



The Tiger Amulet

Judith Bali

Chapter One

My brother recited the dawn prayers, his arms raised to the sun.

Papa's eyes shone. A son who understood the ways of the gods. It was almost beyond the dreams of a simple merchant family like ours.

Papa was pleased with Dharm, but there was nothing special about me.

"Your older brother's a saint, Arun," Papa told me. "Honour the gods by serving him."

Prayers finished, Dharm and I set out for the forest

and the shrine of the Tiger Aunt. Our time had come to leave home and take up the student life. We needed her blessing.

Mata handed Dharm a covered basket.

“A garland to place on her shoulders,” she said. “It’s wrapped in a wet cloth to keep it fresh.”

The sun was in our eyes as we passed through the Sindhapur gate and turned along the river bank. Dharm’s *dhoti* hung in neat folds around his hips, his upper hair rolled in a smooth topknot, the rest in oiled waves on his neck. My *dhoti* was wrinkled, my topknot lopsided, the hair on the back of my neck a tangle of untidy wisps. People often remarked on how different we were.

“Arun’s only thirteen,” Papa told them. “In three years he’ll look as smart as his brother.”

We followed the track, our sandaled feet rustling over the dry grass, the river rushing beside us, heavy

and brown with melt water from distant mountains. The sun was high when we turned away from the river into the forest. I stared at the furrowed trunks of the *sal* trees, craned my neck backwards to see the patches of sky above. The foliage shielded our backs from the glaring sun but blocked the breeze, and sweat burned my eyes, insects stuck to my skin. The sack of mangoes for the Tiger Aunt was heavy on my shoulder.

“It’s lonely,” I said. “Are we the only ones visiting the Tiger Aunt?”

“She protects from jungle snakes and tigers,” Dharm said. “In the city, surrounded by brick walls and paved streets, it’s easy to forget her.”

“But we’re from the city and we remember her,” I said.

“Our family relies on her,” he said. “But hush. We’re on a pilgrimage.”

The ribbons marking the avenue to the shrine were faded, clinging like dead leaves to the branches, the path choked with undergrowth and littered with twigs. Dharm paced ahead, lips moving in prayer, the garland basket held out before him. I pressed my palms together in reverence as best I could with the sack of mangoes clutched in my fingers, and stepped forward, the crackle of leaves under my feet muted in the midday quiet.

The gods were mysterious, the Tiger Aunt most mysterious of all. Would she accept our offerings, or would she scatter the mangoes in the dirt, throw off the lotus garland tied with love by my mother's hands? The Tiger Aunt's smiles could turn to wrath without warning.

In an instant, the peace was broken by running footsteps.

Dharm gasped and jerked to a stop, catching at the slipping basket. I staggered back into a tree trunk,

holding the sack high to save it from hitting the ground.

A young man swung over the rise, a wide grin on his face. Vinod, the *raja's* son. All of Sindhapur knew him for his hair, the hair he had from his northern mother, curling red on his neck like dates dried in the sun. A gold-edged shawl was slung round his neck, a sky blue sash hung lopsided over his *dhoti*. He looked back over his shoulder without seeing us, waving a yellow cloth above his head.

A girl burst from the shadows, panting, fanning her face with the end of her shawl. Her hair fell in a thick braid almost to her knees.

“Give me my sash, naughty boy,” she called, tossing her head from side to side.

“First catch me. Then you can have it,” said Vinod.

He draped the yellow cloth around his waist, swinging his hips like a dancing girl, twirling a hand

above his head.

“Come on, sweet one, come and get your sash,” he called.

I shrank into the trees on the far side of the track. Dharm’s face was rigid, his fingers clenched on the basket.

Vinod held out the cloth to the girl, then snatched it away and drew back, lifting his feet in exaggerated steps.

“Come, queen of my heart,” he said, “or I’ll give the sash to your maid. Do you know her eyes are like lotuses?”

“Aiii!” the girl shrieked, and leaped past the tree trunks, throwing her weight against Vinod, who pretended to stagger under the impact and carried them both to the ground. Laughing, she pounded her hands on his chest in mock fury while he took her face in his hands, smoothed her hair.

“Forget about Roshani’s eyes, Vinod. What of my eyes?” she said. “What can you say about them?”

“Your eyes, Amba? Excellent eyes,” he teased. “They work perfectly, I think.”

Dharm stepped forward, hugging the basket to his stomach.

“You are offending the gods,” he said, his voice high.

Amba and Vinod looked up with startled faces. Amba cried out, snatched up the yellow sash where it lay crumpled in the weeds and bounded away through the trees, her heavy braid shining in the sun. Vinod leaped to his feet and started after her, then pulled up short and glowered at Dharm, arms folded across his chest.

“Offending to the gods,” Dharm repeated, this time his voice an angry bark.

“You dare to spy on the prince of Sindhapur?” said

Vinod.

“Prince or servant, what does it matter?” said Dharm. “You’ve scorned the goddess in her sacred grove. In her forest your only thought should be of her, but instead you play at love. Prince or merchant or fisherman, whatever you are, she’ll punish you for disrespect.”

“You’re just a boy,” said Vinod, “so I’ll overlook your insolence. Return to your father, whoever he is, and be glad I don’t put you in chains.”

“Hari of Sindhapur, spice merchant, is my father,” said Dharm.

His eyes swelled like an angry bull’s.

I burst into speech before he made matters worse, scarcely believing that the trembling voice addressing the prince was mine.

“Please excuse my brother,” I said. “It’s only that

he's worried for your safety. All will be well when you offer gifts to the goddess. Your father's priests can tell you what things will please her."

"If I took advice from children, I'd consider yours," said Vinod. "Tell your brother he'd do well to learn courtesy from you."

He dismissed us with a wave of his arm, and stepped away over the rise, his hair glinting red where the sun broke through the trees.

"We have to start again," said Dharm. "He's spoiled our offering."

I followed him back to the main track where we had first entered the holy forest.

"Sit and calm ourselves," he said.

"The prince..." I began.

"He's gone. Forget about him," he said. "And the girl."

Daylight was fading when we stepped once again onto the sacred avenue and at last entered the Tiger Aunt's clearing. The priest sat outside his hut, old and shrunken, half way to the next world. He folded his hands and bowed as Dharm set a pouch of cowrie shells and silver at his feet.

"Only two of you this time," he said. "You were here in the autumn. A throng of you. Old ones, young ones, children, babies. An engagement, wasn't it?"

"For Sita our sister," I said. "We brought offerings to the shrine."

A joyful time, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, drumming and dancing our way through the sacred wood to the shrine.

Not like now. This time we needed measured steps and quiet hearts to prepare to leave home.

At least that was Dharm's way.

In the clearing, the sun slanted through the forest gloom, streaming down on the goddess, picking out the wilting flower petals scattered at her feet. The goddess of the sacred grove, a slab of stone, her face a vague curve, her shoulder a bulge of rock, her skirt a red cloth fringed with silver stuck to the pillar. But her eyes seemed alive, painted white and black, gazing out from her stone face.

I dropped to my knees and pressed my forehead to the ground. Drawing the mangoes from the sack I had carried from Sindhapur, I arranged them in a neat circle at her base.

