey to the sea. And in one of the carts sits the trader bundled in furs so that even his long curling moustache is hidden, warming his hands over a charcoal brazier."

Hun huddled inside his shawl and rubbed his hands together as if to warm them. He was speaking of Gulab Uncle.

"The trader's cart always keeps to the middle of the train," said Hun. "Not at the head, for danger, if it approaches, comes first to the head."

Hun hit one wrist with a chopping motion of his other hand.

"Not at the rear, for danger, should it run after them, comes first to the rear."

Hun punched a fist against the opposite palm.

“But always in the middle, where he is safe.” Hun picked up a twig and cradled it between his hands.

“And every year, the train of bullock carts reaches the plain.”

Hun spread his hands to show the flatness of the plains.

“Now, the plain is a dangerous place for a long string of bullock carts laden with precious goods, for this plain is clothed in jungle.”

Hun waved his arms like a swaying tree.

“And in that jungle, roam many who call themselves ‘children of the forest’, and who at any moment could attack the long string of bullock carts at the front, the rear, or, the gods forbid, the middle, and steal the trader’s fortune and perhaps even the trader’s life.”

Hun scowled, slicing his finger across his neck.

“One spring, a band of men sprang out of the trees. When the carts lumbered to a stop, the leader of this band, a particularly fierce robber chief...”

Hun put his palms together and bowed.

“...approached the wealthy trader. And it so happened that this was a happy meeting, for after they shared food and drink, they pledged their help to each other. And from that day forward, the robber chief and his band have watched over the trader whenever his carts pass through the forest.”

Hun pointed to his men, who leered and shook their clubs.

“And every year the trader rewards the faithful robber chief with treasures from his carts.”

Hun threw an imaginary sack over his shoulder and pretended to stagger under the weight.

Then he was silent. The shadows were thick under the trees. Dusk was not far off.

“That is a noble story,” said Manu. “It doesn’t make me weep at all.”

“Listen, friend of tigers,” said Hun. “Listen, daughter of Bhagat and son of the juggler.”

Raju exclaimed in surprise. Hun knew about his father.

“Hear now,” said Hun, “how the tale saddens. It so happens that the robber chief has a sister who lives with him in the forest. When their mother died many years ago, her last words were ‘Son, be father and mother to your sister. Daughter, be mother and father to your brother.’

“This spring, the wealthy trader came early through the jungle. In his *dhoti* the colour of the new green of spring, with his curling moustache, he met the robber chief.”

Raju and I looked at each other.

“The wealthy trader said, ‘This time I’ll take back to the mountains what is my family’s. There are some who may keep it from me, so I ask Hun the bandit chief to provide a secret way past the gate.’”

“A plan was made, and in due course the chief’s sister entered the city. Near the gate, the wealthy trader approached her, entrusting to her a treasure blue like the night and golden like the day. Hidden in her shawl, the treasure was passing safely through the gate until a suspicious guard spied it out.”

Again, in the deepening dusk, Raju and I looked at each other. I remembered the scene at the gate, the

woman, the guard, my uncle.

“And the chief’s sworn friend,” said Hun, “the wealthy trader, shielded from danger for so many years by the bandit chief, in an instant betrayed his trust.

“‘Hold that woman,’ the trader called. ‘She has stolen.’

“So you must weep, daughter of Bhagat,” said Hun. “Weep that Hun’s sister is now imprisoned and that the bandit chief is powerless to help her.”

The lips were quivering on Raju’s usually impassive face. “Gulab will free her,” he cried. “He’s not a bad man.”

“You are correct,” said Hun. “The trader is not a bad man. Simply a man easily frightened. When he saw the young woman cast into prison, he was overcome

by the vileness of his deed.”

Above his lips, Hun drew the outline of a curly moustache with his fingers. Then he raised his palms to the sky.

“The trader swore to the robber chief, ‘By all the gods, I will not return to the mountains, where streams foam over the cliffs, where flowers bloom in the rocks, where the air is bright and every breath a blessing, until your sister is free. She will be free. Only let me think on it.’

“Thus,” said Hun, “the trader promised, and then walked off. And it so happened that as the trader passed a sweet drinks vendor, the robber chief saw his eye catch for a moment on a girl, a girl who was trying not to be seen.

“A robber chief must know all, and he knew the child to be Simi, daughter of Bhagat. All afternoon, he and

his men have observed this worthy girl. She too is a chief, a chief with two devoted followers”

Hun straightened the shawl on his shoulder and looked at me with piercing eyes. He gestured with his head for me to stand. I rose and smoothed my skirt. He motioned Raju and Manu to my side.

The forest was almost dark. Trees and people were grey shapes. Hun’s voice circled me, echoing from all directions.

“Hun, child of the forest, requests Simi, daughter of Bhagat, to free his sister.”

One moment, my imagination had been caught up in an exciting tale. The next, I was being asked to make my real life into a story.

Was I foolish to think I could do what Hun asked? Ma’s belt was leading me on. Gulab took it, Hun’s

sister lay in jail because of it, and now it was my duty to help. And how thrilling it would be to carry out a rescue!

“Is it agreed, daughter of Bhagat?” asked Hun.

Raju’s body trembled in protest, but he stayed silent.

“It is agreed,” I said, “if you will allow me the time it takes.”

Manu leaped up and down. “We will free her! We will free her!” he shouted.

“You are a worthy daughter of your father,” Hun said.

It was full night in the forest. Pa would not be pleased with our late return.

“Remember, Simi, I’m going with the caravan,” said

Raju. "I'm not really your devoted follower."

"Give them a lamp," said Hun.

Manu led us the rest of the way back through the jungle, a bubble of light floating through the dark.

"How did your bird whistle summon a tiger, Manu?" I asked.

"Dharm-ji said it would if I needed him," said Manu.

Chapter 7. Sea Captain's Gift

Raju and I left Hun's lamp with Manu, and crept through the streets with only the wayside torches to guide us. There were none of the open sunlit passages we knew by day, no hovering adults to keep us safe in the dark. The silence was frightening. More frightening was the slap of someone's sandals coming close and then fading, the shadow of a hyena lurking around a corner.

Then from behind dark walls came the rattle of crockery, a baby's cry, a man's laughter. The familiar sounds made me long to be home.

When we entered the kitchen at last, Devi Auntie was angry. She grabbed Raju by the hair and pulled

his head back while she scolded. Me she yanked by the arm, squeezing so tightly her hand felt like a burn.

“You think it well done to worry an old woman?” she said to Raju. “To leave your sister crying for her brother?”

Bhoomi was sitting in the light from the hearth, eating a *chapatti*, not at all upset.

“Simi,” Auntie said to me, “you care so little for what I have taught you? You, the daughter of a mother the gods gave us as a blessing, the daughter of a house the city is proud to hail, you roam about in the dark like a girl of the forest?”

Avoiding Raju’s eyes, I suppressed a giggle.

“Go to Bhagat-ji, both of you, and explain yourselves,” Auntie said.

We touched her feet in apology and fled.

A lamp flickered in the room where Pa and Gulab sat. Pa was like a hawk in a tree, black hair, black beard, white *dhoti*, stern and unmoving. Uncle was a jungle fowl, all blue and green and nervous movement.

“Raju,” said Pa, “are you a small child, to run carefree all day with no thought for duty?”

Raju’s mouth worked, but he said nothing.

“He was helping me,” I said.

“He will speak for himself,” said Pa.

Raju lifted his smooth face toward Pa and drew in a nervous breath.

“We went to the forest,” he said, “though not to play, but to seek a holy man’s help for this house.”

Pa raised his eyebrows and Gulab jerked in surprise.

“Is this true, daughter?” he asked me.

“Yes, Pa, it’s true,” I said.

Pa waited.

“To stop the quarreling,” I said.

Gulab studied the back of his hand as if he knew nothing of what we were talking.

Pa looked sad, and then his face cleared.

“What is between you and the holy man is for you alone. I will not interfere. Now eat something and sleep. It’s late.”

We turned to go.

“Raju,” Pa said, “do you always go where Simi leads you?”

“I must,” said Raju. “It’s my grandmother’s wish.”

“Then you have a great responsibility, Simi,” said Pa. “Use it wisely, as your mother was wise.”

Pa’s voice was tender when he spoke of Ma. It was as if she had been with us for a moment.

The next morning, I went with Raju to the cowshed just as Manu’s cheerful face was leading Kamli and Phul toward the gate.

“Hun’s sister,” I said. “How can we find her?”

“Her name is Sonia,” Manu told us. “All the jungle knows of Hun the bandit chief and his beautiful sister Sonia.”

“We need to find where she is to set her free,” I said.

Raju spread his arms indignantly. “We’re just children. How can we?” he asked.

“We promised Hun,” I said.

I helped Raju carry food for Pa and Gulab.

“The woman who stole Ma’s belt – she was taken away by guards,” I said.

Gulab stiffened.

“Where did they take her? Will she be in chains?” I asked.

“She’s in the cells under the guesthouse,” Pa said.

“Raju and I thought she didn’t steal anything at all,” I said.

“The city had no choice but to keep her,” Pa said.
“She says nothing in her defence.”

Gulab chewed his lips. His moustache bounced.

“Perhaps she has others to protect,” he said. “She’ll say nothing, rather than put them at risk.”

“The city has laws to keep order, Simi,” said Pa. “The young woman was caught with stolen property. It’s the law that she be punished.”

“Do they give her enough to eat?” I asked.

“Your heart is soft, and that’s good,” said Pa. “Be at ease. She’s well provided for.”

“Will she be set free?” I asked.

“Not yet, but she has a warm blanket at night, useful work during the day, and is perhaps better off than

she will be when she returns to the jungle.”

Gulab fingered his moustache. “I doubt she would agree, brother-in-law. She’s used to the air of the forest. Sorting beads in a factory all day will not suit her.”

“She works in a bead factory?” I asked.

“Yes,” replied Pa, “and in case it comes into your head to seek her out, remember, you’re forbidden to go to that part of the city.”

“I remember, Pa,” I said, being careful not to promise to obey.

For the next few days, Devi Auntie watched us kept us busy with chores. I picked out stones from lentils, filled the water reservoir by the hearth, sprinkled herbs on winter blankets and folded them away. I amused Bhoomi for hours, taking her to play by the

jujube tree near the animal shed, lifting her up to pick the red-brown fruit for herself.

“One more. One more,” she kept saying.

Bits of pulp dribbled from her mouth and a pile of spat-out pits grew up beside us.

In the kitchen later, Gulab and Devi Auntie leaned against cushions, chatting about their village in the mountains.

“Aaiii,” shrieked Bhoomi suddenly, clutching her stomach. “Toilet! Toilet! Fast!”

A nauseating smell filled the room.

“Bad girl!” cried Auntie.

Gulab’s face puckered in disgust. “By all the gods, remove her from here,” he cried.

“Eeuw,” groaned Raju, retching. He grabbed Bhoomi under her arms and ran from the room, holding her body away from him. Auntie hobbled after them.

“Too many jujubes,” Auntie told us when she returned with a freshly bathed Bhoomi. “Cramps and diarrhoea. I blame you, Simi. Do you think it’s easy to care for a child? You must be on your guard every moment.”

For a few days she kept us close, but once her watchfulness eased, we set off, a bundle of food tied at Raju’s waist.

“If we just keep walking toward the south gate, we should come to the bead factory,” I told Raju.

“If your father finds we’ve been near the docks,” said Raju, “I’ll be ashamed to face him.”

We walked down lanes shadowed by tall walls,

bursting into sunlit squares so bright even the tubs of flowers were drained of colour. We balanced along the edge of a lotus pool, then joined the throngs pushing through the markets, their voices rising and falling around us. We passed stalls of jewellery and long-handled fans, of flower garlands and perfumed oils and spices fragrant in the sun, of grains and dried beans rustling into baskets.

Porters pushed through the crowd, carrying a palanquin bright with coloured stones and golden tassels.

“Make way! Make way!” they shouted.

At a potter’s stall, columns of curved pots teetered above our heads. Raju stood in front of them, swaying his arms from side to side, coaxing them to collapse, but they stayed firm. The potter shook a stick and we ran off.

A cloth merchant stood high on a ladder, unfurling bolts of cloth for a customer below.

From the food stalls, smells of roasting meat, frying vegetables, baking *chapattis* made our nostrils flare and settled on our hair and clothing. Above the din of the streets, birds chirped and cooed and swooped down to carry off scraps of discarded food.

Further along, the air was filled with the clang of metal and rough laughter from around the liquor stalls.

“Ho, there, girl. You’re a long way from home,” called out a liquor vendor from his corner stall. His customer turned and saluted us with his cup. Embarrassed, we turned our eyes away as we passed.

“The bead factory must be along one of these lanes,” I said to Raju.

Suddenly, Raju jerked me to one side. I looked down. A wrinkled hand was plucking at his elbow, a head with stringy grey hair and watery eyes looking up at us. We pulled ourselves away.

“Allow this old grandfather to show you what you seek,” the old man said. His voice stopped, but his toothless jaw continued working up and down.

A slender man and woman appeared at my side. Their perfume filled the air, masking the street smells of fish and sweat. They looked out of place, soft-skinned, draped in fine cloth. Just as Raju and I did, I realised.

“Be off,” the man said to the wrinkled person at Raju’s elbow.

The old man held our eyes for a moment, then scuttled away.

“Beware of these street beggars,” the woman said to me, smiling. “They’ll cheat gentle children of all your coins.”

“You’d better come with us,” said the slender man. “We’ll take you wherever you need to go.”

The woman took my hand, pulling Raju with me. The man led us into the nearest lane, past the liquor vendor who had embarrassed me a few moments before. The vendor looked at us in dismay. His customer halted his cup halfway to his mouth and widened his eyes at us in warning.

Our elegant rescuer, walking ahead, glanced back at his companion with a pleased lift of his eyebrows. With sudden suspicion, I yanked my arm away and ran into the liquor vendor’s booth, still grasping Raju’s hand.

“Sit,” the vendor said, pointing to a pile of sacks,

continuing to talk with his customer. The man and woman hesitated, and then walked off.

The vendor finished his conversation and turned to us.

“You’ll be fine now,” he said. “But be careful who you trust.”

We bowed to him and his client, and turned back up the street toward home. My zest for adventure had faded.

At the next lane, the tiny man reappeared and beckoned to us. “Come another day,” he said. “I’ll show you the bead works.”

He rubbed his hand through the grit of the road and tousled a bit of Raju’s hair with his dirty fingers. “Like so,” he said, smearing Raju’s cheek. “Like so,” he said again.

He withdrew into the alley, examining the coin Raju pressed into his hand.

“Hun’s friend, maybe,” Raju said.

At home, we found Pa and Gulab entertaining Champa, her servant crouching on the bricks behind her.

Champa was a ship captain from Dilmun, far across the ocean. Every year she sailed her ship to our seaport so Pa could fill his warehouses with fine linen coverlets and veils, animal skins with markings never found in the Sindhu valley, thick coils of rope, pearls like tiny moons.

Champa’s soles and palms were dyed red with henna, her orange hair was bound with golden chains, and a ruby clung to the side of her long, curved nose. Her ears, her neck, her arms gleamed with thick bands of gold. Next to her, Gulab’s bright

turban and *dhoti* and springing black moustache seemed almost ordinary. Pa in his plain white clothing and smooth beard somehow looked more impressive than either of them.

Once, Champa, Gulab, and Pa had lived with their families in the same mountain village. Now they were scattered far apart, but the old ties still held. Pa and Champa discussed wind directions while Gulab shifted his long legs restlessly, just the way Bhoomi did when she was made to sit still.

Champa's blue eyes looked at us intently, the great sweep of her nose probing the air. She pulled my braid and punched Raju lightly on his shoulder.

“So, Gulab,” said Champa. Her voice was hoarse from shouting over the winds and creaking timbers of her ship. “This fine young man – is he soon to join your caravans?”

Raju blinked uncomfortably and glanced sideways at Pa.

“Champa-ji,” said Pa, “Raju’s place is in the office here. We leave the adventures to you and Gulab. True, Raju?”

Raju joined his palms and bowed obediently. He turned toward Champa.

“Are there really sea demons?” he asked her.

“You like to chase danger. More fun than being a warehouse clerk, eh?” she said. “Demons, you ask? How about a giant turtle with a snake’s head, claws all along its legs and a shell big as a hut – demon enough for you? Or a fish long as I am tall with teeth sharp as Gulab’s razor to slice a person in two with one bite. Or a towering water demon with pools of darkness for eyes and arms and wild hair like jets of water that swoops from nowhere to press ships

down to the bottom of the sea. Demons like those, you mean?”

Raju’s eyes shone. Gulab’s too. Champa looked pleased with their reaction.

“Indeed, said Pa, “there are demons everywhere, if we fear them.”

Raju’s eyes dropped. He knew Pa was discouraging further questions.

“Enough shivering,” said Champa. “See what I’ve brought you from the land of Dilmun.”

She gestured to her servant, who left, and then returned carrying a wooden box above his head. With a flourish, he placed it on the carpet and removed the lid. Champa pulled off the wrappings and presented me with a hand mirror. I looked in surprise at my face reflected back from its sunny

surface. My fingers traced the carving of intertwined birds that formed the handle.

“Use it in health and prosperity, Simi. Smile into it always,” she said.

There were other things in the box. Stone jars of hair oil for the men and Raju, herbs for Devi Auntie, a clay elephant garlanded with red braid for Bhoomi. Gazing in my mirror, I hardly noticed.

Chapter 8. A Merchant and Three Cowherds

Raju and I slipped out to the cowshed early the next morning. Devi Auntie, busy providing for Champa, left us unsupervised.

“Manu, we need your help,” I asked.

He grinned in delight.

“I’ll always help you. One day you opened your hand and gave me a fine suit of new clothes. Now my hands are open for you. I’ll go to every rock and tree, the stars above, the land of snakes below if you ask.”

“Better you should look after the cows,” Raju said.

He sounded like Pa.

“Manu,” I said, “turn us into cowherds like you. That’s how you can help.”

His grin slipped, replaced with a worried frown.

“Just for a while, Manu. We have to rescue Sonia, and we can’t do it if we look like merchants. We need a disguise.”

Manu’s smile returned.

The next morning, Manu brought his cousin, to care for Kamli and Phul. Manu held out a bundle of tattered pieces of cloth. Behind the shed, I removed my finely pleated skirt and scarf and tucked the ragged cloth around my hips and shoulder.

Raju changed in the lane. When I came through the gate, he was following the advice of the tiny man in

the market place, rubbing dust into his head, turning his gleaming black hair dull and spiky. I shook out my neat oiled plait and rebraided it roughly, so that tendrils fell over my eyes.

Our discarded clothing and sandals we hid behind the wall.

“You are my cowherd cousins now.” said Manu. “I guided you in the forest. I will also guide you in the city.”

We set out for the river gate. Our bare feet were soon coated with grime as if they had never known sandals.

Manu stooped, then held up a coin, which he dropped into a cloth pouch at his waist.

“There are many things waiting in the dust,” he said. “Perhaps we’ll become very rich.”

His small pouch was crammed with bits of broken jewellery and metal chips by the time we reached the liquor vendor who had sheltered us. There was no recognition in his eyes as he watched us pass.

Raju touched my elbow. The old man with the cloudy eyes stood beside him, fingering Raju's frayed *dhoti*.

"Good, good!" he said, and patted Raju's shoulder.

He dashed off down the lane. "Beads," he said.

We hurried after him through lane after lane lined with high brick walls. Raju's eyes under the strange dusty hair had the far-away look that meant he was mapping our route in his head.

Where the walls opened into a large park, the old man stretched out his arm to hold us back. He gestured across the bushes to a wide opening in the

wall.

“Bead factory,” he said.

When Raju passed him some coins, he bowed, then slid down against the wall, closing his eyes.

I slipped into the park, Raju and Manu straggling behind, and sat in the shade of a bush.

At the factory gate, a guard in a leather breastplate and pointed cap, walked back and forth, slapping his club into the palm of his hand. A loaded bullock cart lumbered out of the gate and down the road. A woman swept the bricks, raising great swirls of dust. Men and women came and went, chattering or silent, well-dressed or staggering under heavy sacks.

No one went through without speaking to the guard and receiving his nod.

A ball shot across the road, past the guard's feet and through the factory entrance. Two boys stood shuffling their feet, gazing at the gap where their ball had disappeared. When they tried to enter, the guard stepped in front of them.

"You wish to enter this courtyard?" the guard asked.

Passers-by stopped to watch. The boys mumbled, probably too nervous to notice the twinkle in the guard's eye.

"Be quick," said the guard. "Touch nothing but the ball you seek."

"Tomorrow, Simi-ji, you will bring a ball and we will enter easily," said Manu.

"Perhaps not with a ball, but somehow," I said.

Finding Sonia once we were inside would be more

difficult.

Hoping for ideas, we watched the pacing guard, the long wall stretching unbroken on either side. I drew letters in the dirt with a stick. Manu wandered further along the road and returned with more gleanings in his pouch. Raju played with pebbles, his face serious.

“Look, Manu, here are three small stones. Now I put a coin under this stone. Now I move the stones around. Which rock hides the coin?”

Manu pointed to one, then another, then the last. The coin was under none of them.

“You can’t find it?” asked Raju. “Quiet! The coin is calling. Yes, it has moved. Aha! Here it is.”

His face solemn as usual, he pulled the coin from Manu’s unruly hair.

Manu waved his arms in a short excited dance. The old man scurried over from his resting place against the wall, clapping his hands.

“Good, good!” he said.

The boys with the ball looked over. Passers-by glanced at us.

“Put them away,” I said to Raju in a low voice.
“We’re attracting attention.”

Our audience melted away except for a long-legged form leaning against the wall by the factory. I stared through the afternoon glare and realized it was Gulab. There was a sudden stir at the gate, and our eyes turned to watch.

“Make way! Make way!” the guard called, pointing with his club to clear a path.

Another guard trotted through the entrance, followed by three young women clustered in a group with a third guard behind. Pedestrians stopped to watch. Two of the women walked with lowered eyes, shawls pulled across their faces. The third, walking proudly, was Sonia. Her eyes bored into the gathered crowd. Then, tossing her head at the watchers on either side, gold rings glinting in her nose and ears, she strode ahead.

The little procession of guards and women neared the wall where Gulab leaned. He straightened, widened his eyes, opened his mouth to speak. Sonia stopped, looked at him full in the face, and cut off his words with an abrupt sweep of her hand. She drew in her breath and spat on the bricks at his feet.

Gulab stepped back. His face was shrivelled beneath his bright turban, his jaunty moustache out of place. The guards stood unmoving.

Sonia glared at Gulab a moment more, then turned back to her group, which jolted ahead, prodded by the club in the hands of the guard.

Gulab stumbled away from the wall. Manu ran to him and took his hand.

“This way, Uncle-ji,” said Manu, “Please sit for a moment in this beautiful park.”

Gulab sat limply and unspeaking on the brick ledge at the base of a tree. Manu ran off to find a drinks vendor, a coin from Raju clutched in his hand. The old man with the filmed eyes sidled close.

Manu returned with the drink and placed it in Gulab’s hands.

“Uncle-ji,” he said, “Simi and Raju and I have formed a magnificent plan.”

Gulab made no response at first, then slowly lifted his head.

“Continue, cowherd,” he said.

“Tomorrow or maybe the next day,” said Manu, “Raju will bring his ball, and we will run with it here by the guard. And I will hit it with my foot...”

He jumped up and kicked his foot across the ground.

“...right through the gate, and in we’ll go to free the beautiful one who spat on you today. And when she’s free, she’ll spit on you no more, and you’ll live happily ever after.”

Gulab barked a short laugh.

“Cowherd, if only your enthusiasm were enough to win her release,” he said.

His face looked a little brighter behind his moustache.

The old man nodded in approval. “Good, good!” he said.

Gulab dropped a coin in his palm.

“Now, Simi, Raju, Manu,” Gulab said, “we must return home. We’ll go together if you three cowherds will walk with a merchant.”

Chapter 9. Suspects

“The situation is complicated,” said Gulab as we walked up the main road to our quarter.

“Perhaps you should leave Sonia to me. Hun will understand.”

“Gulab, I have a plan,” I said. “At least, I almost have a plan. Raju and Manu and you and even Bhoomi gave me ideas for it. We’ll all be quite safe. I’ll explain it to you.”

Gulab hesitated. “Not here,” he said. “Privately. Later.”

Raju and I went to change back into our own clothes. When we entered the main courtyard we found

Gulab already sitting with Pa.

“The thieves grow bolder,” Pa said.

Instead of sitting still, as he usually did, he drummed with his hand against the cushion. Devi Auntie limped from the kitchen with a tray. I took it from her, pouring buttermilk into the cups and fetching her old brown cushion.

Pa looked at me.

“Simi, your mother’s belt has been stolen again,” he said. “It must be the same robber band as the first time.”

“The belt?” I cried. “Again?”

Had Gulab taken it once more?

Gulab’s hands fluttered, his knee jiggled. He stared

at Raju and me, eyes pleading for us to say nothing of his role in the first theft.

“It was a different manner of thief entirely this time,” he said. “Bhagat-ji tells me the box and the chest were left lying open, the sealings scattered on the floor.”

“A belt is just a belt,” said Pa. “Either it’s returned or it’s not. But these thieves must be stopped.”

‘But it was Ma’s,” I said.

“I know, Simi,” Pa said softly.

Next morning, I watered Ma’s jackfruit tree, then loosened the earth around its roots. Trees could feel love, Ma had told me. Perhaps it would finally bear fruit after all the years it had stood there.

I put my arms around the trunk. Could we trust

Gulab? Had he stolen again, or was he innocent this time?

“Manu is here,” said Raju.

We made our way to the cowshed. Gulab was waiting.

Raju and I sat cross-legged on the hard-packed earth. Manu stood by the cows, caressing their necks while their eyes looked steadily ahead and their tails flicked lazily. Gulab leaned against the shed, tossing raisins into his mouth.

“Well, Simi, let’s have your plan,” he said.

“Did you take Ma’s belt?” I blurted out.

“Simi,” he said, “you are as open as the sun in the sky. Will you be so frank about the secrets we arrange today? If we have a plot, it must be kept

dark as the night.”

“Gulab-ji, I have kept many secrets,” I said. “I’ve never told about the first time you took the belt, I’ve never told about Hun...”

“Enough about the first time,” said Gulab. “I look on that belt as rightfully mine, and I’ve been hoping that in time Bhagat will give it to me willingly. As for the disappearance now, I’m as surprised as your father is.”

“Gulab-ji is a good man,” said Manu. A cow scraped her hoof in the dirt, then was still. “Even the great chief Hun says so.

The back courtyard baked in the morning sun, thickening the familiar smells of cow and dust and sweat, making me long to stay there, snug and secure. But I had promised Hun.

“Gulab-ji, Sonia’s in the jail, right?” I asked.

“She is,” said Gulab. “She’s taken there every evening and to the factory every morning, where she polishes beads behind brick walls.”

“Gulab-ji, if you can reach Sonia with a message, we can rescue her.”

“Simi, I have thought of many schemes to free her, but a trader cannot be seen to interfere with the law of the city.”

“Send one of your men,” I said. “Just a message. And get us a cart with a driver. The rest we’ll do. No one will know about you.”

“Simi,” said Gulab, “you put me to shame. Do it soon.”

“Tomorrow we’ll begin,” I said. “Ad a few days later,

the rescue. Every day when the sun is highest, Sonia must go to the toilets. That must become her habit. Every day, Raju and I must juggle and do magic tricks in the streets. That must be our habit.”

Raju looked down at the dirt and said nothing.

“And we need a pouch of dried fruit. A large pouch,” I said.

“I will provide it,’ said Gulab.

“You’ll be a merchant, pleased with Raju’s magic tricks. You’ll reward him with the fruit so that the guard sees. Not tomorrow. The next day. Tomorrow give him coins. The guard must become used to us.”

“I bow to your cunning,” said Gulab. “There’s a barred window in the cells. The prisoners can’t pass through, but words can surely flow in. Tonight, one

of my men will whisper to Sonia ‘toilet – at the sun’s height – every day.’”

Manu took the cows, long past the usual time, and Gulab sauntered off. I almost believed him when he said that this time he had not stolen the belt.

“Raju, there may be clues about the belt at Pa’s warehouse,” I said. “Bring coins. We’ll take Pa some sweets from the vendor.”

Champa captain, decked as usual in golden ornaments and threads of gold twisted elaborately through her hair, was sitting in the office with Pa when we arrived. Her servant stood behind her. I offered them the milky sweets in their leaf wrapping.

“Raju, find something to put them on,” said Pa.

I slid them on the plate Raju brought and wiped my sticky hands on the edge of my shawl when no one

was looking. Champa's servant passed round the plate. The chest in the corner was closed as usual, with no sign it had been ransacked for the belt.

"Bhagat-ji," said the captain, turning her nose with its great ruby toward Pa, "family life is agreeable. I had forgotten. Like a prince you are, your child walking through dusty streets to wait on you."

"I am pleased with Simi," said Pa.

My smile slipped. I felt guilty. I had come for my own purposes, not for him.

"Simi, advise me," the captain said, her great nose swooping toward me. "I will explain. In Dilmun waits a princess, light of her father's heart, as I was of my father's and you are of yours..."

I was embarrassed to look at Pa for his reaction.

“...wilful, as I was, and as you are too. But unlike you, this princess is ruled by no one.”

Champa slammed a fist into her hand and clenched her jaw.