Dharm lifted the garland from the basket, heavy with gleaming white lotus and bands of red hibiscus, and held it out to the goddess.

“Tiger Aunt, guardian of our house, accept this garland,” he said. “Guide our steps in the quest for knowledge as we depart for our teacher’s house.”

He hung the garland over the pillar, careful not to

cover the eyes. Then he crouched at the base, scraping in the earth with a stick.

“What are you doing?” I whispered. “You’ll make her angry.”

“It’s fine,” said Dharm.

He pulled the cord of his amulet over his head, held the tiny carved tiger between his palms.

“Give me yours,” he said.

My eyes opened wide. I clutched at the stone hanging from my neck.

“Hurry,” said Dharm.

I handed him the stone tiger, holding my breath in alarm.

“You’re going to bury them?” I said. “They’re our greatest treasure, Papa said. How can the goddess protect us if we bury them?”

“Our greatest treasure,” said Dharm. “That’s why we should offer them to her.”

He placed the amulets in the tiny hole at base of the goddess, then packed down the earth, sprinkling it with twigs and leaves.

“Goddess,” said Dharm, “accept our amulets. Hold them in your heart and guide us where you wish us to go.”

He bowed and turned down the path, jerking his head for me to follow.

I hurried my farewell bow to the goddess. Our trek home would be through the night jungle. I shivered at thoughts of snarling teeth and claws.

“Holy Lady, kinswoman of tigers,” I blurted out, “keep your fierce children close by you tonight. Let us pass safely through the forest.”

“You prayed to the goddess like a child afraid of the

dark,” said Dharm as we walked in the dim light toward the river. “Wise people ask for knowledge.”

“But it’s wise to be frightened of the jungle at night,” I said.

Chapter Two

The following day I sat with Papa by the jackfruit tree in the courtyard, eating *chapatti* and yogurt. Dharm was fasting in preparation for our initiation with Master-ji.

“The gods have honoured me with a son like Dharm,” said Papa, “but it’s a great responsibility. His honesty will endanger us all. I hope the prince is less honest, and hides the whole affair from his father.”

“Will the Tiger Aunt punish Vinod?” I asked. “And the girl Amba?”

“That’s between them and the goddess,” Papa said. “But you gave the prince good advice. A few offerings, a golden shawl, flowered water, a dish of scented rice, and maybe the goddess will shrug at their behavior, put it down to youth.

He settled back against his cushions, eyes drooping shut for his afternoon nap.

I found Dharm and my mother in the kitchen. Mata held a slice of mango to Dharm’s mouth.

“Fruit is fine, even when you’re fasting, my son,” she coaxed. “Your body’s still growing. Some nourishment is necessary.”

Dharm tilted his head out of her reach.

“Don’t turn me from my duty, Mata,” he said.

“Just one piece,” said Mata, “for my sake.”

He left the room chewing, refusing more with a wave of his arm.

“Arun,” said Mata when Dharm had gone, “Your brother needs your help. He defended the Tiger Aunt as he should, but the *raja* won’t understand. He’ll be offended by Dharm’s words to the prince.”

“But the *raja* won’t find out,” I said. “Vinod won’t tell his father he dishonored the sacred grove.”

“The *raja* was young once,” said Mata. “What he allowed in himself he’ll allow in his son. Every generation tells the same story,” she said.

“Did the *raja* run in the sacred wood?” I asked.

“Past is past,” said Mata. “It’s your brother I worry about now. The prince is arrogant. He’ll not remember his own misdoing, but he’ll fume at Dharm’s insult to the royal house, and I think he’ll speak of it. I’ll send a gift to the *raja* to cool his anger.”

“We’re just merchants, Mata,” I said, “with one small warehouse. You can’t match the *raja*’s jewels and

precious metals.”

“That’s not my intention,” said Mata. “I have something better.”

She held out her hand, uncurling her fingers to reveal a tiny wooden box, the lid so snug the seam scarcely showed.

“What’s inside?” I asked.

She stared at me, sucked in her cheeks, smoothed the box with her fingers. I realized I was not to know the contents.

“Tomorrow the *raja* sits in the great hall,” she said. “Go there, wait your turn and give this to him.”

“By myself? They won’t let me in. I’m just a boy.”

“A boy with oiled hair and a new *dhoti* can enter anywhere if he’s courteous and holds his backbone straight. We’ll starch your clothes and drape them well and for Dharm’s sake, for all of us, you’ll keep

yourself neat for an hour or two and approach the *raja*. Only the *raja*. No one else. And say nothing to your father. He won't want me running to the *raja*. And nothing to your brother either."

"Couldn't you take the box yourself, Mata?" I asked.
"I'll come with you."

"No, my son. It's for you to do. Your youth will impress him.

In the morning Mata smoothed my hair, oiled my skin, folded a length of yellow cloth around my hips, strings of copper beads over my chest and around my arms.

"Become a man just to do this, and then you can be a child again. There'll be fried cakes and honey for you when you're back home."

The pink of dawn was fading, the shadow thinning in the lane, as I passed through the courtyard gate.

“See he gets there safely, Prabhu,” Mata told the watchman, who was about to crawl into his hut after his hours of duty. “Put off your rest a little longer.”

We turned onto Sindhapur’s main avenue, sweat springing on my face and shoulders as the morning grew hot.

Pedestrians and bullocks drooping from the long wait for the monsoon dotted the way. I was the only one in a hurry. I longed to meander with as little purpose, instead of striding up the long sloping avenue to the palace with a sick stomach and a cramped back.

Prabhu stopped in the shadow of a wall.

“From here you continue on your own, Arun,” he said. “The palace courtyard is through the gate. You don’t need me to spoil your entrance.”

Pretending not to see the pleading in my eyes, he straightened my sash and patted my hair.

“You look like a prince,” he said. “Or will as soon as I do this.”

He scrubbed my face with the end of his shawl.

“Now go,” he said. “I’ll wait for you here.”

I crossed the dusty road to the gate.

“I’m here for the public audience,” I told the guard.

“You’re young to be petitioning the *raja*,” he said.

“But go ahead. Wait in the hall with the others.”

He pointed with his club to a broad staircase.

My sandals slapped on the courtyard pavement, up the stairs, along the inner passage. Leather-skirted guards lined the way, eyes amused in set faces. An official with jeweled armbands and a moustache curved like cattle horns beckoned from a carved archway.

“Are you lost?” he said. “There’s nothing here for

children.”

“I want to see the *raja*,” I said.

“That’s not difficult,” he said. “Any full moon, wait by the city gates and see him in procession.”

“Not like that,” I said. “I want to speak to him, to give a gift to him.”

This was as awkward as I had known it would be.

“What gift?” asked the official. “The *raja* is careful what gifts he receives.”

He held out his hand as I dug behind my sash, drew out the tiny box wrapped by Mata in striped cloth.

“It’s only for the *raja*’s hand,” I said, holding it close as I unfolded the cloth. “It’s a box.”

“Open it,” he ordered.

“I must not,” I said. “It’s for the *raja*.”

He patted my shoulder and smiled.

“Be reasonable, my boy. Show me what’s inside, and if it’s fitting you can give it to the *raja*. Otherwise, no.”

He held my wrist, closed his fingers over the box.