“Not even by the prince her father. The opposite, in fact. Her whims rule the prince. Bhagat-ji,” she said to Pa, “We need the prince’s favour. We rely on him for cargo. And there’s only one way to keep his favour. By making the princess smile.”

“We are in agreement about the prince,” said Pa. “This tie with him is good for us all.”

“Simi,” said Champa, “you’re a young girl like the princess. What will please her?”

“A mirror like you gave me?” I said. “Would she like that?”

“She’s a princess, Simi. She has mirrors already, costlier than I could give.”

“Shawls? Bangles? Combs? Amulets? She’s too old for toys, I think.”

“Simi, all those and more I have taken her. But I do have one idea. I’ll take the princess a fishing cat. A fishing cat with a jewelled collar and an embroidered cushion.”

“Fishing cats?” said Pa. “They’re wild by nature. They won’t do well in a cage.”

“The princess heard of them, and now she wants one,” said Champa. “Perhaps it was I who spoke of them. Swimming in the river. Catching fish with their paws. Not like the cats she has seen.”

“Embroidered cushions might not be good for cats,” I said. “Their claws would rip out the threads.”

“Wise child,” said Champa. “Plain cushions. I knew you would advise me. And now, Bhagat-ji, allow me to leave. There are many tasks.”

She placed her palms together and bowed to each of us, her nose with its red jewel dipping over her hands. Her servant followed her out of the room. The office was quiet without her.

Pa re-wrapped the sweets. “The rest are for you. Share as you wish,” he said, closing my hand around the packet.

“Who could have taken the belt?” I asked him. I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Did Gulab take it?”

“This is what must not happen, Simi,” said Pa. “Could it be this person? Could it be that? If we look on everyone with suspicion, soon we won’t trust even each other. Better to never know the thief, Simi, than to suspect unjustly. Who knows? Perhaps

the one who took it had need of it. Leave the belt, Simi. Let it live out its own story.”

He lowered his head, pressing his fingers into his forehead. I thought there were tears in his eyes.

“Yes, Pa,” I said.

“Wait in the courtyard,” said Pa. “Soon we’ll walk home together.”

“The watchman might have seen Gulab come or go,” I said to Raju when we were out of Pa’s hearing.

“Simi,” said Raju, “can we not listen to your father’s words? Forget about Gulab and the belt.”

“Perhaps Pa says one thing from duty and hopes for another,” I said. “It’s good to look for truth. In the end, Pa will agree. You’ll see.”

I walked to the gate where the watchmen crouched on the bricks by their fire pot. They saluted me, palms together, squinting through the smoke.

“Please accept these sweets,” I said. “My father said I could give them where I wished.”

“These will give our teeth some good work to do, little mother,” said the older man. “And did you not bring us a jar of something to wash them down with?”

I had not thought of providing drink.

“No matter. Fetch the water, grandson.”

The younger man brought an earthenware jar from the shade near the wall.

“Pure water serves us well,” said the grandfather. “Still, if it pleases you to come again, ask the

grandmother for some of the sweet drink the cowherd brings. That slips down a dusty throat like silk.”

“Manu comes here?” I asked.

“Indeed,” said the older man. “You are surprised? Did you think you know all that happens in this world?”

“Was he here two days ago?” I asked, a terrible suspicion wrenching my insides.

“He may have been,” said the watchman.

“Can you perhaps think carefully?” I asked.

“Yesterday, today, tomorrow, they are all the same. One small boy with flavoured water? I know only that he’s not here now,” said the man.

His grandson grinned broadly at us.

“Is he a sage or is he mocking us?” I asked Raju after we had walked some distance away.

“I think he sees everything, but tells no one but your father,” Raju said. “He’s loyal to the one he serves. Your father takes only honest people to work here.”

“People like you, Raju?” I teased.

He scowled. “My duty is not here. It’s surely the will of the gods that I travel with Gulab, just as my father did.”

“Raju,” I said, “I don’t want to think it, but Manu could be the thief, since he comes here sometimes.”

“It’s happening,” said Raju. “Just as your father said it would. If we search for the belt, soon we won’t even trust each other.”

I hoped Raju was wrong.

At home, I tossed a ball for Bhoomi to catch, while Raju carried firewood to the kitchen.

“Raju,” I said, “we have three suspects now - not counting everyone who works at the warehouse, of course, but we’ll never be able to check all of them. Gulab, but maybe he’s telling the truth about not taking it, Manu, but I can’t believe he would steal from us, and, I’ve suddenly realised, the captain. She’d love to take a belt like that to the princess she’s so worried about. Petals of lapis lazuli, leaves of gold.

Raju shrugged as well as he could with a load of firewood on his shoulder.

Chapter 10. Dried Fruit

In the morning, I clasped the rough grey trunk of the jackfruit tree, pressing my cheek against the bark, gazing up at the clusters of dark green leaves.

I was reluctant to leave the tree's strength. But I had to. Today Hun, Gulab, Sonia, fiery and graceful, depended on me.

"So now, Simi, you talk with trees?" Gulab asked, coming into the courtyard.

"I wasn't talking," I snapped.

"Simi, I have news for you," Gulab said.

He folded himself onto the ledge, bright blue *dhoti* billowing over his legs.

“Sonia received our message last night,” he said.
“She’ll be at the toilets starting today. When the sun is at its highest, as you requested.”

“Good,” I said.

“So now you begin your part,” Gulab said. “I look forward to your performance.”

I went to my room for my new mirror, tucked carefully away in a chest.

Raju and Manu were waiting at the cowshed.

Suspect in the belt theft or not, Manu was a lively help to us that day. Once again he brought his cousin, who walked off down the lane with Kamli and Phul, swinging a wooden stick.

Raju and I changed into our cowherd disguises while Manu stood guard in case Auntie or a servant came. I looked in the wavy face of the mirror at my dirt-smearred cheek and roughened hair. Ma would not have been pleased by my appearance.

Or perhaps she would have laughed.

“A child should be naughty,” she said.

I held the mirror for Raju. He glanced at his herder face and pulled at his mouth to hide his grin.

Manu was delighted to see his reflection. He wrinkled his nose and rolled his lips and laughed.

‘Do you see, Simi?’ he said. “One Manu laughing here, one Manu laughing there, but only one to speak for both of them.” He pounded his chest for emphasis.

becoming the likeliest suspect.

Leaving the mirror and our good clothing in the gap between the walls,
we slipped out the back gate into the city.

In a square several lanes away from the bead factory, we sat to rest, dangling our feet in a pool and drinking from cups of peppered water Raju bought from a vendor.

Then we began. Raju planted his feet apart and began to juggle. Manu and I clapped in rhythm as he tossed the little bags of dried beans in the air.

A passer-by threw a coin at his feet. Another followed. Raju's face was serious as he walked in a circle, then climbed on the pool ledge, still juggling, and jumped down again.

He pocketed the little bags and drew out his pebbles.

A scattering of people watched him. A pebble disappeared from his palm and re-appeared in Manu's ear. He pulled a coin from the ear of a smiling man with a dark red turban and a walking stick as tall as he was. Some people stopped to watch and some ignored us, as we had hoped. And Raju acquired a handful of coins, which he crammed into his pouch.

At the next square, Raju repeated his act, and by the time we headed down the lane to the bead factory, we felt we were established performers.

The old man with watery eyes appeared from a side alley. He beckoned and we followed, ushered like honoured guests out of the lane and into the park. He patted the ground for us to sit by the bush across from the factory gate, and held out his open palm to Raju. Raju, as before, passed him a coin.

Already the sun was high. We would plan to arrive

earlier the next day.

Raju juggled his beanbags, his calm expression never changing. The old man clapped, and Manu and I joined in, sitting cross-legged by the shrub. The guard at the factory gate watched us.

Gulab approached us, as he had promised, and threw some coins on the bricks. He wore his brightest clothes, and walked with a swagger, a rich merchant with a flamboyant moustache being kind to poor children. Several onlookers followed his example.

The guard called to a small boy in the street, giving him some coins and pointing to us. The boy ran up and placed them carefully at my feet. I looked toward the guard and joined my palms in thanks. He joined his palms in return.

Performance finished, we wandered back down the

lane. Raju gathered his day's earnings and put them in the hand of the old man, who tied them into a corner of his shawl. He pursed his lips and pressed an imaginary flute with his fingers.

"Tomorrow," he said.

We walked home in high spirits.

"It's working," I said.

"Yes, because I'm doing all the work," said Raju.

"You love to show off your tricks," I said. "Anyway, my time will come."

"Where were you roving all day, no food, no common sense?" asked Devi Auntie when I entered the kitchen.

Early next morning, the mist in the courtyard

muffling the birdcalls and darkening the bark of the branches, Raju and I transformed ourselves once more into herders. Manu's cousin took the animals, and Manu, Raju and I set out for the factory gate.

Raju started to juggle, Manu and I to clap as soon as we reached the park. The old man appeared with a reed flute, trills swirling in the air like Raju's beanbags. Faster and faster went Raju's hands, the trills, our clapping, then slower and slower, then faster and faster again.

Raju fumbled and the bags fell to the ground. He stood without blinking. I could tell he felt embarrassed in front of the crowd.

"You dropped them, juggler? They're not important. Start again." It was Gulab who spoke, watching from the wall, pretending not to know us.

"First I will rest, then I will juggle," said Raju, sinking

to the ground by the shrubs, pulling his pebbles out of Manu's hair and from under my foot. The old man blew a soft trill on his flute, and Raju stood again to juggle, catching us up in a whirl of beanbags and music.

While I slapped my hands together with enthusiasm, I noted the guard watching us, and Gulab, today in rose and yellow, leaning by the wall tossing what I knew were bits of fruit into his mouth from a bag at his hip.

The plan was proceeding.

The old man stopped the flute with a flourish. Raju bowed to the street with folded hands and dropped his beanbags to the ground. Sweating and panting, he folded himself down beside us, his face as serious as always. Manu and I grinned broadly. I glanced at the guard across the road. He held up folded hands. I did too. No coins from him today, but the cloth

spread in front of us was sprinkled with donations from others.

Gulab approached.

“Whoever you are, you’re worthy of a reward,” he said. He dropped the sack of dried fruit on the cloth. “Something to honour your stomach with,” he said, and walked off.

Raju wrapped the coins together and presented them to the old man, who again touched Raju’s feet. The guard looked on curiously. The more intrigued he became the better, I thought.

I snatched the fruit and crammed a handful in my mouth. When Raju put out his hand, I twisted away and hugged the cloth bag to myself. Raju shrugged.

It was part of the plan.

Chapter 11. Two Rescues

Next morning, I stole into Pa's room and lifted Ma's heavy gold ear and nose rings from her old chest.

Gulab waited for Manu at the cowshed with Raju and me. The cows flicked their ears and nosed the weeds in the hard-packed earth while Gulab helped work the thick rings through my ear lobes and nostril.

"I still say the plan is too crude for my liking," he said, "but perhaps it will work."

"Gulab-ji," I said. "I saw your face when Bhoomi had her 'accident' in the kitchen. You couldn't bear it. People are terrified of other people's toilet messes.

More than they are of poisonous snakes. I'm sure it will work."

Raju's face lit up in a rare grin, remembering Gulab's reaction the day Bhoomi ate too many jujubes.

Manu and his cousin arrived. Gulab slipped away and the cousin left the courtyard with the cows swaying beside him. Manu, Raju and I set off for the bead factory.

By the time we crouched in the park by our usual shrub, the sun was still climbing to its high point. The old man appeared beside us. Gulab was already across the lane leaning by a corner of the wall. His colours were subdued today, his brown and grey blending with the yellow brick.

Down the road, a carter from Gulab's caravan lounged in his seat, joking with a knot of men. The bullock's reins hung from his hands. I caught Manu's

eye and looked toward the cart. Manu nodded and looked away.

“Wasting such fine melons isn’t good,” he said, “but the plan requires it.”

“Soon Sonia will be free from her cruel bondage,” I said.

“Are they really cruel to her?” asked Manu.

“Probably,” I said. “She’s a prisoner, after all.”

The old man ran trills up and down his flute and raised his eyebrows at Raju.

“One moment, flute player,” said Raju. “First Simi has to eat fruit.”

I brought out the cloth sack of dried fruit. I watched until the guard’s eyes were on us. Then I plucked a

piece of fruit from the bag, rolled it between my fingers in front of Raju's face, and placed it in my mouth. I rolled my head with pleasure as I chewed, a smirk of victory on my face.

Raju snatched at the bag. I jumped up and ran into the road where the guard could see Ma's heavy earrings tugging at my ears. Raju chased me. I jerked to a stop, held up the bag, turned it upside down and shook it. Nothing fell out. I shrugged and smirked again. I had eaten the whole bag of fruit myself. Or so the guard thought, we hoped.

The old man warbled on his flute. The sun was almost at its height. Raju tossed beanbags, Manu and I clapped.

Suddenly I clutched my abdomen.

"Aaii! Aaii!" I shrieked. The beanbags fell. The flute trembled and was silent. I staggered to my feet.

Raju took one of my arms, Manu the other.

“Simi-ji, Simi-ji! What is wrong?” Manu cried.

“Serves you right for eating all the fruit,” Raju shouted.

“Toilet!” I called out. “Toilet! Quickly!”

They looked around desperately, then pulled me by the arms across the street to the guard.

“Toilet! Toilet! Please! Aaii! Aaii!” I moaned. I bent almost double, pressing my stomach, then looked up at him, making Ma’s earrings shake.

The guard’s face was horrified, just as Gulab’s had been after Bhoomi ate the jujube fruits.

“Go, then, girl. Quickly. Through that entrance.” He pointed me through the gate to a door at the end of

the courtyard. I raced across the bricks, groaning and panting.

“You boys. You wait here,” I heard the guard say.

It was up to them to handle the melons and the bullock cart. I sprinted to the toilet room, grabbing my buttocks to make my urgency look real.

I burst into the toilets, ignoring the unwholesome smells, looking frantically for Sonia. She entered behind me, outlined against the sunlight behind, staring like a beast about to spring. Her jewellery gleamed, her hair sprang from her head in black waves.

“Sonia, I’m Simi. Change clothes with me quickly, before we’re caught,” I said.

“And why would I do that?” she asked.

I started to unwind my ragged skirt.

“Please hurry,” I said. “Your brother asked me to do this for him. I promised. Please be quick.”

“My brother? This is for my brother? You’re sure?” she asked. “For my brother I will do it, but not for Gulab. Never, never for that frightened little cockroach with the big moustache. You promise me this is for my brother?”

“I promise. Hun sent me. Hurry, please.”

I twisted her clothes around me as she gathered up my discarded rags and draped the tattered, discoloured fabric around her hips.

“We must wet your hair to make it thinner like mine,” I said. I pulled the cord from my hair and wove it into hers. Her heavy gold rings swung against her pulled-back hair.