I snatched my hand away.

“No!” I shouted, straining back, clutching the box to my chest. “It’s only for the *raja*. My mother said so.”

“Move back,” he said, flapping his arms. “Insolence to the *raja*’s chamberlain, making a disturbance at the threshold of the hall. What are you thinking of?”

“The *raja*,” I said. “I must give this to him.”

The chamberlain studied my face, his head to one side.

“Come along then,” he said, nodding toward the

archway. “I’ll humour you to keep you quiet. Wait with the others till you’re called. Put that box back in your belt and behave yourself.”

He led me through entry posts wound with flowers into the great hall.

“Stay here,” he said. “The guard will fetch you.”

I shrank against the wall, my eyes drawn along two rows of pillars stretching like giant tree trunks to a golden canopy and the *raja*, his hands planted on the carved arms of the throne.

The waiting crowd smelled of cloves and hair oil. Some wore metal beads and earrings like mine, some gold with polished stones, some shell, some simple baked clay.

Two young men bowed at the *raja*’s feet and performed a song. They came away with purses in their hands.

“He liked my melody,” said one.

“The rhythm of my drum made him sigh with happiness,” said the other.

A metal worker approached the throne and held out a gleaming copper pot while the chamberlain wrote down the location of his workshop.

A girl recounted her grandmother’s hardships and was given silver for medicines.

I searched the guard’s face each time he came for the next petitioner, hoping for my turn, but always he summoned one of the others, his eye sliding elsewhere when he saw me watching. Once when he consulted with the chamberlain, both men glanced at me, then quickly away. The room, which had felt cool and airy at first, grew hot, and I grew thirsty and hungry.

I gathered my courage.

“Guard-ji, when will I go to the *raja*?” I asked.

“Loud speech is not permitted in the hall,” he said. “Especially from a boy with secrets concealed in a box. Leave if you can’t behave.”

I hung my head, concentrating on not crying.

At last there was no one left waiting but me. The chamberlain stood at attention near the door.

“You said I would be called,” I said. “You told me to wait.”

“Too late. The public audience has ended. Go home now,” he said.

The *raja* stepped off the dais and paced down the aisle toward my end of the hall, his courtiers clustered behind. The blue fringes of his sash swayed around his knees, a red stone gleamed on his chest.

“Out of the way!” the chamberlain said, pushing me behind him, and bowing as the little procession came

close. The *raja*'s eyes were fixed on the arched exit ahead, not on the shadows behind the pillars. Soon he would be out of my reach.

"I must give him this box," I cried out. "My mother said so."

"Be calm!" said the chamberlain, clamping his hand on my upper arm.

"The *raja*. This box is for him," I shouted.

Still grasping my arm, he pressed his fingers over my mouth.

And then suddenly released me.

"*Raja-ji*," he said, folding his hands and bowing.

I did the same. Guards crowded close as the *raja* turned on his heel and strode toward us, his eyes beneath his pointed crown probing my face.

"What's happening here, chamberlain?" he said.

“Why are you allowing this?”

“*Raja-ji*, this boy was causing a disturbance by the archway,” said the chamberlain. “To keep the peace I admitted him. It was my mistake. I should never have allowed it.”

“Of course you admitted him,” said the *raja*. “Have I not said that all may attend my public audiences? In obedience to me you brought him in. But why this ugly shouting?”

“*Raja-ji*, he’s insolent and disobedient,” said the chamberlain.

The *raja* looked at me.

“You’ve heard the chamberlain,” he said. “Why would a timid-looking boy like you be disobedient?”

“*Raja-ji...*” I said.

“Speak up,” said the *raja*. “You spoke loudly enough a few moments ago.”

“*Raja-ji*,” I repeated, clearing my throat, “I don’t want to disobey. I’m just carrying out my mother’s wishes.”

“*Raja-ji*,” the chamberlain said, “this boy looks timid, but he might be concealing bad intentions. He carries a box which he refuses to give for inspection.”

“It’s only for the eyes of the *raja*,” I cried.

“Shouting again,” said the *raja*. “Show me the box and I will judge.”

I brought the box from the folds of my sash, unwrapped the striped cloth, held it out in both palms. *Raja*, chamberlain, guards, all stared at it, so tiny and insignificant under the gaze of so many eyes.

“What does it contain?” the *raja* asked.

“My mother didn’t tell me,” I said.

He took it between his thumb and finger, tugged at the little knob on the top. The lid held fast.

“Finely carved,” he said, “not to be forced. I’ll examine it at my leisure.”

“*Raja*-ji, allow me to check it first,” said the chamberlain. “There could be danger even in something so small.”

“Did your mother say why I had need of this?” the *raja* asked.

“She said though it’s only a simple thing,” I replied, “the time will come when it’s of great worth.”

“And who are you, that your mother entrusts you with such missions?” the *raja* said, tapping the box with his finger.

“I am Arun son of Hari the merchant,” I said.

“Return to your mother and tell her the box is delivered,” the *raja* said.

I bowed and left the hall, Prabhu hurrying to me as I descended the stairway.

“You were gone a long time,” he said. “I asked the guards where you were, but they shooed me away.”

“That was a heavy task Mata gave me,” I said. “I never want another one like it.”

At home, Mata fed me honeyed water and sweets dripping with syrup. She held my chin in her hand.

“You gave it?” she murmured, gazing into my eyes.

“Mata, he has the box,” I said.

“Well done,” she said.

Chapter Three

Three days later, Dharm and I left for our uncle's school. Mata and our sister Sita made a celebration of our last evening, bangles covering their arms, hair piled and coiled and threaded with ribbons. I was too downcast to eat much, though Mata had prepared our favourite dishes, and the household would eat barley and peas for days to make up for the feast. Jungle fowl rich with *ghee* and ginger and raisins for Dharm, sweets rolled in powdered almonds and cardamom for me, and rice with yogurt and cucumber. Dharm's face was calm and his appetite healthy, as if this was a day like any other.

“Eat,” said Papa. “There`ll be no food like this at Master-ji’s house. He’ll give you a plain life with no comforts to distract you. That’s how you’ll learn.”

“Don’t worry,” said Sita. “Our aunt won’t let you go hungry.”

“The courtyard will be quiet without your games,” said Mata. “Who will I make sugared water for? Your father and sister are not fond of sweets.”

“Mata,” said Dharm, “I’ll be the best student your brother’s ever had. You and Papa will be pleased with your son. And Arun too. He learns quickly.”

If I pleaded, Mata would let me stay home for another year at least. But I could not. Dharm was going gladly, and Papa counted on me to look out for him.

Before sun-up the bullocks were yoked, the offerings for Master-ji mounded in the cart, the driver waiting on the high seat, whip in hand.

Mata wiped my face with her shawl.

“Don’t be afraid, Arun,” she said. “It’s true my brother’s stern. When we were children, the servants, even my mother, were careful not to displease him. But he’s a scholar, with much to teach you. Just until the next hot season, and you can visit us.”

“Don’t be sad, little brother,” my sister said. “I thought my life had ended when they told me I’d marry Raj and leave to live in his house, but now I understand it’s best. You’ll be fine too.”

“Master-ji doesn’t take just anyone for a student,” said Papa. “We must be grateful he’s agreed to have the two of you. We’ll be waiting for his good reports.”

Mata pulled us up into her arms, then stepped away, patting Dharm’s arm, straightening my *dhoti*.

Prabhu stood with folded hands before the gate, a

wide smile on his face, his eyes wet.

“Blessings, Arun,” he said, “and to your brother too.”

The cart creaked through the gateway into the lane. Papa, Dharm and I followed, walking between brick walls dim in dawn mist and then gleaming gold. By the time we passed through the city gates, the sky was blue above the haze, the road stretched hot along the Sindhu, the sun burned our eyes.

We walked till evening, then built a fire by the forest edge, and slept beside it rolled in blankets. In the morning, the wide road along the river dwindled to a track. Jars rattled and sacks of grain slid into each other as the cartwheels bounced over ruts.

We rested at midday, sitting in the dust under a *pilu* tree, pouring tepid water down our throats, chewing hardened *chapatti*. Clusters of the tiny yellow *pilu* fruit were cupped in long pointed leaves. A small bird, the white stripe on its side gleaming in the shadow of the foliage, tugged at the fruit, then flew

off with a spray of berries in its beak.

“Papa, it’s difficult to be a *pilu* fruit,” I said. “So safe in the arms of its leaf mother, only to be snatched away.”

“But the seed of that fruit will send its roots deep,” said Papa, “and spread its branches wide, maybe even wider than the tree it was taken from. Don’t concern yourself, my son. That *pilu* fruit will be just fine.”

He put some almonds in my hand, gave some to Dharm as well.

“The *pilu* fruit knows it’s all in the hands of the gods,” said Dharm. “Master-ji will explain it.”

“Time to move on,” said Papa, “if we’re to be there before dark.”

Late in the afternoon the forest opened into bare fields dotted with clumps of trees and a distant

farmer working the earth with a bullock and a plough. Papa turned from the river track onto a path edged with trees, some of them bearing the same yellow fruit that had saddened me at our rest stop.

We came to a village, a scattering of thatched huts on either side of the track, and waited to be welcomed. A guardian stone overlooked the path, reminding me of the Tiger Aunt.

Two boys in loincloths and bare feet ran to us, folded their hands and bowed.

“We’ll take you to our grandfather if that’s your wish,” said the older boy.

“Find water for the bullock,” Papa told the driver. “I’ll speak with the elders.”

“Is his grandfather our Master-ji?” I asked.

Dharm held up his hand to silence me.

“Master-ji stays deep in the forest,” he said. “He’d

never live where there's so much bustle. Papa's just paying his respects to the headman here. It's expected."

The headman sat under the broad leaves of a *pipal* tree, his white turban a wide flat wheel above his face.

"So your sons begin their studies," he said. "We're great followers of Master-ji in this village. He looks to us for the grain and vegetables your boys will eat."

"I see their feeding's in good hands. Your fields are rich and your village well-ordered," said our father. "Grain I've brought from Sindhapur, but if you have vegetables to spare, I'll gladly take them now to Master-ji."

He passed a pouch of cowrie shells to the headman, who weighed them in his palm, then flung his arm toward his grandsons, who ran off to a shed at the village edge.

“Tell your sons if they have need of anything, they must come to us,” said the headman. “If Master-ji permits.”

We drank milk under the rustling *pipal* leaves, bowed to the headman and turned to leave. Baskets of cucumbers, fat melons, pale gourds, had been wedged in the cart among the jars and sacks from home

“Follow the track. You’ll reach Master-ji before nightfall.”

The track was dim between the tall *sal* trunks, so broken by roots that several times we had to push the wheels free. The sky was purple from the setting sun when we reached a fence of tangled thorn boughs and peered through the open gate. A house with a thatched roof and carved door posts, a mango tree at one side, a *neem* tree at the other, several small huts, two cows eyeing us from the far side of the yard.

“Now your student life begins,” said our father. “You must approach Master-ji in the proper way.”

He took a bundle of firewood from the cart and with the driver’s help settled it on Dharm’s head, steadied it while Dharm took hold.

“You too, Arun,” Papa said. I felt the weight on my head, stretched up my arm to grasp the wood before it slipped. The weight pressed me down, threatened to topple me forward into the dirt.

“Walk tall, and you won’t feel the burden,” said Papa. “Your first lesson as a student. Duties weigh less on a back that’s straight and graceful.”

He pushed us toward the gate.

I walked with Dharm across the yard to the verandah, my head stiff under the firewood, unable to glance back at my father for fear of dislodging the load. We stood at the step, waiting.

“Say nothing unless you’re asked,” our father had told us.

A tiny woman came through the door onto the verandah. Her nose was sharp, her hair pulled into a grey knot on the back of her head. I recognized our aunt.

“Why do you approach this house?” she asked, pretending not to know us.

“We’re here for Master-ji,” said Dharm.

“You’re blocking the step,” she said. “Move to the side. Wait for him there.”

She turned back into the house. Our father watched from the edge of the clearing. My arms ached from balancing the firewood on my head.

“Couldn’t we rest just for a moment?” I murmured.

“No,” said Dharm. “Do nothing without permission. Papa told us.”

Two boys came round the corner of the house, their hair twisted on the tops of their heads, their bodies wound in white shawls. They were silent as they glanced at us, set a basket of purple *jamun* fruit on the verandah, and disappeared into the hut. Two more boys came, heaved baskets of fodder leaves onto the ground by the bullock shed, and ran to their hut, looking at us over their shoulders.

Then one boy more, who set down an untidy bundle of sticks and bark by the fodder. Not nearly as well tied as our bundles, but we had had the driver to help with ours. This boy looked us full in the face, raised his eyebrows, and clutching an imaginary stack of wood on his head, pretended to stagger and grimace with pain.

“You’re a student, not a street performer, Hamsa,” said a deep voice.

Hamsa smirked at us, then turned and threw himself down full-length before two gnarled feet and a

wooden staff planted on the ground.

Master-ji. Matted coil of black hair on his head, wiry beard, string of wooden beads resting on his rounded stomach.

“It’s good that you touch the feet of your Master-ji, Hamsa, but even better if you mean to improve. Leave us now.”

Hamsa sprang up and sauntered to the hut. Master-ji had the same piercing look I remembered from Sita’s engagement ceremony, the dark pupils of his eyes probing deep to find out our secrets. Could he see I disliked him and his school and his students, and was only pretending to be courteous?

“What do you want?” he asked, though he and our parents had planned our arrival for months. “Why do you stand before me bearing firewood on your head?”

“Master-ji, I am Dharm son of Hari. I wish to be your

student,” said Dharm.

“And this other boy, what does he want?” he asked.

“Master-ji,” I said, “I am Arun son of Hari. I wish to be your student.”

“Are you ready to leave the gentle care of your mother and to endure a student’s life of hardship?”

“I seek knowledge,” said Dharm, “and will follow wherever you lead.”

“I seek knowledge,” I echoed, “and will follow wherever you lead.”

“But where will I find fuel for the sacred fire?”
Master-ji asked.

“Master-ji, here is *pipal* wood,” said Dharm as we laid the firewood at his feet.