“Walk out of here to the gate. Keep the shawl over your head, but let the rings show so they’ll think you’re me. Bend over, and hold your stomach as if it hurts. Wait behind the gate until you hear a big disturbance outside.”

“A disturbance?” asked Sonia.

“Yes,” I said. “Angry shouting and melons flying everywhere. Slip by the guard when he’s busy with the melons. There are two boys and an old man to help you. When you get to the lane across the park, you are safe. Tell Hun we kept our promise.”

“Let it begin, then,” said Sonia. “But what about you? They’ll find you here.”

“I’ll tell them you forced me,” I said. “We’ve planned it all.”

“It’s not easy to play the innocent, you know,” she

said.

Without warning, she scratched her nail down my arm, leaving a red welt, then slapped my face hard, making my ears buzz. She wrenched my arms behind my back, threw me to the damp floor, and, holding me still with her foot, bound my hands and feet together with her shawl, the green one she had been wearing when she entered. I barely had time to protest before she stuffed a handful of skirt into my mouth.

“This is to help you,” she said as she walked out the door.

I lay twisted and uncomfortable, cheek and arm stinging, nose pressed against the floor. The smell of wet clay that filled my nostrils was strangely clean and pleasant, in spite of the drains just arm-lengths away.

I jerked my trussed-up body toward the door, flopping from side to side. The thought of accidentally collapsing over one of the drains made me retch.

A voice called, “Sonia, you’re taking too long.”

The light dimmed as someone stood in the entrance.

“What has happened?”

I groaned and shook my head, trying to dislodge the gag. A woman bent over me and pulled the skirt out of my mouth. Her hands moved to the loops of shawl binding my arms and legs, and then hesitated.

“It’s clear you’re not Sonia,” she said. “I’ll have to leave you like this until I get some help.”

My mouth was too dry for me to make any sound but a croak.

This adventure was ending badly for me. I imagined Pa and Devi Auntie and Raju and Gulab sitting sadly without me. Perhaps I would never eat warm *chapatti* and lentils in the kitchen again.

The woman returned, bringing two guards and a dapper little man with a stomach like a round ball above his neatly folded dhoti. He prodded my shoulder with his walking stick.

“Who are you, dressed in Sonia’s clothes but not Sonia?” he asked.

“The juggler’s sister,” I replied. I could no admit who I really was, for Pa’s and Gulab’s sakes.

“There’s no juggler here,” he said.

“Outside in the park, Seth-ji,” said the woman.

“Untie her,” he said. “Wait in the office.”

Instead of relief when my arms and legs were freed, I felt helpless. A sob rose in my chest and escaped from my mouth.

“We’ll soon sort this out,” said the woman, supporting me as I stood. “Either you’ve been meanly used, or you’re cleverer than you should be.”

She led me by the arm across the courtyard to an office much like Pa’s. The guard from the front gate swept into the office behind Seth-ji.

“Seth-ji,” he said, pointing at me, “that’s the very girl. Different now, but the same. Bright face with big eyes. She led her brothers around as if they were the ones with the nose rings.”

“You say, guard, that you admitted this girl?” asked Seth-ji from the entrance

“As I have said, Seth-ji,” answered the guard. “An

embarrassing need of nature. It was the best thing to do.”

“The fact is,” said Seth-ji, “that Sonia is gone and not likely to be found.”

That was good news, but I hardly cared any more.

“So now we will decide about you,” he said. Are you, perhaps, one of Hun’s bandits? Do we send you to the jail?”

My body trembled. Tensing my muscles only made the shaking worse. Should I shame Pa and tell who I was?

“I can see you’re no juggler girl,” said Seth-ji. “Your hands are soft, your hair is smooth and oiled under the dust. What are you plotting against me?”

A small boy appeared in the doorway.

“Guests!” he said urgently.

I sagged with relief, somehow knowing who would come into the room.

“Seth-ji,” said Pa. “I’m obliged to you. Gulab tells me you have my daughter under your care.”

“A great honour to serve you, my brother,” said Seth-ji. His voice was flustered.

“Now I’ll conduct her home,” said Pa.

I stared at the floor as Pa and Gulab took my arms.

“You understand that she was injured somewhat before she came into our care,” said Seth-ji. “Please accept my heartfelt wishes for her quick recovery. Guard her strictly, Bhagat-ji.”

“We’ll watch her,” Gulab said.

Chapter 12. Melon Cart

Raju and Manu were waiting outside the gate under the eye of a new guard. They fell into step behind us. The old man was nowhere in sight. Remnants of crushed melon lay by the wall.

“Pa, I can explain,” I said.

“Not now,” said Pa.

He and Gulab walked on ahead.

“What happened to you?” Raju murmured to me.

“Nothing important,” I said. “Where’s Sonia?”

“She got away,” said Raju.

At home, Pa’s sitting room smelt of burning oil lamps. Tasselled cushions gleamed red in the flickering light and carved table legs gleamed.

Pa’s beard, newly oiled, hung in dark twists. Gulab’s moustache sprang across his cheeks, his bright clothes contrasting, as always, with Pa’s simple white.

Raju stood in front of them. I joined him.

“Simi,” Pa said. “My daughter in the part of the city forbidden to her. My daughter, detained in a bead factory where she would still be if her uncle hadn’t chanced to see her. I am waiting to hear what this daughter has to say.”

So Gulab had told Pa he had been there by chance. I avoided his eyes.

“We wanted to be street performers. So we were,” I said.

A brief grin flashed on Gulab’s face.

“Raju juggled like a real performer, Manu and I clapped, and an old man came and played the flute for us. People gave us money. Raju gave it all to the old man,” I said.

“Good, good!” said Pa, his frown relaxing.

Now I plunged into a lie. “We didn’t know we were near the river gate. We were just walking from square to square, juggling whenever there were people.”

“And the factory?” Pa asked?

“The guard said I could use the toilet. A woman hit me and I fell. I can’t remember very well what

happened after that.”

“Was it your idea, Raju, to wander through the city, juggling at the crossroads?” asked Pa.

“Simi-ji wished it,” said Raju.

“Did you think to point out the dangers?” asked Pa.

Raju’s face wobbled. I closed my eyes, willing him to hold back the tears.

Pa’s eyes were wide open, staring at nothing. Gulab was silent. Raju and I waited.

Finally Pa spoke.

“I know my daughter. She never takes a step without thinking where her journey may lead her. She would never, just for a whim, leave a father heavy with worry. She would never, just for fun,

remove jewellery from her father's chamber.

“So, daughter, whatever you did, I know you thought it for the best. I'll probe your story no more.

“But remember, Simi. The gods have given me only one daughter. If you are hurt, it will be difficult for me to bear.”

Pa's eyes were red at the rims. Gulab's eyes were blurry. Tears were welling in my eyes too.

“As for you, Raju,” said Pa, “you watched over Simi as your grandmother requested. I won't scold a boy for obeying his grandmother.”

As Raju and I left, Pa turned to Gulab.

“If as you say you saw Simi enter the bead factory, you also saw the bandit's sister run out, and the cart of melons destroyed. I won't press you, but have a

care for your niece's safety."

Gulab looked down for a moment. "She was always in my sight until she went through the gate, Bhagatji," he said, "and then I came for you. She was foolhardy, perhaps, but never in danger."

"Simi," said Raju, when we were back in the courtyard, "tell me what happened at the bead factory."

I put my finger to my lips and led him through the darkness to the cowshed. The warmth, laden with animal smells, was welcome in the cool evening.

"You tell me first," I said. "I guess the melon plan worked?"

"Simi," said Raju, "it was exactly as we arranged. Manu snatches a melon and runs, and the men by the cart all yell 'Stop thief', so he throws it on the

ground, crack, splat. The driver stops the cart right in front of the gate, just as we said, then cracks his whip, pretending to make him move.

“My goods are being stolen from under me,’ he shouts. ‘Do something.’

“Then he starts pitching melons all over the road. ‘What’s the use? Take them all. I don’t care. In the market no one wants them. Why should the bullock pull them home just to rot? Take them. Take them.’

“Did the guard think it was real?” I asked.

“I guess so,” said Raju. “Well, I don’t really know. But it didn’t matter, because then everyone starts kicking the melons and jumping on them. Manu and I too. The guard is shouting we can’t make such a mess and who do we think is going to clean it up. Then the old man begins to walk around playing his flute, and I think I might as well juggle.”

“So that was when Sonia came through the gate?” I asked.

“The guard didn’t even notice. She waved at us and went off with the old man.”

“Where was Gulab?” I asked.

“He stayed in the lane. Sonia spit at his feet again.”

“Oh no,” I said. “Poor Gulab. Sonia called him a cockroach. Maybe he is. Do you think he took the belt a second time?”

“Simi, forget the belt,” said Raju.

The rains came. One moment, dark clouds and sheets of water cutting into the earth; the next, sunlight.

The jackfruit tree needed no watering, but I tended it

anyway, pulling weeds, embracing the trunk, looking up through its leaves to the sky. I was becoming used to Ma not being there. All the more reason to find Ma's belt, to hold something in my hand to keep my memories safe. Or perhaps all the more reason to put the belt in the past.

"I want to visit the holy man," I told Raju one day.

We were well into the trees before the rain started. Raju carried our sandals; they were useless in the stew of mud and bark and leaves coating our feet. Forest rain was different from city rain. It slid onto our necks in sudden waterfalls or pattered around us while we stood under leaves in pockets of dryness.

Dharm-ji sat under a roof of woven branches. His large topknot seemed small above his broad face and square fringe of beard.

We crouched before him surrounded by the drip of

water. Then the sky cleared.

“What do you want?” Dharm-ji asked.

“Dharm-ji,” I said, “my path is not clear. If I forget my mother’s belt, I’ll obey my father, but if I find the belt, I’ll make him happy. How should I choose?”

“Follow your heart,” he said.

We sat again in silence. A flock of birds flew into the clearing, searching for food. We rose and walked home through the forest.

In the evening, we gathered under the jackfruit while the lull in the rain lasted. Raju and I drowsed outside the circle of lamplight. Our presence forgotten, Auntie and Pa questioned Gulab about Sonia, but Gulab avoided answering.

“Devi Auntie, these herbs I brought from the north.

They work well, do they not?" he asked.

"Yes, indeed," said Auntie. "Bhagat-ji," she said to Pa, "will you not try a little tonight? Even one night's restful sleep would help you."

"Only time will help me, Aunt," said Pa. "What's the use of sleep? When I wake up, the sadness is waiting for me."

"We can't rock Pa and tell him stories, the way we do with Bhoomi," I said to Raju, grinning at the thought, "but holding Ma's belt may soothe him. We have to figure out how to get it back."

Chapter 13. Pursuit in the Rain

Gulab was our main suspect, even though I was growing fond of him and his comings and goings. But I was suspicious of him, especially whenever Champa visited.

Several times I came upon the two of them deep in conversation. When they saw me, they raised their voices, speaking of shipments of oil or bales of animal skins. What were they really discussing? The lapis lazuli belt, I thought.

“Simi,” said Raju, “forget about the belt and everyone will be happy, including us. A belt is just a belt, your father said.”

“It’s not just a belt!” I was indignant. “It’s Ma’s lapis lazuli belt and Pa says it’s mine now. And he wants it back, whatever he says.”

“Soon I’ll be travelling the caravan routes with Gulab,” said Raju. “I’ll watch him and discover where he keeps the belt. For now, do nothing. I’ll get it back for you. I promise.” His voice rose higher and higher until it squeaked.

“But Raju, we don’t even know if it’s Gulab who took the belt,” I reminded him.

“I’m pretty sure he did,” said Raju, sadly. “We know he took it once.”

“Do you think he took it and is trying to trade it to Champa for that princess?” I asked.

“No,” said Raju, “he said it belonged in the family. It’s a matter of honour.”

“Do you think Champa stole it and is trying to trade it to Gulab?” I asked.

“Maybe,” said Raju. “Gulab would pay a lot for it, I guess.”

“Do you think the watchmen at the warehouse took it?” I asked. “Maybe for Gulab or Champa or the bandits?”

“If they wanted to, they could, I guess,” said Raju. “They watch everyone, but no one watches them. But it would be difficult. Your father’s warehouse isn’t like the bead factory, Simi. It’s carefully run. I know from helping there.”

He puffed his chest out.

“One thing I’m sure of,” he said. “Manu didn’t steal it.”

I was relieved he was so certain about Manu.

“Raju,” I said. “Do you think Gulab wants to give Sonia the belt?”

People did strange things for love. In Ma’s tales, they kidnapped, fought wars, jumped off mountains, gave up thrones. Would Gulab steal for Sonia? A peace offering for putting her in jail?

Raju looked startled and then thoughtful.

“No,” said Raju, “he knows it wouldn’t work.”

“You’re right, Raju,” I said, “not with Sonia. She’d heave that belt of lapis lazuli right back and spit at the same time.”

We laughed.

A few days later, a plan formed itself.

Champa came visiting, her red hair dulled by the rain, water dripping onto her jewelled nose from her gold ornaments. Auntie sent Raju with a jug of warm milk and ladled puffed grain from a storage pot onto into a dish.

“Give them this to chew on,” she said to me.

“Use the pretty bowl,” said Bhoomi, “I don’t like that one.”

“It’s not your likes and dislikes that run the city,” said Auntie, but she reached up to lift Bhoomi’s choice from the shelf.

With a loving finger, Bhoomi traced the fish shapes swimming between two zigzag lines around the red bowl.

“Be careful with this, Simi,” Auntie said.

When I carried in the heavy footed tray, Pa and Champa stopped their discussion to admire the bowl. Gulab sat to one side, barely joining in the conversation. He seldom spoke much when Pa was present.

“Ah, the family heirloom,” said Champa.

She spooned grain into her hand and tossed it into her mouth. Still chewing, she tapped a fish on the bowl with her long red finger nail.

“Ocean fish or river fish? What do you think, Simi?” she asked.

Before I could draw breath, she answered herself. “Ocean, I’m sure. They remind me it’s time to be on the sea.”

My mouth opened to agree, but Champa had already turned toward Pa.

“Bhagat-ji, the sooner I sail, the better. I’ve learned my cargo’s at risk. Some thefts are reported in the port. What use are officials if they can’t protect my wares? Do you agree?”

Whatever Pa had to say, he kept it to himself, for Champa rolled on, still tapping her fingernail for emphasis.

“Anyway, I’ve handled it myself. I’ve brought in dogs, fierce ones. I’ve lost nothing yet, but with ruffians roaming the docks, who can say? To tell the truth, I’m looking forward to the day a thief comes close to my warehouse. Those dogs have teeth. Raju, you’re always looking for demons. I tell you, my dogs on the prowl are monster enough even for you.”

Pa held up his hand. I felt a surge of pride. Pa spoke out when he thought something was wrong.

“Champa-ji,” he said, “is this not harsh? Will the gods be pleased if someone is hurt?”