“Then, Dharm and Arun,” said Master-ji, “listen while I tell you how a student must act. When the master

speaks, the student obeys, when the master is hungry, the student serves him, when the master chastises, the student is joyful. And in return, the master holds the student in his heart, caring for his welfare.”

Dharm and I bowed.

“Hemp belt at your hips and *pipal* wood in your hand. These you must keep with you always, for by them the gods will recognize you.”

He knotted thick strings around our waist, closed our fingers around wooden staffs as tall as we were.

“Go with Devadatta,” said Master-ji, waving his hand toward a young man approaching from the hut. “He’ll teach you your chores.”

He and Papa walked off along the pathway to the house.

“Give my blessings to my sister and tell her all is well,” I heard him say.

Chapter Four

“I’ll show you how to go for water,” said Devadatta, leading us to the hut, “and after today you must keep the tank in Go-ma’s kitchen filled.”

He balanced poles, a clay pot at each end, balanced on our shoulders.

“Leave your staffs here,” he told us. “The pots will be heavy coming back. You’ll need both hands.”

I set my staff on a *charpoy*.

“I’ll bring mine,” said Dharm. “Master-ji said to keep it with me always.”

“That was ceremony,” said Devadatta. “He didn’t mean when you were fetching water.”

“Master-ji said ‘always,’ “ Dharm said.

One hand gripping the pole over his shoulder, one clutching the walking stick, he set off toward the stream.

I stole a glance at Devadatta, who shrugged and raised his eyebrows.

“New students are keen,” he said.

The evening meal was peas and barley, plenty of it, but with none of Mata’s *ghee* and garlic. When we returned after eating, we lay down on *charpoys* lined up by the wall, bare ropes against our skin. Dharm and I rolled our shawls into pillows, but Devadatta asked us to put them aside. Master-ji required us to lie flat, he said.

“Of course,” said Dharm. “It was our mistake.”

In the early morning, the slender leaves of the mango tree were touched with gold, the branches hung with fruit, as we settled on the ground before Master-ji to begin our studies, seven of us, and Devadatta. Master-ji sat cross-legged on the bench circling the trunk, his hair thick and twisted, his upper arms wound with wooden beads.

Alankar and Hamsa were my age.

Alankar was not to be trusted. He had kneeled beside me at the stream that morning while we washed ourselves and our clothing, his tiny mouth pursed in his round face.

“The new boy didn’t scrub his *dhoti*, just dipped it in the water and wrung it out,” I heard him say later to Devadatta.

He spoke the truth, but only for the sake of causing harm.

“I’ll see to it,” Devadatta told him, although so far he

had mentioned nothing.

Hamsa, never still, always smiling, was already my friend. Hamsa, who had teased us when we stood with *pipal* wood on our heads waiting for Master-ji. At night, in the sleeping hut, he had whispered into my ear, his hands cupping his mouth, long after we had been told to sleep.

“What eats heartily when called to the feast, then drops dead when the feast is finished?” he breathed against my cheek.

“A fire, of course” he said when I was silent, flustered that he was talking when Devadatta had ordered silence.

“My turn to ask one,” I said. “What eats but can taste nothing?”

“Teeth,” we both said, our answers stumbling over each other.

“Another one,” said Hamsa. “When is a chicken not a chicken?”

I had no idea.

“When it’s Devadatta,” said Hamsa. “Skinny legs, yellow toenails, and arms that flap like wings.”

We giggled, pressing our hands over our mouths to muffle the sound.

But now, under the mango tree, Hamsa was as subdued as the other students.

“Dharm’s back is straight. That’s good,” said Master-ji, when we had settled ourselves.

The rest of us shifted our hips, pulled in our stomachs in imitation of Dharm.

Master-ji’s head lifted and the air vibrated with his chanting.

“Holy fire, as a father holds his son close, be ever

near us,” he chanted, his hand rising and falling with the movement of his voice.

A familiar chant I had heard many times in Sindhapur. We repeated his words, our syllables wavering around Devadatta’s steady voice. Repeated them again and again, until the back of my neck was knotted tight.

Master-ji nodded his head at last.

“Enough,” he said. “Tomorrow you’ll do better. Now what questions do you have?”

A thrush chirped in the mango tree, orange head flashing through the leaves.

“Ask your questions,” he repeated.

“Master-ji,” said Hamsa, “the chant says fathers hold their sons close. But how can that be? Ours are all far away.”

“And anyway, Master-ji, some fathers hurt their

sons, and don't hold them close at all," said an older boy. "Did those who made the chant not know that?"

"Whatever a father does, a son has to accept," said Alankar.

He's not only a tattletale, I thought. He's a prig. Dharm is too, sometimes, but he never shows off like that.

Then it was time for the midday meal and chores. Three trips to the stream for Dharm and me before we had filled the water reservoir by the kitchen hearth.

"Pour gently," said Go-ma as I tipped the heavy water jar over the tank, splashing my feet. "Don't cast on the floor what you worked so hard to carry here."

When we left the house she pressed dates into our hands.

“Like your mother would if she were here,” she said.
“Rest now for a while.”

Already I could feel my teeth sliding into the fruit,
the sweetness on my tongue.

But it was different for Dharm.

“Go-ma, I’ll eat this because you gave it to me, but
you know I lead a strict life now. No treats.”

Every morning, we recited the lines Master-ji taught
us. Every afternoon Dharm and I fetched water and
shared chores with the other boys. Except with
Alankar, who never wanted help and lived to finish
his tasks before the rest of us.

“Devadatta-ji,” he would gloat, “I’ve already filled
the box with kindling. Give me something else to do
while I wait for the others.”

But Hamsa was glad to let us do his work.

“What’s the difference between a prince and a

donkey?" he asked, sitting by a basket of gourds waiting to be peeled and chopped.

"Tell us," said Devadatta, "then get back to your task."

"A prince straightens his back to keep his golden helmet balanced on his head. A donkey straightens his back for saddlebags full of other people's things. It's a prince I want to be."

One hot afternoon Dharm and I staggered into the kitchen with our last load of water.

"Go-ma," I boasted, "that was hard work today, bringing the water. I almost fainted from the sun."

"Arun," said Go-ma, "don't complain. Your chores are an offering to the gods."

Master-ji strode through the door from the other room as Dharm was unhooking a water jar from the carrying pole. I trembled at the spark of anger in the

master's eye.

"Stop, Dharm," he said, as Dharm lifted the jar over the storage tank. "Arun's complaints have made this water unfit. Return to the stream, both of you, with the water you brought unwillingly. Bring fresh, and let every step be cheerful."

"Yes, Master-ji," said Dharm, stooping to fix the jar back on the pole. I stared at Master-ji's thick beard, hardly able to believe we were to plod once more through the scorching heat and dust.

"Help your brother, Arun," said Master-ji.

I bent my head to hide the tears leaking onto my cheek. Go-ma ignored us as we heaved the poles on our shoulders and set out again, passing the other boys where they rested under a tree, sipping water.

"It wasn't even your fault," I said as we lurched through the forest. "I was the only one complaining."

“He’s testing us,” said Dharm. “He wants to see if we meant it when we promised to obey him.”

“Even for ridiculous things?” I said.

“He said to be cheerful,” said Dharm, his step brisk, a smile pasted on his face.