“The gods will say, ‘Well done, Champa. You protect what is yours as a sea merchant must,’” said Champa.

After the rain had stopped, I came upon Gulab and Champa mumbling by the herb garden. I picked up the words “day after tomorrow” before they saw me and changed the subject.

“A good girl, Gulab, this niece of yours,” said Champa, watching me straighten herbs that had been flattened by the rain.

Two mornings later, Raju and Manu and I sat on the brick ledge around the jackfruit tree, waiting to trail Gulab and Champa. Manu’s cousin had already disappeared into the rain with the cows, their broad noses swinging. I threw my arms around the tree

trunk, angling my head so I could see the courtyard entrance. The rain faltered and stopped.

Gulab swept across the courtyard and out the gate, saluting me with his walking stick. The three of us stole after him.

He turned from the lane into the street, walking in long easy strides, twirling the carved stick in his hand like a dancer.

We followed him down the main road, Manu ducking from time to time to collect bits for his pouch.

Finally, Gulab turned at the guesthouse in its park of flowers. The sky darkened and water poured down, beating flower heads into the mud and obscuring Gulab's shape as he entered the building. We pulled shawls tight over our heads and squinted through the sheets of rain until Gulab emerged with Champa and her servant.

They turned south toward us. We backed into an alley out of their sight as they passed, Gulab wielding his walking stick, the captain gesturing broadly with her hands.

Discussing Ma's belt, I thought.

We fell in behind them.

"The rain is helping us," I said. "Even if they turn and see us through the rain, they probably won't know it's us all bundled up in shawls."

We pushed ahead, squelching on soggy debris that grew thicker the further we walked, brushing shoulders wrapped in shawls that grew shabbier

"Simi," said Raju, "they're headed for the river gate. We can't disobey your father again."

"We can't stop now," I said. "We're just about to find

out what they're doing."

I pressed on. Raju followed, his chin jutting with displeasure. Manu was subdued, looking from one of us to the other.

The towers of the river gate rose through the haze of rain. Gulab and Champa passed by the guard without pausing. We waited our turn, colourless in the streaming water.

"Will they let us through?" I asked.

"They will, for I have this," said Manu, pulling a large coin from his pouch.

"Where did you get that?" I asked.

"Bribing them will make them even more suspicious," said Raju.

“It’s for Gulab-ji, not the guard,” said Manu.

It was our turn before the guard. We had no chance to ask more.

“Where are you going?” the guard asked.

“Guard-ji, “said Manu, “we’re following a very tall gentleman. He dropped this coin in the road. Probably if I return it, he’ll give me a reward.”

“Well now,” said the guard, “what would a clever boy like you do with such a reward?”

‘I will buy garlands for my cows,” said Manu.

“Pass through,” said the guard. “Hide that coin until you find your tall gentleman.”

And there we were. Through the river gate and on our way to the river. Father would be angry, but I

felt free.

The rain stopped. The sky gleamed like pearls. From the ramp, we could see Gulab and Champa and the servant crossing the muddy flats to the river flowing full and brown past the city.

A man pushed angrily at his cart stuck in the mud, while a small boy pulled at the bullocks' necks.

“Move, cart,” shouted the man. “Did I give you beautiful new wheels so you could rest here? Move, ungrateful one.”

An amused crowd gathered, calling advice, helping to push. We loitered behind, out of sight of our quarry.

Gulab, Champa, and her servant walked to one of the flat-bottomed boats moored at the river's edge. The boatman jumped to the stony path and bowed

them into the boat with a flourish. Another man cast off and leaped lightly from the shore to crouch in the boat's middle.

The boatman poled them slowly upriver. At least, to my eyes it seemed slow, but the boat was far in the distance by the time we picked our way along the stones to the shore.

"Simi-ji," said Manu, "hire a boat and follow."

"No boatman will take us, Manu," said Raju, trying to hide his satisfaction. "Your story about returning money to a very tall gentleman won't fool a boatman. Who would hire a boat just to do that?"

"Manu," I said, "we can't follow them in a boat anyway. They'll see us, and the whole point of following them will be lost."

Raju was pleased. "So let's return home now," he

said.

“We can follow on foot,” I said. “They might not go far. Maybe today we’ll find Ma’s belt.”

Chapter 14. Small Cat, Big Cat

In flood season, the river spread wide between its banks and there was little room to walk. Once we were past the gate area, the water lapped right up to a ramshackle stretch of shacks and shelters, their roofs supported by timbers sunk in water. We threaded our way behind, losing sight of the river but still smelling river mud and hearing the cry of gulls and the rush of water. Children darted as we wove around bits and pieces of the inhabitants' lives – drying clothes, wood piles, people crouched together.

The fishing village thinned and we walked beside the fast-moving river again. There was no sign of Gulab and Champa. To the north stretched fields of millet

dotted with distant farm workers. Ahead the river curved, rocky shore giving way to waving reed beds. Behind was the city, brown in the dull light.

I stepped into the reeds. “Oooh,” I cried in dismay as cold water welled up around my feet. Startled birds darted into the air chattering wildly. Insects buzzed.

“Are there snakes?” I wondered.

We slogged to higher ground where it was still damp but at least firm. Our bodies were clammy from half-dried clothes, our arms itchy from insect bites and sweat, our feet shrinking away from the slippery roots and ooze they encountered.

“It’s as hard to walk here as if it was pouring rain again,” I said.

Manu was in the lead. He rounded a curve and jumped back, putting his finger to his lips. He stole

behind the twisted trunk of a tamarisk tree, nodding for us to follow, and peered ahead.

“Boats,” he whispered.

We looked through the branches. Part way across the river was a small island ridged with trees and bushes, a boat tied to a mooring pole, the boatman waiting. Two more boats sat at the shore near us. Gulab and Champa sat in one of them, anchored by a boatman with a pole plunged into the water.

“Why is that tree trembling so?” called out Gulab. “Simi, is that you? Step out where we can see you.”

“How did he see us?” said Manu.

Raju looked at me in disgust. “Now your father will find out,” he said.

We filed out onto the bank to stand by the boat.

“You were right, Gulab,” said Champa. Her jewellery sparkled in the sun. “Bhagat’s daughter misses nothing.”

“I thought we’d left you at the gate,” said Gulab. “But, of course, you and your little band don’t give up so easily.” He flourished his arm gracefully. “Tell me why you’re tracking me today through gloom and damp.”

I clutched at my shawl. Raju watched, waiting for me to speak.

A wide smile spread on Manu’s face.

“Gulab-ji,” he said, “we are on the trail of the jewelled belt.”

Champa’s eyes widened.

“Also, Gulab-ji, I must give you this.” He pulled the

coin from his pouch.

“And how did I earn this?” asked Gulab.

“Perhaps you dropped it,” said Manu. “I don’t know for certain.”

“I thank you,” said Gulab, “and I return it to you as a reward.”

Manu exhaled in a breath of rapture. Gulab leaned back in his seat. The boat rocked as the river slapped its sides.

“Listen Simi,” he said. “Let me tell you what we’re doing, before you throw us down and search us for the belt. In fact, you know why we’re here. Champa-ji herself explained to you in Bhagat’s courtyard.”

Two men rounded the curve ahead, one combing the

reeds with a stick, one holding a throwing net.

“I remember,” said Raju. “You’re looking for fishing cats. Champa-ji needs one or two for the jewelled collars and feeding bowls.”

I noticed the empty cages in the other boat.

“Well remembered,” said Champa.

“Gulab-ji, we’ve raised nothing,” said the man with the net. “No cats, no rats, not even many birds.”

“Try the island once more. Then we’ll leave,” said Gulab.

He looked at Champa. “No fishing cat to be found. Perhaps the gods have heard Simi’s prayers.”

“I’d like to visit that island,” said Manu.

“Then go with the men,” said Gulab. “All of you. It’s not every day you can stand on an island.”

The boatman held his boat close to shore while we all climbed in, the two hunters first and then the three of us. I could feel the tug of the river through the solid timbers of the vessel. The boatman’s muscles bulged from poling us across the current to the tiny island partly submerged by the water.

The hunters jumped over the side and helped Raju jump after them. They grabbed Manu and me under the arms and swung us over the reeds to solid earth. The hunters’ sticks prodded the brush but no animals jumped out to be entangled in the net. Another pair of hunters appeared around the island’s end.

“Nothing stirs here. This is getting us nowhere,” one of them said, jabbing with the stick. Just as he spoke, a spotted brown shape reared up beyond his knees, hissing angrily as it danced sideways up a low

rise of land. One man readied his net, swaying lightly back and forth on his feet.

“A fishing cat,” I said, barely breathing. “A baby.”

The kitten bounded away, crouching with black ears flattened, short tail sweeping from side to side.

“This air’s too quiet,” said Manu. “We must go.” For once, his eyes were not twinkling. “Go now.”

The four hunters looked at him for an instant, then sprang to the boats, pulling us with them. I wrenched my arm away and ran back up toward the kitten.

“Go,” I heard a boatman shout, “I’ll bring the girl.”

Dark clouds rolled together and rain plunged down, pressing me to the ground as I scrambled up the rise. I heard my name shouted from across the water. My

feet were cold in the rising water. The island was shrinking.

“Simi-ji, Simi-ji. You must come,” the boatman called. He slogged through the deepening water, supporting himself with the steering pole.

I reached the hissing cat, crouched on a point of rock that was growing smaller as the water rose. I dug my hands around the cat’s shoulders and heaved the animal against my chest. Its claws raked my skin, but I felt no pain, only the coolness of the rain pouring over the slashes. Rough fur filled my mouth as I pressed with my chin to still the animal. I twisted my shawl round both of us, knotting it tightly, until only the cat’s head, with its large terror-filled eyes, remained outside the bindings. I felt the thrusts of its strong hind legs, muffled by the folds of cloth.

The boatman pushed through a swirl of water toward me. His boat bobbed behind him still

moored by its rope.

Through a blur of rain, I saw Gulab on the far shore, his gestures frantic. Champa's servant and one of the hunters tugged at his arms, pulling him back from the river. Gulab lunged away from them, but they held fast.

Water slapped across my toes, then welled around my ankles. I saw Raju in Champa's grip on the cliff above Gulab, shouting soundlessly in the pounding rain. I saw Manu, standing even higher, grope at his neck and raise something to his mouth.

The bird whistle. The whistle that called the tiger.

Manu's cheeks puffed out. Across the river, heads swung, searching for the sound, but I heard nothing.

The boatman below called out in warning. I looked upriver where he pointed. With a huge roar from the

depths of the river, a wave raced toward the island. I was whirled up and down, my feet and hands flailing desperately for something solid to grasp, the fishing cat weighted against me. Water and grit filled my mouth.

Then the tiger came, his massive head moving toward me over the grey water. He floated alongside me. The boatman, clinging with one hand to the root of the tiger's tail, hauled me up over the powerful golden haunch. I pulled and kicked until I lay along the animal's spine, my legs straddling his back, my arms squeezing the sides. The fishing cat, dead or alive, was pressed between the tiger and my chest.

The rain ceased. The water calmed. The great animal pushed through the waves to the shore, the hunter at his tail, I on his back. The little band of people waiting drew back in fear and wonder. Only Manu did not move. He stood proudly, stars in his

eyes. The boatman raised himself and helped me slide off.

The tiger gave a mighty shake, spraying us with water, and loped off into the forest. Gulab pulled at the knots in my shawl and the fishing cat sprang snarling to the ground, disappearing into the rocks and leaving both of us scratched and bleeding.

“Boatman,” said Gulab, “it’s because of you that Bhagat’s daughter is here with us, safe.”

“It was the tiger that saved us,” said the boatman through chattering teeth.

I was shivering too, and overcome with the urge to lie down on the wet rock and sleep.

“Simi,” said Gulab, “this is my responsibility. I should have watched you more strictly.”

He was either angry or amused. I was not sure which.

“That fishing cat was almost in my grasp,” said Champa. “At least, Simi, you’re safe. Where did that beast come from?”

“He’s my friend,” said Manu. “Raju’s and Simi’s, too.”

“We must return to the city on foot,” Gulab said. “We have no boats.”

He pointed at the river.

One boat floated gently in the middle of the river where the island had been, still moored to the post that was now almost submerged. The other boats were nowhere in sight.

They wrapped the shivering boatman and me in

shawls, and started back to the city. Manu and Raju supported the boatman. Gulab carried me over his shoulder.

Drowsy in my cocoon of shawls, I remembered the golden face and broad cheeks of the tiger, his sinewy back, his dense neck, his paws scooping the water.

Chapter 15. Offering for Dharm-ji

A fever kept me in bed for three days. The cat scratches on my arms and chest were healing cleanly, but something unclean in the animal's claws still could have poisoned my system, Auntie said. Or it might have been the shock of sinking under the wave and fearing for my life, as Raju said. Or it might have been the shock of learning that my uncle was an honest man after all, as Gulab teased when it was clear I was recovering.

Whatever the reason, Pa and Auntie, concerned about my health, said very little about my trip to the river. They assumed we had spent the whole day with Gulab, and I had had an unfortunate accident but done nothing foolish.

Once Auntie decided that I was recovered, I was free to search for the belt, but I had no idea where to look. Gulab? Champa? The watchmen? The belt had been gone for so long now, perhaps I was the only one who still thought of it.

And Raju, of course, because I kept reminding him.

One sunny day, Pa and Gulab entertained Champa beside the jackfruit tree. Devi Auntie sent Raju with cushions. I followed with cups of crushed nuts and milk.

“Stay until the harvest, brother,” said Pa to Gulab.
“Still time enough to avoid the snows.”

I looked at Raju. He had been silent lately about leaving with Gulab. Had he changed his mind?

“When harvest time ends I sail for Dilmun,” said Champa. “I’ll be back in the summer with a great

load of copper, as you request.”

“Pearls as well, Champa-ji,” said Pa.

“Pearls of course,” said Champa. “But you must offer me more cargo in return.”

“We’ve already provided amply,” Pa said. “Carved tables, jewelled bedsteads, thick-quilted cloth, more cloth fine as spider’s web, beads of red carnelian, beads of lapis lazuli. At the port the goods are piled so high they block the light.”

“Or perhaps in place of more goods, there is a small matter I have in mind,” Champa said, the gold chains in her hair swinging as she turned toward me.

“However I can help, I’ll do so, Champa-ji,” said Pa.

“Bhagat-ji, it’s your daughter’s help I need,” she said. “It concerns the tiger she rode to safety some days

ago.”

“Simi,” said Pa, “pay attention to how you can help Champa-ji.”

“Bhagat,” said Champa, stretching out her fingers and checking her long red nails, “it’s a thing not often seen, how this daughter of yours thought nothing of climbing on a tiger. Oh no, she’s lost her footing in the flood, I thought. And then I saw the tiger. Oh no, the tiger will attack her, I thought, but she climbs on its back, burdened with that fisher cat, no less, as if she does it every day. And the tiger lets her.”

“We thank that tiger daily,” said Pa. “Our family chose true when we took the tiger for our seal.”

“That beast has caught my fancy,” said Champa. “It didn’t growl, or snap, or slash with its huge paws. A tiger like that – it’s just the thing for my Dilmun

princess.”

“But the tiger...” I started to say.

“I know,” said Champa. “Finding it’s not easy. I’ve sent servants out every day since. No luck. No sign of it. But I recall what your cowherd said.”

Pa raised his eyebrows, wondering what Manu could have said to interest Champa.

“Slipping on the rocks, your girl shivering, all of us shivering, your young herder says ‘He knows me – and Raju and Simi too.’ He meant the beast, and Simi and the young monster-hunter here can help me find it.”

Raju looked toward me and rolled his eyes.

“Simi or Raju,” said Champa, “if you know where the tiger’s lair is, tell me.”

Pa and Gulab watched me. Raju avoided my eyes.

“Be careful, Bhoomi,” he called to his sister. “Keep your ball out of the garden.” He ran to steer her away, even though her ball was nowhere near the garden.

Leaving me to answer Champa.

“I don’t...” I began.

“I’ll send my men out with their nets as soon as you say where, Simi,” interrupted Champa. “I see you’re reluctant. Don’t be concerned about its welfare. Animals on my ship – they’re well looked after. Ask the monkeys already piled up at the wharf. Chatter away in their cages all day, food, water, whatever they need.”

“By all means keep them healthy, Champa-ji,” said Gulab. “Dead monkeys bring poor prices.”

His sarcasm passed over Champa. She laughed.

“Spoken like a true trader, Gulab,” she said.

She was already thinking of something else, turning to Pa with a question about fall harvest.

“The holy man will know how to keep the tiger safe,” I told Raju when we were alone.

Raju was irritated with Champa, and not just because of the tiger. “Were you the only brave one worthy of praise, Simi?” he asked. “Did Champa not see the boatman risk his life?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “It’s because of Pa,” I said. “Champa just wanted to impress him.”

We had to wait until morning to slip from the courtyard. The sky lightened as we hurried through the city, the air filled with the chirping of birds. As

we crossed the fields to the forest path, the air turned golden. The sun rose past the horizon. There was no sign of rain. We needed to hurry. Champa's men would be out early tiger hunting.

Dharm-ji's little clearing was empty. No one sat by the tree.

"Make your offering," said Raju.

I placed a leaf on the ground where the holy man usually sat and shook out the pouch of nuts and fruit I had brought from the kitchen. There was a rustling at the door of the little thatched shelter under the trees. and Manu backed out on his knees, sweeping with a short broom as he came.

"Dharm-ji won't mind that I went into his hut," he said. "Soon he'll let me come every day to serve him."

“Manu,” I called. “The tiger is in danger. Can Dharm-ji help?”

Manu’s face was worried as he listened to our story.

“Dharm-ji will come when he comes,” he said. “I cannot hurry him.”

Then his expression cleared. “But I can call the tiger. We’ll explain to Sher-ji. He understands everything.”

He lifted his bird amulet and blew. The long sweet note swelled around us and died away. The forest shadow divided. The golden tiger padded into the clearing. He stood still, his huge face bent to one side in a question.

“Sher-ji,” I said, “hide yourself in the thick of the jungle where people can’t go. Or in the tall grass. My father says when a tiger lies still in the sun-striped grass, no human eye can see him. Go quickly,

for Champa wishes to take you as a pet for the Dilmun princess.”

The tiger swung his great head to the ground, and rubbed his nose through the nuts and fruit lying there. He stared at me with his golden eyes. The ruff around his jaw was like the guru’s square beard, the drum of his rib cage and his hollow stomach like the guru’s, too.

I gasped. Could it be?

“Sher-ji, please go. You are in danger.”

All three of us held our breath. Did he understand?

But we were too late.

A great net was thrown from a tree at the edge of the clearing. It hit the tiger’s side and slid off, tangled around a slashing paw. From an opposite

tree, another net fell, better aimed, and was pulled tight around the tiger.

The clearing was suddenly filled with movement. Men leaped from behind bushes, shouting, cheering, laughing. The tiger roared and thrashed, jerking the arms of the men who held the ropes. My heart lurched, as if it too had been seized by the tiger's captors.

Manu beat the earth with his hands, sobbing into the dirt.

"He's not yours to take," shouted Raju, reaching out helplessly to the captured animal.

"Champa captain, please let him go," I cried.

Champa stood in a cluster of her men.

"Accept my thanks, children. You didn't know we

were following, of course, but you brought us directly to the beast. I'm sorry to take him away from you, but when you're older, you'll understand. This tiger is the luckiest of tigers. He'll be treated like a king."

They heaved the tiger into a cage lashed to poles and eight men carried him off. He hunched down in the bottom. Not even his tail moved. We ran to follow, and then fell back. When our sobbing quietened, we slumped onto the clearing floor.

"Pa won't like this," I said finally.

"Gulab won't either," said Raju.

I had thought Manu's crumpled muddy face would never smile again, but his eyes brightened.

"Sher-ji understands everything," he said. "You will see."

I gathered up the trampled fruit and nuts and made a neat pile once again by the tree. I stood before it.

“I will bring you back,” I shouted loudly. If only the tiger could hear, crouched in his woven cage.

Chapter 16. Letter for Pa

“I can’t do what you ask, Simi,” said Pa, cross-legged under the jackfruit tree. “Champa is our guest. She has eaten our food. We have accepted her gifts. There’s no more to be said.”

“Sher-ji is our friend, Pa,” I said. “He came because we called him. It’s our duty to help him.”

“They put him in a cage, Bhagat-ji,” said Raju, although he was usually silent in Pa’s presence. “It’s not good, to be in a cage.”

Pa gazed at Raju.

“Raju,” he said, “I will tell you something. Do not

long for what you cannot have. I learned this. You must learn it too.”

I was surprised. Pa seldom talked about himself.

“I was not much older than you are, Raju, when I was sent here, an orphan like you. But no grandmother, no small sister, no family to caress me or scold me.”

Raju listened with rapt attention. I too. I knew Pa had come as a boy to help with the family business. I never thought of what it was like for him.

“I learned,” said Pa, “that duty is what bears us across this life. Other things fade, Raju, but duty is with you always. Until the day the gods release you, duty stays. It is never taken from you. It is difficult, the path of duty, but it endures. So don’t long for what you cannot have. This tiger is not for you.”

Pa tousled Raju’s hair. Raju had received more than

Pa's wisdom. There was a new bond between them now.

"I will not ask Champa to set this tiger free," said Pa. "The tiger follows his path, you follow yours, and Champa follows hers. In her eyes, she has done nothing wrong."

I turned to go.

"Now, Simi," said Pa. "I'll say something to you. I was lenient when you freed a prisoner of the city. I was lenient when you endangered yourself and others to rescue a fishing cat. I was lenient because your heart is good.

"Now surely it's your duty to honour my wishes. Leave this Sher-ji in the care of the gods. Do not rove through the city as a street performer, do not exchange clothing with a bandit, do not allow fishing cats to gouge out chunks of your flesh in an attempt

to free the tiger. Go and busy yourself with something useful. Raju, I rely on your restraint.”

We turned toward the back courtyard.

Pa called after us. “The tiger is already travelling down the river to the port. Champa sent him off early this morning. Even if you wanted to, you can’t help him now.”

But we could if we somehow reached the port, I thought, as we walked to the cowshed.

Manu was pegging the cows outside.

“This is how I see it,” I said, rubbing behind the cows’ ears. “It’s Manu’s duty to help Sher-ji. We are Manu’s friends, so it’s our duty to help him. Meanwhile, let Pa do his duty to Champa. It’s all as it should be.”

“What about your duty to your father?” Raju asked.

“Pa will understand in the end,” I said.

“What about your mother’s belt?” he asked.

“We’ll put it from our minds for now,’ I said. “Sher-ji is all we can think about.”

Raju drew a map in the dirt, a long wiggly line for the river flowing south-west, circles for the city and the port. He drew waves to the left of the port for the ocean.

“Bhagat-ji always says ‘ten days by boat from warehouse to wharf’, so in ten days,” said Raju, “Sher-ji will be on the wharf in his cage.”

“We have a little time,” I said. “They won’t sail for Dilmun until Champa is at the port, and she’s staying right here until harvest is finished. We heard her tell

Pa.”

“We can walk to the port,” Raju said, “or ride in a cart or a boat. Walking is easiest, but it takes too long. Boat is fastest, but what boatman would take us? Could we pay a farmer to take us by cart?”

“River is best,” said Manu. “Raju-ji, wear your golden arm bands and leather sandals like a fine merchant. Then a boatman will bow you into his boat, and off we’ll go. We’ll reach the port and cut open Sher-ji’s cage.”

“They’ll think I’m too young,” said Raju.

“And anyway, you can’t go, Raju,” I said. “You can’t go north with Gulab if you journey south with us.”

Raju looked sheepish.

“Simi,” he said, “I have decided I won’t travel with

Gulab. I can't leave your father. He relies on me. He told me so."

His face glowed with pride.

"That's good," said Manu.

I thought so too, but said nothing.

In the morning I took Bhoomi to help care for the jackfruit tree.

"Bhoomi, when I'm not here, it's your job to water the tree and the herb garden. Can you do it?"

"Where are you going?" asked Bhoomi.

"I am right here beside you. But if one morning, you see that I am not, you must water the tree until I'm back. Are you big enough to do it?"

“Will you bring me sweets?” asked Bhoomi.

“Of course,” I said.

Manu placed Kamli and Phul into the care of his cousins.

Pa spent the morning in his room writing out business arrangements for his friends across the ocean, ready for Champa to take when she sailed. After Pa left for the warehouse, I took a leaf from his writing chest and scratched out a message in careful letters, just as Pa had taught me.

“Greetings to my respected father Bhagat the merchant. Simi, Raju and Manu are safe. Guided by Manu’s holy man, they go on a pilgrimage. May the gods be with you.”

Raju and I had puzzled over the wording.

“I am following my heart, Raju, just as Dharm-ji told me. That’s almost the same as going on a pilgrimage.”

The next morning, so early it was more night than day, Raju and I crept silently into the courtyard, water jars at our waists and sacks of fruit and nuts and cold *chapattis* over our backs. Raju stood with me as I watered the jackfruit tree and patted its trunk.

We roused Manu, who had slept with the cows. In darkness, we left the courtyard and passed through the city. The birds began their morning song as we reached the main road to the river gate.

Manu's cousin would give the leaf with my careful script to Devi Auntie in the evening, when he brought the cows. We would be far away by then.

Chapter 17. Three White Cranes

The city squares were clogged with the makeshift stalls of fair time, the goods offered for trade still covered with cloths for the night. Trades people from the countryside were waking, coughing, and muttering from under their awnings and carts. The clang of metal, the scrape of pottery, the drone of morning prayers surrounded us.

We moved unnoticed, just three visitors among many others. Even so, we wanted to be through the gate before full light. If the guards recognised us as the two boys and shawl-wrapped girl Gulab had helped through the gate a few days before, a message would be sent to Pa and our journey would be over.

We hung back from the gate, watching for a group to join.

Raju's hair was smoothly oiled behind his ears, his *dhoti* freshly dyed the colour of ripe grain. His rounded stomach and gleaming arm bands spoke of a life well-provided.

Manu looked like he always did, hair sticking up in spikes, faded *dhoti*, bird amulet bumping his thin chest. I had braided my hair and wrapped my skirt myself, leaving bangles and earrings in my chest at home. I looked as unkempt as Manu.

A drum sounded, its powerful rhythm coming closer. The drummer appeared, walking steadily toward the gate, his drum strapped to his shoulder. A throng of dancers swirled around him, pink and red and orange, laughing and calling out.

“Join them, Raju-ji,” said Manu. “This is our chance.”

Raju swung his sack to Manu and joined the dance, stamping his feet, waving his arms. A bridegroom floated above the crowd on one man's shoulders, supported by the arms of many others.

An enormous man with two walking sticks lagged behind, even though the dancers progressed slowly, doubling back and circling each other as they shook to the drum's rhythms. Manu and I ran up to him. We each supported an elbow, helping him walk faster.

"Did Chander send you?" he asked. Was Chander his son, I wondered.

"No, Raju did, honoured sir," I said, hoping that would satisfy him.

The man asked no more questions.

The guard waved the wedding party through the

gate.

“The gods smile on you,” he shouted.

The sun had risen, but the river was still hidden under mist. The mud we had waded through the day of the fisher cat was sprouting with grass. The dancers and the bridegroom continued to the shore, where boats decked with flowers waited to carry them to the bride’s village. We edged away from the old man and turned to walk along the track by the river.

The sun rose higher and the mist cleared. We watched as a group of large riverboats swept by, carrying goods from Pa’s warehouse. We grinned with satisfaction. It was our plan to join them at their first camping place, too far from the city for them to send us back.

Water birds swam on the river surface and swooped

and dived above, calling out hoarsely. The green on their wings and the blue of the sky were dazzling in the sunlight. Grasses and reeds, lush from the rains just ended, rippled in the breeze.

Carts of all sizes followed the track. The creak of their wheels filled our ears. Our throats grew tired from returning the greetings of the drivers and their passengers, mostly families going home after watching the bullock cart races the day before. Many called us to ride with them, but we smiled and waved them on. Friendly grandfathers and talkative mothers would tell us their life stories and expect to hear ours. Our legs were aching and we were ready to ride, but we needed someone who asked few questions.

The further we walked, the thinner the traffic became, until the track was almost deserted. Behind us a loud voice approached, singing threshing songs. When the singer came into view, we saw he was

alone, stamping his feet on his blue-painted cart in time to his song. He slowed beside us. His bullocks, one brown, one dull white, gazed at us. Bedraggled flowers and traces of bright blue paint still clung to their long curved horns.

“Travellers,” called the driver, “would you not like to ride behind the two finest bullocks in the valley?”

“Did they win yesterday?” asked Manu. “Were they in a race?”

“Yesterday they flew like birds through the fields,” the man said. “Their hooves were lost in a cloud of dust. These two cart wheels could scarcely keep pace with them. When I cracked the whip, my darlings outran the sound. The two fastest bullocks in the valley, I assure you. No, they didn’t win, but they and I, we know they’re the best.”

“They are fine bullocks indeed,” said Manu, a little

disappointed.

“There’s a bit of flour in the back, nothing else,” said the man. “Jump in. It’s not every day you can travel with such companions as these.”

He flicked the flank of each animal with his whip.

We hung back. I regretted now that we had avoided those large families. We would have felt safe with them. I remembered the over-friendly couple who had tried to lure us near the bead factory.

“You are wise to be wary of strangers,” said the man, “but you’ve nothing to fear from me. I will never shame myself before my beauties.”

He brushed the bullocks again with his whip.