Chapter Five

The rains came, streaming off the thatched roofs and splashing our ankles with mud. We sat in Master-ji's house for our lessons, or on the verandah when the sky was clear.

Devadatta received word that his mother was ill and left for his village.

"Dharm will do your work while you're away," Master-ji said.

Dharm's shoulders jerked in surprise.

"Yes, Master-ji," he said, then swallowed, his throat

muscles straining.

I felt my lips part in a smile. My brother was distinguishing himself. We watched Devadatta walk off down the lane, rope belt around his waist, staff in his hand.

“Bow to Master-ji and begin your chores,” Dharm told us all.

We obeyed as a matter of course.

But settling to sleep that night did not go so smoothly.

“Douse the lamp. It’s time to sleep,” said Dharm.

“I still need it,” said Alankar, bending over the tray that held the lamp. “I wish to watch its flames flicker.”

“Blow it out,” said Dharm.

“It’s a holy act, to contemplate the flame,” said

Alankar. “You mustn’t stop me.”

He rearranged his legs on the woven ropes of his *charpoy*, balanced the lamp tray between his hands, his eyes half-closed in meditation.

“You’ve never needed the lamp burning before,” said Dharm. “You’re doing this to bother me. Put out the lamp.”

Alankar ignored him.

Hamsa eased his feet to the floor, dashed to Alankar’s *charpoy*, and blew out the flame.

“Sacrilege!” cried Alankar. “You broke up my conversation with the gods.”

“Sleep now,” said Dharm. “You might as well. There’s no fire here to light the lamp again.”

“Hamsa should be punished,” said Alankar.

In the morning Alankar pushed in beside Dharm as

we walked to the house for our boiled milk and *chapatti*.

“You interrupted my prayers last night, Dharm,” he said. “It’s my duty to see you punished for that. I’ll tell Devadatta when he’s back.”

“He uses the rules to hurt people,” I told Dharm later.

“Let him tell Devadatta,” Dharm said. “Let him tell Master-ji. I did everything as I should.”

When Devadatta returned after his mother’s death, Dharm waited for his scolding, but nothing was said.

The rainy season passed and our lessons moved back to the mango tree.

“Great Sun,” chanted Master-ji, his hands marking the rhythm, “drive your chariot across the sky, and as the stars disappear like thieves in your golden light, let our weakness be dissolved in your

radiance.”

We echoed his words, Devadatta’s rumble carrying the rest of us.

“What questions do you have?” asked Master-ji.

“Master-ji, how can stars be like thieves?” asked Hamsa.

“They do nothing wrong,” I said. “Just shine like they’re supposed to.”

“No,” said Alankar, his voice defiant, “they’re very wrong. They try to shine like the sun and the sun becomes angry, licks them up in a great flame, burns them to ashes.”

For a moment there was silence. Even Master-ji looked startled by Alankar’s ferocity.

“The sun’s not angry,” said Devadatta. “It’s just that stars are pale compared to the lustre of the sun.”

“Go into the forest, each of you” said Master-ji, “sit away from the others, and ponder the words you’ve learned this morning. Return in time for your evening chores.”

We straggled toward the trees.

“And Alankar,” Master-ji called out as we moved away. “Remember. In this house you’re safe. There’s no flame to lick you up and burn you to ash.”

Alankar bowed, smug from the attention paid to him, but as the smirk faded from his plump cheeks, his eyes were sad. A boy with secrets.

I sat at the base of a *sal* tree, alone in the hush of midday, leaves stretching far above, ridged trunk at my back, grass soft from the rains under my knees. The sunlight dripped through the branches, warm on my eyelids.

“Wake up, Arun. Wake up.”

The voice was relentless, pulling me from sleep.

“I have a question,” said Hamsa. “What can’t run and smell at the same time?”

“I’m not in the mood for guessing,” I said.

“The answer is ‘your nose.’ See? It’s running right now and it’s probably too blocked to smell.”

I rubbed my nostrils with a handful of dried leaves, wiped my hand on the grass.

“So are you coming with me or not?” Hamsa asked.

“Where?” I asked.

“If we go now,” said Hamsa, “we’ll be back before the others, and I know where Go-ma keeps the fruit.”

“Steal, you mean?” I said.

“Just a little, for a treat,” said Hamsa. “She sleeps in

the afternoon. And I saw Master-ji walking toward the village.”

“I don’t think we should,” I said, licking my lips. “Master-ji would be angry.”

“We’re not disobeying him. He’s never said not to steal fruit. Anyway, boys misbehave. People expect it.”

We stole through the trees back to the clearing, circling around Devadatta lost in meditation by another *sal* tree, and almost stumbling over Alankar sound asleep in the undergrowth.

At Master-ji’s house, the yard was quiet, except for the servant snoring by the cowshed and the jingle of bells from the cows foraging under the trees.

Go-ma was curled on her side on the kitchen floor, hands under her cheek, eyes draped with a shawl. Hamsa pointed above her to the shelf where she had set the dried fruit.

He eased his hand into the jar, pulled out a fistful of dates, and urged me toward the shelf. I closed my hand around two dates, and turned away, eager to leave before Go-ma woke up.

“Wait,” whispered Hamsa. “There’s honey.”

He thrust his fingers, dates and all, through the wide lip of the honey jar, pulled them out dripping with liquid.

“Help me,” he said, licking at the sticky mess, but the honey dropped in shining strands to puddle on the floor.

I scrubbed at the spill with the end of my shawl while Hamsa wiped his hands on his *dhoti*. Go-ma muttered, then sat up, straightening her shawl.

“I can’t believe my eyes,” she said, then looked toward the entrance. “Master-ji,” she exclaimed.

Startled, we glanced at the door.

“Arun and Hamsa, why are you here?” said Master-ji.
“Stealing Go-ma’s food, ignoring my instructions?”

He stood in the doorway, his staff in one hand, holding a sack over his shoulder with the other. His eyes burned through us.

“Leave this house.” he said. “Out of my sight.”

He slid the sack off his back, the twisted red and yellow tassels swinging as he set it on the floor behind him.

Shoulders slumped, we stepped through the door.

“Tell Devadatta what you’ve done. He’ll give you a penance. Stay away until you’ve carried it out.”

Neither of us spoke as we waited by the shed door for Devadatta. Hamsa rubbed at the honey smears on his fingers and clothing. I clutched my stolen dates, my stomach heaving.

Devadatta sat cross-legged on the wooden step to

hear our tale, his face solemn. The other boys hovered near.

“How did this happen, Arun?” Dharm asked. “You never disobeyed at home. Why here? How will we explain to Papa?”

“No one steals from a teacher,” said Alankar. “Now you’ll be beaten.”

Devadatta’s eyes were closed, his face expressionless.

“No beating,” he said. “That’s not what Master-ji wants. He sent you to the forest to study the chant, so tonight you can complete what you failed to do. Sit by the mango tree and repeat the chant in your hearts. All night, until dawn. Now go and eat. You’ll need your strength.”

After the evening meal, we crouched beneath the mango tree, beside the platform where Master-ji sat every morning to teach us. I looked out into the

dark, glad of the fence that enclosed the yard and the secure ties on the thorn gate. Leaves rustled, crickets chirped in the cool air.