We crawled onto the floor of the cart. The driver urged the bullocks forward.

“If we feel suspicious, we’ll jump and run,” I muttered, as we bumped along the track. “He won’t chase us because he won’t leave his animals.”

Uncomfortable on the hard planks, thrown against each other when the wheels rolled over rough patches, we at least had a chance to rest our aching feet. The sun rose to its height over our heads.

Where the track turned away from the twisting river, the man stopped and accepted our help to unyoke the bullocks.

“Time to give my children a rest,” he said. He pulled a cloth bundle from beside the sacks of flour in the cart.

“Sit and share my meal,” he said, putting chunks of *chapatti* and vegetable in our hands.

Raju offered him dried fruit from our supply. The

man thanked him with a wide smile. The bullocks nosed at the fresh grass on the river bank. The land drowsed, insects buzzed, the river murmured.

I was hungry and the food was well-prepared, but I ate little. My stomach was knotted. The journey, the man, the lonely road. I was overwhelmed.

“We are grateful for your generosity, driver-ji,” I said. “We’ll leave you now. The track takes you away from the river. Our path is beside it.”

We folded our hands and bowed.

The driver stood. “I and my bullocks have found happiness in serving you,” he said. “It’s true what you say. I’m a generous man. Is it not my generosity that has set you three young people further on your path? Is it not my generosity that painted my wagon the colour of the skies to please your eyes, that made the wheels smooth, that harnessed my

bullocks to pull you?”

He smiled broadly, passing a hand over the necks of his animals while he spoke. There was menace in his word “generosity”. My insides churned when I saw his other hand fingering the handle of a knife tucked at his waist.

“You with the golden armlets,” he continued. “Is it not my generosity that feeds these bullocks the choicest grain and shelters them under the driest roof?”

Raju touched an armband with a nervous hand.

“Is it not my generosity,” said the man, “that has kept you from harm along this track?”

There was a twist in his voice as he said the word “harm”.

“Kindly present me with those armlets, boy, that I may continue to be generous.”

He gripped the handle of his knife.

For a moment we gaped at him.

“Best give them to me, boy, or, chances are, someone will hurt you for them further down the road,” he said.

Raju pulled off the bands and flung them to the ground. “Run!” he yelled.

We scrambled off the track and up the rocks to the thick scrub that had forced the track away from the river.

“The gods smile on you,” called the man after us. “Watch for my bullocks at next year’s race. Next year’s their year to win.”

Thorns ripped our skin and caught our hair as we crashed deep into the growth where a man with a bullock cart could never come. A stitch in my side forced me to bend over, panting. The others stumbled to a stop. We listened intently as our breathing gradually slowed. No sounds reached us from the track.

“I can’t hear the river,” said Manu.

The air was empty of the river’s pulse that had been with us since sunrise. Without the river, I felt lost. Scraped and bleeding, itchy from insects and sweat, frightened of what lurked in the brush, I had no energy to think what to do. Tears squeezed from my eyes.

Manu held up his hand, his head bent to one side. He smiled.

“This way,” he said. “The river is calling us.”

We walked the way he pointed. Soon we could hear it too, the gurgle of water underneath the insect buzz and bird calls. And at last the muddy line of the river through the trees.

Raju danced, whooping with joy and beating the ground with his feet.

The cart driver was part of the past. We filled our water jars and walked and stumbled over rocks and through trees. As afternoon drew to a close, the bank flattened, and the track reappeared to wind by beds of reeds. The way was deserted except for us. I kept checking behind for blue carts, but there were none.

“There might be crocodiles. Don’t go near the water,” said Raju. His voice sounded panicky. “They’ll rear up and grab us with their teeth, and

when people look for us, all they'll find is footprints going to the water's edge and none coming back."

"Don't worry, Raju-ji. We're too big for them. They won't eat us," said Manu.

I hoped Manu was right. My neck ached from swivelling my head to check for crocodiles beside us and carts behind.

"The boatmen always reach the mooring place before dark," I said. "Pa says that gives them time to set up camp. We might be almost there."

In fact, we had hours before we reached the camp. Late afternoon became dusk and then night. We crept forward guided by the river, silver in the early moonlight. A duck squawked and beat its wings, and night birds hooted. A rustling in the grass ended in a tiny shriek. Water splashed, and the ripple of a swimming animal flashed on the surface.

The fragrance of baking wheat and roasting spices, the sound of conversation, floated from down the river. We moved ahead cautiously. A fire glowed. Men's faces loomed out of the dark. I could make out the heavy shapes of boats at the river's edge.

Hidden behind a clump of bushes, we ate our cold *chapattis* while the men by the fire slurped bowls of hot food. When they rolled themselves in blankets around the fire, we pulled our shawls tight and lay down among the roots of the bushes, out of sight of the guard. In the morning, just as they were about to pull away from the bank, we would appear, and rather than break their momentum and send a boatman back to Sindhapur with us, they would take us with them.

The night was cool, and our sleeping spot uncomfortable, but somehow I fell asleep. When Raju shook me awake, it was still night. A guard stood studying my face in the light of a lamp.

“Next time you’re trying to hide, don’t cry out in your sleep,” he said. “Come finish the night by the fire. We’ll sort this out tomorrow.”

In the morning, there was a discussion about what to do with us. They had no idea I was Bhagat’s daughter.

“Our youngest brother has run off to join a ship,” I told them. “Our mother has sent us to bring him back.”

Manu looked uneasy. He was not used to being dishonest.

“Either we take you with us or send you back to the city alone,” said a boatman. “There’s no one to spare to escort you.”

“We’ll pay fair price,” said Raju.

“Save your coins for your return,” the boatman said. “There’s room in my boat, but only if you cause no trouble.”

We sat on bales of cloth that a few days before had probably been in Pa’s warehouse. The impression of Pa’s tiger seal showed clearly in the clay sealings. Our hearts felt as light as the river breeze that cooled our faces. Until we reached the wharves of the port, we had nothing to do but watch the shore slip by.

“Look,” said Manu as we rounded a point of land. Three white cranes waded on long thin legs in the rocky shallows, their heads held high on graceful necks.

“Three together,” said Manu, “just like us. Simi, Raju and Manu. They’re telling us we’ll find Sher-ji.”

Chapter 18. Man Twice Paid

For a short stretch of the river, the track wound close to the shore. A band of travellers and a long-eared donkey appeared, then disappeared as the track led away behind a cliff. The donkey was led by a woman who tossed her head in a way I recognized. Was it Sonia?

The days were long. Raju had leisure to think of his lost armbands.

“I should never have brought them with me,” he said at least once every day. “Your father had them made for me.”

“Raju, it’s true if you hadn’t worn them on this trip,

they'd still be safe at home," I said. "But if you hadn't worn them, how could you have joined the wedding party and danced through the gate?"

"How can I face your father?" he moaned.

"I know exactly what Pa will say," I said. I made my voice deep, and shifted to sit just as Pa sat, with my hands on my knees. "Armbands are not important. Possessions float on the surface of life, easy to gain, easy to lose. Your eternal soul, that's what's important."

Raju smiled weakly.

The boatman looked at me closely.

"I recognise the father you describe," he said. "Those are words the merchant Bhagat would say. Now I realize. For days we've been transporting Bhagat-ji's daughter. May the gods forgive us if

anything happens to her.”

The donkey and its little band of people wound by the shore again. It was too far across the water to see her features, but the proud walk and impatient toss of the head were surely Sonia’s. I watched until she disappeared.

That evening, the last evening before we reached the port, they told us, they gave us special attention, urging food on us, spreading our blankets, asking if we needed anything. They posted an extra guard to keep watch as we slept, now that they knew I was Pa’s daughter.

As it turned out, we were fortunate the guards were armed and alert. In the night the camp was attacked.

I woke up to shouting and splashing. A guard pulled me up by my wrist and gripped Manu’s arm at the

same time. A mass of shapes at the mooring poles seethed with grunts and thuds and the crack of wooden clubs.

“We need to leave,” the guard said, pulling us after him toward the trees. “They surprised us. Too many of them.”

A warning shout rang out, and then a great cheer. One of the boats slid from the shore. A cluster of shapes splashed after it and clung to its sides.

“Raju?” I asked.

“He’ll be all right,” said the guard. “It’s you they mustn’t find out about.”

A howl of pain erupted from the far side of the fire. I strained to see what was happening. I pressed my heels to the ground to resist the guard.

A man raised a club.

“Be ready!” a voice shrieked, and there was Raju, sweeping his sack from side to side, thumping its weight against the man’s knees. “Be ready!” he cried each time he struck, his face serious in the firelight.

“Watch out, Raju!” I screamed. The attacker’s club brushed his shoulder, knocking him to the ground.

The guard pulled me away, urging me closer to the forest.

A sudden shout came from the forest edge. The rush of the attackers faltered.

“The men of Hun have arrived, come to the aid of the traders,” a voice called out. “Raiders, beware!”

Feet pounded out of the trees, almost knocking us

down as they rushed by.

In the light from the campfire, I saw a man raise a bow. I recognized the scar on his cheek. He accepted an arrow from a little man beside him and took aim.

“Raiders, beware!” he shouted again. “An arrow flies from the bow of Hun.”

The bow twanged. An arrow shot into the dark. The little man handed him another, which he shot high over the boats into the water.

His men advanced with swinging clubs and blood-curdling howls. The attackers fled both ways along the river, splashing through water, crashing through the trees.

Raju struggled to his feet. The men clinging to the drifting boat waded back with it to the mooring post. A boatman brought cloths and a pot of salve to bind

cuts and scrapes. A guard sat Raju down by the fire, pressed his fingers carefully along Raju's shoulder, then patted him hard on the back.

"Nothing wrong there," he said.

Raju smiled, the cut on his forehead garish in the flickering light. The men laughed. Manu squatted beside him, flinging an arm around his neck.

"So," said Hun, standing by the fire, "Hun keeps his word to Gulab. He has protected Bhagat's boats and sent the pirates fleeing."

The little arrow bearer stood beside him. "To our mighty chief Hun, who keeps his word!" he called out.

"To Hun!" they all shouted, Hun's band, the guards and the boatmen.

Hun turned toward me.

“Daughter of Bhagat,” he said. “You also kept your word. To the daughter of Bhagat and her band of two men!” he shouted.

Raju and Manu grinned at each other.

“They freed Sonia, the sister of Hun. My debt can never be repaid,” Hun continued.

“To the daughter of Bhagat!” shouted Hun’s men. The guards and boatmen looked surprised.

I looked closely at the arrow bearer. Even in the poor light, I could see his eyes were clouded. I knew him well, although here in the forest, he was more talkative than he had been at the bead factory.

“Raju-ji,” Hun said, “do you recognize your flute player? Did he not give you good help with the

juggling act?”

“Is this man a member of your band? asked Raju.

“For a few days, for my sister’s sake, he made himself a beggar,” said Hun. “I paid him well. He is happy.”

Raju squared his shoulders in indignation. “I also paid him,” he said.

“And I thank you,” said the little man. “I was helpless to refuse.” He smiled and stretched out his arms like a supplicant asking for forgiveness.

“Where is your sister, Hun-ji?” I asked.

“She guards our supplies, back in the forest,” said Hun. “She praises your courage. I’ll tell her you’ve recovered.”

The air filled with bird calls. Dawn was approaching.
Our day to reach the port and the wharves. Would
we find the tiger?

Chapter 19. A Just Trade

It was still daylight when the smell of the sea became strong, but when our boats finally reached the mooring place at the port, the sky was darkening. Our heads swung to take in the sounds and movement on the shore. People shouted, bullocks bawled, ropes and cartwheels creaked, gulls dived, their cries cutting the air. And, underlying it all, the river slapped against the pilings.

Further along, the big ships waited, their masts and great curving prows black against the rosy sky. Beyond lay the ocean, where ships sailed to distant lands and sometimes lost themselves forever amidst the waves and coiling sea serpents. Raju's face was bright with excitement.

Manu's face was anxious. "I don't see Sher-ji," he said. "We must find him."

"You won't be looking here for anybody," said the boatman. "You'll come with me to my sister's house and you'll not stir from there until I take you back up the river."

"Boatman, we must find our Sher-ji," said Manu. There was panic in his voice.

"You must find this tiger another time," the boatman said. "I am as a father to you until I return you to the merchant Bhagat safe and sound. You can't roam freely here. It's too dangerous. Do you want to end up as a slave for some rich Dilmun merchant?"

"But Sher-ji..." Manu began, then turned silent when I touched his arm.

"Tonight my sister's," said the boatman. "Tomorrow

we unload, but in the evening, perhaps we'll find some entertainment for you. There'll be a wedding somewhere at this time of year."

He sent a guard to fetch sedan chairs for us, one for me, one for Raju and Manu.

"I am not an old lady, to be carried through the streets," muttered Raju, looking at me as if he thought I liked the idea.

"I'm not either," I said, and stamped on his toe with my sandal.

Then we fell silent, before the boatman scolded us.

The curtains were drawn tight around me as I was heaved up by the carriers. The air was stuffy. I parted the curtains to catch the breeze. A guard kept pace beside me.

“No, keep yourself hidden,” he said. “The boatman has ordered it.”

The boatman’s sister had a small courtyard and many sons. And a powerful welcoming embrace. She brought us fresh clothing and piled food in front of us even after we begged her to stop. Her eldest grandchild organised the others to sing and dance for us, turn by turn. Always, a son or two sat near the entrance watching us.

“Anyway,” said Raju,” even if we could get past them, where would we go? Maybe this place really is as dangerous as the boatman says.”

All the next day, we were fed and entertained and always observed. The grandchildren, even the older ones, seemed to take for granted that they had to stay within the walls. Maybe the boatman was wise to be so cautious.

In the evening, as he had promised, there was a marriage celebration.

“Our niece is to be married,” said his sister. “Tonight we celebrate at our cousin’s home.” She brought our clothes to us, laundered and smooth, and helped me with my braid.

“Champa captain arrived today,” said the boatman. “She starts loading tomorrow. She’ll sail as soon as the wind turns.”

Our large group left for the cousin’s house. We walked down the lane and turned into a road, the boatman, his sister, five sons, five daughters-in-law, fifteen grandchildren, and three guards with clubs. And the three of us.

“We have to find Sher-ji tonight,” I whispered, “before they put him on Champa’s ship.”

The rays of the setting sun burned into our eyes, forcing us to look away.

“The river lies where the sun sets,” said Manu. “Yesterday the men who carried us away from the river had the sun on their backs.”

“Keep the sun in view,” I said.

While it was still light, this was easy to do. However, when the sun was about to disappear, we were still twisting through the streets. So many lanes we had crossed, so many corners! How could we remember in the dark which way was west?

Raju thought of a game – at least, he told the boatman’s grandchildren it was a game.

“Pretend I can’t turn,’ he said. “Forwards, backwards, or sideways I can go, but I can’t turn. Manu, Simi, you have to help me.”