Dharm brought us blankets.

“Devadatta sent these. He says you’re too young to shiver all night. Don’t cause trouble again. Think how I feel, sleeping safe inside, knowing you’re out here.”

He returned to the hut and we were alone.

“Arun, are you reciting in your head?” Hamsa whispered. “The way Devadatta said?”

“I’m trying,” I muttered. “I wish I’d never listened to you and your crazy ideas.”

The moon rose, half hidden in shadow. I could make out the line of the thorn fence, the mass of the forest.

“Arun, I saw something move,” said Hamsa, pulling

at my arm.

I slid around to his side of the trunk.

“Over there,” he said into my ear, directing my glance with his palm against my cheek.

I picked out the solid block of the house, the feathery outline of the *neem* tree across the yard.

“Do you see?” asked Hamsa.

Two figures, a tall and a short, glided toward the *neem* tree, melted into the darkness. Hamsa and I shrank against each other, our breath shallow. Faint beneath the song of the crickets came scraping, thudding, murmuring. The shadows by the *neem* tree shifted.

We slouched against the mango trunk, afraid to move. My throat itched. I swallowed to hold back a cough. My legs cramped, then turned numb. An owl screamed in the forest. I pressed my mouth to keep

from crying out.

The gliding shapes reappeared, pulling away from the *neem* tree, sliding onto the verandah and into the house.

We said nothing, the experience too fresh. I pounded life back into my legs, wrapped my blanket snug, and tried to pull my thoughts away from the *neem* tree. Drowsy, I let my head sink to the ground. Tomorrow I would figure it out.

Chapter Six

The birds were calling when Dharm woke us.

“It’s not your concern,” he said after we related what we had seen.

“But it was Master-ji and Go-ma,” said Hamsa.

“Wasn’t it, Arun?”

“You don’t know that for sure,” said Dharm. “You said it was too dark to see.”

“One tall, one short, and they came from the house,” I said.

“If you knew it was Master-ji, you should have turned your back and not spied on him,” said Dharm.

“In the dark,” said Hamsa, “in secret, not even a lamp.”

“He’s the master,” Dharm said. “He understands things we’ve never even thought of. Don’t question him. Turn your thoughts to doing your duty.”

As we washed ourselves in the yard behind the shed, Devadatta approached us.

“You may come to the lesson this morning. You’ve done your penance.”

“But we fell asleep,” I said.

“The gods understand,” he said.

He led us to the mango tree, green and ordinary in the daylight, where Master-ji sat waiting.

“You’ve learned how to behave?” Master-ji asked.

“Yes, Master-ji,” we said.

“Then take your places.”

We joined the row of students.

Alankar caught my eye, his mouth twisted into a smug smile.

“Enjoyed your night on the ground?” he murmured.

Hamsa clenched his fists, his nostrils flaring.

Master-ji spoke.

“The gods wish us to be punished for our misdeeds, but only so we learn. They don’t rejoice in our shame. Why is that, Alankar?” he asked.

Alankar’s smile collapsed.

“That would be spiteful, Master-ji,” he said.

“Correct,” said Master-ji.

Alankar had been reprimanded. I tried not to smirk.

“Now,” said Master-ji, “let us praise the gods, who are never frightened by threats.”

Such godly words Master-ji spoke. But why had he and Go-ma been digging under the *neem* tree?

In the afternoon, Dharm and I carried water to the kitchen.

“What you did yesterday is forgotten,” Go-ma told me. “But from now on follow your brother’s example. Don’t make trouble for yourself.”

She glanced at the pots of dates and honey. My eyes followed hers, and then were caught by the sack folded on the shelf beneath. Fat red and yellow tassels dangled from the edge.

“Did you see?” I asked Dharm, as we passed through the forest on the way for more water. “The sack Master-ji was carrying when he caught us in the

kitchen. It's empty now."

"You're here to learn from Master-ji, not to notice what sacks he carries on his shoulder," said Dharm.

"But where did he go in secret yesterday? Sending us to the forest so we wouldn't know. That's what they were burying in the middle of the night, whatever was in that sack. I'm sure of it."

"Master-ji can go wherever he wishes. He doesn't need our permission. And as for sending us into the forest, that's what masters do. Papa says that's where he learned the most, sitting by himself under a tree."

"I still think there's something wrong," I said.

"He's Master-ji," said Dharm. "Respect him."

Several days later the supply cart arrived from the village, creaking to a stop by the verandah.

"Sweets! *Jaggery!*" said Hamsa, dropping the

gathering basket from his back.

I set down my water pots and ran with him to the bullock cart.

The driver heaved a sack of barley onto the verandah, then wiped the sweat from his face with a corner of his shawl.

“We’ll help,” said Hamsa, reaching for a small package wrapped in jute cloth, tied with string.

“Help eat the date sugar, you mean,” said the driver. “Your hand’s gone straight to it. Do your fingers have a nose to smell it out?”

He pulled a chunk of hard *jaggery* from the pouch at his waist.

“No need to break open Go-ma’s supply,” he said. “I have some ready for you here.”

He broke off pieces of sugar for the boys pressing around him. Only Alankar hung back.

“You too,” said the driver, extending his hand. “Even Master-ji sucks on *jaggery* from time to time.”

Master-ji appeared on his verandah, waving his hand toward the entrance.

“You’ve had your treat,” he said. “Now bow to the guests who are arriving and go to your work.”

Two men passed through the thorn gate into the yard. One was the wide-turbaned headman from the village, the other a stranger, grey hair as matted as Master-ji’s, a rough brown goatskin wrapped over his shoulder and around his waist.

“As you see I didn’t come alone today,” said the carter. “The headman’s brought the priest Baghadasa to see Master-ji.”

Alankar had disappeared into the hut. The rest of us bowed to the men as they passed onto the verandah. A stone amulet was bound with cord to Baghadasa’s upper arm, a stone carved with the

image of a tiger.

“Just like our amulets,” I told Dharm as we walked to the stream, poles on our shoulders. “He must be a priest of the Tiger Aunt.”

“One holy man to see another,” said Dharm.

“Their faces were worried,” I said. “I think they’ve come for help.”

When we brought water for the kitchen, Master-ji and his visitors were deep in conversation by the mango tree. We went off for water again, and then once more, and each time we passed back through the gate they still sat talking.

“You older boys,” said Devadatta, “come into the forest to cut fodder. Arun, you others can sweep the yard behind the house.”

I grabbed one of the twig brooms leaning by the wall and dashed across the yard to the sleeping shed,

slipping inside unnoticed when Master-ji's head was turned toward Baghadasa. I thought their voices would come through the small window in the far wall.

Alankar and Hamsa were already in the room, their ears pressed to the window lattice.

"Shh," whispered Hamsa, beckoning to me. "It's getting interesting."

"Go away. Let me listen," said Alankar. "This is my affair, not yours."

I squeezed myself beside them to peer through the lattice. The group under the mango tree was out of view, but I could make out the words.

"Master-ji," a hoarse voice grated. "I'm not satisfied with your plan to wait and see. The gods prefer us to do something."

I strained to hear.