We could see the setting sun above the walls on our left. Raju stood facing it, and I pulled him sideways as he cross-stepped like a dancer. The guards turned to the right. Raju still faced the sun while Manu and I pulled him along backwards. The grandchildren imitated us, some not very successfully, with much giggling. Pa would have ordered us all to walk properly, but the boatman said nothing.

The redness in the sky disappeared completely. The guards lit our way with torches. Manu and I concentrated on keeping Raju facing in the right direction. When we finally stopped at a courtyard entrance, Raju was shuffling sideways to his right. “We can find the river,” said Raju quietly, pointing across the lane. “When we walk out of the courtyard, it’s straight ahead over there.”

Now we needed to slip away from the close watch of the family.

“Watch for our chance,” I whispered.

The adults talked and teased the bride-to-be, children ran, servants passed food and drink. Then a drummer beat a rhythm and the dancing began. A few people set their sandals to one side and stamped to the beat, and then more and more joined in until a circle within a circle of swaying bodies and clapping hands revolved in the courtyard. The three of us pushed our sandals into the folds of cloth around our waists.

Three times we circled the courtyard. Then Raju nudged Manu into the shadows. Once more around the circle, and I slipped away, and then Raju.

We ran through the entrance and down the lane, the sound of our feet drowned out by the drums. We slowed to a walk when we were well away, then stopped and put on our sandals. We worked our way through lanes and roads in the river’s direction.

The streets were busy with people. Behind high walls, other courtyards were noisy with drumming and singing. The rains had come and gone, the air was pleasant, there were weddings to celebrate before the cool season set in.

We walked for a long time. Our way dipped downward.

“The river smell is stronger,” said Manu.

I could smell it too, thicker, more like fish than at home.

“Because of the tides,” said Raju.

The streets were almost deserted. A face peered out from a lane and withdrew quickly. My heart thumped. The face popped out of the shadows again, and disappeared. The boatman had warned us. The walls loomed, threatening danger from all

sides.

Without a word, we broke into a run, stumbling as the descent became steeper but at least in no doubt which way the river lay. I kicked off my sandals, ignoring the pebbles bruising my soles, afraid to look behind in case the shadowed face was there.

We turned down an alley. I fell. Manu shouted. Raju turned back and together they pulled me up. Light glowed at the end of the alley. Suddenly we looked out upon the torch-lit wharf, noisy with men loading goods from a cart onto a big ship moored nearby. We were at the sea, further down the river than we had been the day before.

I looked behind us. The lane was empty, stretching back into the shadow. In front of us, two men rolled a huge jar past our toes, glancing at us, then turning back to their task. It felt safer here. But where was the tiger?

Lines of storage sheds extended along the wharf, separated by narrow walkways untouched by the torchlight.

“Those sheds go on forever,” said Raju. “Do we have to search them all?”

“First we need that knife,” I said.

I pointed at two workers crouched near a cart sharing a meal, one slicing a mango and passing pieces of fruit to his companion. Hidden by the alley wall, we watched them finish their meal. The man wiped the blade carefully on his *dhoti* and stuck the knife in a sheath at his waist.

They steered their cart to the path between the sheds. One stood at the bullocks' shoulders while the man with the knife lit a lamp from a nearby torch and entered a dark pathway, counting the huts as he passed them.

“I know what to do,” murmured Raju, putting a finger to his lips.

The man left at the cart was absorbed in gazing at the big ship. Behind his back, Raju pulled down the torch, ground it out in the dirt, and motioned us into a second pathway. He crept along the darkness between the sheds, moaning “Oooh! Oooh! Oooh!”

Manu and I joined in. “Oooh!” we wailed.

Raju threw his shawl over the end of the dead torch, and we tied mine on the top like a great puffy head.

“Oooh!” we moaned again. Holding the makeshift ghost, Raju stretched his arm between two huts into the path where the workman, still counting out loud, was walking.

Raju jerked the stick. The billowing shawl swirled with menace in the dim light. Raju drew it back

between the huts.

“Show yourself!” cried the workman. “I don’t frighten easily.”

“Oooh! I want flesh, I need flesh,” Raju moaned. Again, he passed the stick across the pathway and made the ghost dance just outside the pool of light cast by the worker’s lamp.

“Scream,” Raju said softly, and I shrieked so loud my throat burned.

“Oooh,” Raju groaned. “Flesh is good. Better see to your companion, workman.”

I screamed again. Raju danced the stick-ghost once more.

“Be off!” the man yelled, flinging his knife. It thudded to the ground behind the ghost. Manu

scrabbled in the dirt and grabbed it, running off. as the man's companion rushed up.

"The gods save us, they're nothing but a pack of mischief makers," the worker called out in disgust, pursuing us for a moment and then returning to his work.

"I have become a thief," said Manu as he passed the knife to Raju. "Now when we find Sher-ji's cage, we can rip it open."

A dog barked further down the wharf.

Champa's guard dogs?

We edged toward the sound. A dog barked again. We were closer this time. A shape leaped snarling out of the dark. We cried out and stumbled back, but the dog was on a chain and could only thrust its head toward us, barking wildly. Another dog joined in.

“If these are Champa’s, the tiger is near,” I said.

“Quiet, you monsters,” a voice called sternly.

Champa walked out of a hut. Bells jingled on her ankles. I pushed Raju back along the walkway we had just passed. He slipped away.

“Simi,” said Champa, “as your father feared, you are here. And the little cowherd too. Where is the boy who likes monsters? Show yourself, monster-boy. No need to fear these fellows. They’re tied up.”

Manu lifted his bird amulet and blew. The birdcall trilled through the night. A huge roar behind the sheds answered it, and the scrabbling of claws we knew were Sher-ji’s. I hoped Raju could find the cage and use the knife.

Champa looked behind her in the direction of the tiger’s call, and then at Manu. “I remember,” she

said. “You had the whistle that day by the river. Don’t blow it here. You’re disturbing the princess’s tiger.”

As she stretched out her hand to take the amulet, Manu sounded the bird trill again, and the tiger roared. Then roared again, so close my ears rang. And then Sher-ji was in front of us. Raju had succeeded.

“You’ve interfered with the property of a princess,” said Champa, hands on her hips.

Sher-ji stood still for a moment, his big head turned to one side looking at Manu and me. With a thrust of his haunches he bounded across the walkway and loped off down the wharf. Within moments, we heard his roar in the distance.

“You did this, Simi. Why did you take him?” Champa asked. “My princess will not be pleased. Not

pleased.”

I had nothing to say that she would understand.

“Did I not give you the mirror?” she asked. “And still you make trouble for me?”

Bhagat merchant will be unhappy if my ship brings no copper and pearls for him next summer.”

Did she plan to ruin Pa’s business?

Then her mouth fell open. She stared at the lane beyond me and gasped, stumbling backward. Hun, surrounded by his men, advanced from behind the huts, his bow raised.

“Champa captain,” Hun said, “do not threaten those who are under the protection of Hun. This girl, this boy, and this other boy” – he pulled Raju from behind the shed – “have acted rightly, as befits those who come from the house of Bhagat.”

“You misunderstand. I’m a woman of peace. No need for your arrows,” said Champa, her voice shrill. “Now that I think of it, the princess can do without the tiger. Difficult to feed on the ship, in any case.”

I hugged myself in relief.

“Return to Bhagat with no cares, Simi,” said Champa. “Though I have neither tiger nor fishing cat, my princess will be pleased. A belt of great beauty I have for her, gold like the sun, lapis lazuli like the midnight sky.”

I gasped. Raju raised clenched fists. Manu looked stricken.

“My mother’s belt?” I said. “You took my mother’s belt?”

“Lower your fists to your side, monster-boy. It was your Devi Auntie herself who gave it to me,” said

Champa. “A just trade, she said it was. For me, a gift for my princess. For her, an end to quarrelling in her household. She said to say nothing, but I tell you anyway.”

Devi Auntie the thief? I touched Raju’s hand in sympathy.

“Now, I make ready to sail,” said Champa.

When we had least expected it, the mystery of Ma’s belt had been solved.

We left Champa by her sheds and walked closer to the water. One more time, Hun and his men watched with us by the river as dawn broke. The scar on Hun’s face stood out in the early light.

A river boat pulled along the wharf. Under a gold-tasselled canopy, on a pile of embroidered cushions, sat Gulab, folded legs stretched along the boat,

moustache springing up. His boatman helped him climb onto the wharf. He greeted us properly with palms pressed together, then, leaning casually against a hut, observed us. The rays of the rising sun glanced off the bright blue of his shawl.

“I have come to fetch my niece,” he said, “but it’s also you, Hun, I’ve followed here. I beg you to deliver a message for me before I go north with my caravan.”

Hun stood straight and still.

“You have a sister who is fiery-tempered but without fault,” said Gulab. “Tell her that a man who is brave and true may sometimes be foolish. It would be generous of her to forgive him.”

“I have such a sister,” said Hun. He saluted Gulab with his long curved bow and left, followed by his men.

Chapter 20. Happy Endings

Gulab arranged everything. He tracked down the worker we had terrorized into throwing the knife, and returned it to him along with a pouch of coins.

He praised us. Me for being brave about the belt, Manu for calling to Sher-ji with his bird amulet, Raju for slicing the rope that bound the tiger cage.

“And don’t forget when Raju fought the river thief with his travelling sack,” I said.

He scolded us for blaming him when the belt disappeared the second time.

“I took it once to return it to the mountains, and

suffered the scorn of the sister of Hun. Never again,” he said.

He was handing us one by one into the boat as he spoke.

“Because of the jewelled belt, I’ve lost my Sonia,” he said. “I’m glad its story with our family is finished.”

He helped the guard push the boat away from the wharf.

“Return in luxury to Bhagat,” he told us. “I will walk with Hun who keeps the forest safe.”

We lay back on Gulab’s cushions, which still smelled of his scented oil, while his boatman poled us into the river. In the distance, Champa’s ship pulled at its mooring, graceful and full of promise even without the tiger.

The trip home was tedious. Raju juggled stones and learned about steering boats from the boatman, Manu hung over the side looking for fish, and I threw pebbles at the shore, aiming for tree trunks. Sometimes, the boatman held the boat still so we could admire beds of pink lotus blooming in the backwaters of the river.

Once, where the track came close to the water, a donkey trotted by. Gulab, in his red and blue finery, gripped the donkey's harness. He was speaking intently to Sonia, who walked beside him. His step was light and his lips were parted in a wide smile like a man who was cherished, not scorned.

He must have earned forgiveness.

Once, Sher-ji appeared on the shore. The rays of the rising sun danced like fire on his coat as he sauntered near the river. He stopped to gaze at us, broad cheeks bordered with the fringe of beard. He

washed his face with three delicate circlings of his paw, then turned and swung into the forest, his tail curled behind.

We reached the city early one afternoon. The boatman walked with us through the streets. We stopped at a vendor's to buy sweets for Bhoomi.

We touched Pa's feet and told our story. He patted our heads.

Devi Auntie threw her frail arms around us all, even Manu.

"Auntie," I said, "you gave Ma's belt to Champa."

Auntie drew herself up, just as the fishing cat had when it was ready to attack me.

"Simi," she said, "your mother asked me to care for this family, and so I will. It's not good for Bhagat and

Gulab to quarrel, and sure enough, Bhagat-ji, when the belt disappeared, your quarrelling stopped.”

“You did well, Devi,” he said finally. “A belt is only a belt, after all. May it give pleasure wherever it is.”

“I regretted deceiving you,” said Auntie, “the day I carried food and drink to the watchmen and took the lapis lazuli belt. But I don’t regret taking it.”

“Raju,” I said, “that’s why the watchmen wouldn’t tell us anything useful. They were protecting Auntie.”

Devi Auntie clapped her hand to her mouth.

“If that’s true, I must send cakes to them,” she said.

“And honeyed water as well,” I said. “They’re fond of it.”

Raju confessed to Pa that he had lost his gold arm bands.

“Will you give Raju new ones?” I asked.

“Perhaps in time,” said Pa. “Or perhaps, Raju, you’ll become a great merchant and be the one buying arm bands for me.”

Raju nodded, his face serious as usual.

Pa presented a pouch full of coins to Manu. “The gods have given Bhagat’s house a prince for a cowherd,” he said.

“Pa,” I said, “When I stopped looking for the belt, I found it.”

Bhoomi pulled at my arm. “The jackfruit tree,” she said.

“Have you cared for it well, Bhoomi? There are sweets for you, if you have.”

Bhoomi took me to the tree. She climbed on the ledge and pointed up through the glossy green leaves. A huge yellow jackfruit hung there.

“There’s one fruit on it,” she said.

Fruit from Ma’s jackfruit tree! I had stopped hoping for it months ago. The season was long over. A wave of Ma’s love washed over me, making me smile. Even my sadness felt sweet.

Chapter 21. The Holy Man's Question

Next morning, Raju climbed the trunk of the jackfruit tree and handed the spiky yellow fruit down to me. We waited by the cowshed for Manu, and left as soon as he arrived with his cousin.

Auntie wrapped a packet of food for us. Pa and Gulab watched us leave as they chanted their prayers under the tree.

We took turns carrying the jackfruit. Its weight was our only burden that day. No heavy secrets, no fear of worrying others, no dangers waiting around corners. Parrots called and flitted in the trees and monkeys screamed to each other as we followed the jungle path.

Dharm-ji sat under the tree, his barrel chest, his hollow stomach, his wide cheeks and forehead and strange square beard the same as always. Raju set the jackfruit in front of him. Manu's smile sparkled.

The holy man's eyes were closed. We sat, content to be there, in shade pierced here and there with beams of sunlight.

His eyes opened. He placed both hands on the jackfruit and centred it precisely before him. He looked at Manu.

“Manu, what have you to say? You return from your adventures a boy who has wasted melons, lied and stolen.”

Manu's eyes filled with tears.

“It is true, Dharm-ji,” he stammered. “These things I have done. Now I cannot be your faithful servant.”

“Manu,” Dharm-ji said. “before your adventures you knew only goodness. Now you have learned a little wisdom as well. Carry this fruit to my shelter and store it. Sweep the floor and go for water. Can you do it without spilling?”

Manu’s bowed in delight. He disappeared into the hut with the jackfruit. Soon we could hear the rasp of the broom on the floor.

Dharm-ji looked at Raju.

“What is your question?” he asked.

Raju was flustered. “I have lied. Is that not wrong?”

“Look not to what is wrong,” said Dharm-ji. “Just do your best.”

Dharm-ji looked at me.

“What is your question?” he asked.

“Dharm-ji,” I said, “I think the tiger could have escaped any time he wanted to.”

“That is right,” said the guru.

“So why did he stay in the cage?” I asked.

“If he had left the cage, would you have learned the fate of the belt?” he asked.

I gaped at him, open-mouthed. In my heart, I answered his question. One needed the other to happen.

Dharm-ji folded his hands and bowed.