“Bhagadasa,” said Master-ji, “you suspect no one, you’re not sure when the treasure disappeared, no one was seen near the door, no noise was heard, there’s no trace of the thief. That’s why I say watch and learn. The thief might reveal himself.”

Treasure, I thought. Treasure that Master-ji had buried under the *neem* tree. And now he was pretending to know nothing.

“Headman,” said Master-ji, “what do you say?”

“I have no opinion on the matter,” came the headman’s deep voice. “All I know is the treasure and its bronze box are gone.”

“That’s why, Headman, you must encourage Master-ji to agree with me,” said Bhagadasa. “Threaten the villagers, pull apart their houses. It’s for their own good. If we don’t find the treasure, the goddess will blame them for not taking proper care and mete out a terrible punishment.”

“I don’t think so,” said Master-ji. “Have no fear for the village, Headman. It’s only thieves who must answer to the goddess.”

Hamsa and I glanced at each other. Was Master-ji offering himself to the goddess for punishment? For surely he was the one who had stolen the treasure.

Master-ji’s voice floated again around the corner of the hut.

“Bhagadasa, you came for my advice, and I’ve given it,” Master-ji continued. “Watch and wait. Don’t be distressed, Headman. All will be fine.”

Their discussion was ending. I snatched up my broom and slipped out of the hut, Alankar and Hamsa close behind.

“I know everything. I can explain it to you,” said Alankar as we swept twigs and leaves from the packed dirt yard.

“You’re the big authority on Master-ji’s affairs?”
Hamsa asked.

“Just tell us what they were talking about,” I said.
“What treasure?”

“The Tiger Aunt’s, I guess,” said Alankar. “But it’s Bhagadasa I know about. He’s my father’s priest. He looks like a holy man, but he’s evil, a viper with fangs behind his wooden beads.”

“Are you saying Bhagadasa stole this treasure?”
Hamsa asked.

“I didn’t say that,” said Alankar. “Maybe.”

“Here’s a question, Arun,” said Hamsa. “What says ‘yes’ and ‘no’ at the same time?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“Alankar’s face,” said Hamsa. “His lips say Bhagadasa’s not a thief, his eyes say he is. Right, Alankar?”

Alankar scowled, his eyes squeezed shut above his round cheeks.

“What is this treasure anyway?” I asked. “Gold? Jewels? Tiger Aunt shrines are poor.”

“You don’t know much about the Tiger Aunt,” said Alankar. “She has lots of shrines. The best one is where I live, in the forest near my city.”

“There’s treasure there?” Hamsa asked.

“My father and Bhagadasa say so. I heard them talking,” said Alankar. “Buried beneath the image.”

I thought of our tiger amulets buried far away near Sindhapur.

“Who’s your father, anyway?” asked Hamsa.

“What’s your city?”

Alankar’s eyes widened.

“None of your business,” he said.

We swept the rear courtyard, throwing the dead leaves over the fence, and walked back to our hut, past the guests and Master-ji on the verandah.

“Kumara,” Bhagadasa called out in his hoarse voice, a cup in his hand. “The gods go with you.”

His eyes looked straight at us.

“Keep walking,” muttered Alankar, tugging on Hamsa’s arm. “I don’t have to answer.”

“What’s going on?” said Hamsa, pulling out of his grasp.

I folded my hands and bowed toward the verandah. Master-ji, standing behind Bhagadasa, waved us away, tipping his head toward the hut.

“That’s not Kumara,” he told Bhagadasa. “That’s my nephew Arun and his friends. My sister’s son.”

Once again he signalled to us to hurry.

Alankar threw himself on his *charpoy*, buried his head under the blanket.

Hamsa and I glanced at each other.

“Alankar, you have to tell us everything,” said Hamsa, “or we’ll tell Master-ji you were listening at the window.”

“You were too,” said Alankar, his voice muffled by the blanket.

“Are you going to tell us or not?” asked Hamsa.

“I already told you everything. Bhagadasa is my father’s priest,” Alankar said.

“Who’s your father?” I asked. “What’s your city? Why won’t you tell us?”

“I can’t,” said Alankar. “Master-ji told me not to.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Hamsa. “Why would Master-ji say that?”

Alankar threw off his blanket, sat up on the *charpoy*.

“Because my father wants me dead. That’s why,” he said, his eyes defiant.

“Dead?” I said.

“Yes, dead.”

Chapter Seven

“Your father wants you dead?” I asked.

“What did you do to him?” asked Hamsa.

“Nothing,” said Alankar. “Forget about it.”

The older boys came through the door and collapsed on their *charpoys*. Alankar lay back down, turning his back to us.

“We’ll ask you later,” muttered Hamsa.

Devadatta came to us after the evening meal.

“Arun and Hamsa,” he said, “Master-ji’s waiting. He

wants to speak to you.”

Master-ji’s eyes drilled into us as we entered his house, bowed and touched the floor at his feet. We sat facing him, the thin mat pressing into our legs.

“You heard a name today,” he said, “spoken by Bhagadasa. Do you recall it?”

“Yes, Master-ji,” I said. “Kumara.”

“Who is Kumara? Do you know, Arun?” asked Master-ji.

“It’s Alankar,” I said. “That’s who Bhagadasa was looking at when he called out ‘Kumara.’”

“Master-ji,” said Hamsa, “why did you pretend it was Arun Bhagadasa was talking to?”

“Later you can ask Devadatta. He’ll explain,” said Master-ji. “Right now listen carefully.”

“Yes, Master-ji,” we said.

“Forget the name ‘Kumara.’ Forget you heard it spoken. Forget who said it. Forget who was with you when you heard it. Never repeat it, even to each other or to Alankar. This is your duty. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Master-ji,” we said.

“Go now,” he said.

“This place is crazy,” Hamsa mumbled as we stumbled through the dark to our hut.

“Or maybe just Master-ji is,” I whispered.

Inside, we joined the others, rolled in blankets, settled for sleep.

“Mata thinks her brother is perfect,” I said to Dharm the next afternoon, as we went for water, “but I think Master-ji’s a crook.”

Dharm gasped.

“You mustn’t talk like that about our teacher,” he said.

“It’s the truth,” I said. “I’m sure he stole the treasure from the headman. How could a holy person do that? And now there’s something strange with Alankar. Master-ji pretends to be holy, but he’s not.”

“You’re looking for the bad. You should look for the good,” said Dharm. “There are things we don’t understand.”

Devadatta was waiting for us at the stream. Hamsa, too, crouched at the edge trailing a stick in the water.

“Sit beside Hamsa, Arun. I’ll tell you about Alankar. Sometimes the two of you are unkind to him.”

“The other way round, Devadatta,” said Hamsa. “He’s the unkind one. He tells tales, thinks he’s better than we are.”

“Listen to me,” said Devadatta. “Dharm, you listen too, so you can advise your younger brother. Alankar’s in danger. He’s here with Master-ji for his safety. There are people who’ll kill him if they find him. His name is Alankar. If he has another name, we’ve forgotten it. Ask him no questions, for there’s a lot he can’t talk about.”

“It’s his father he fears,” I said. “He told us.”

“Alankar’s father is misguided and Alankar is wise to fear him,” said Devadatta.

“What about his mother?” I asked.

“His mother’s dead. His mother’s brothers too. Now forget what I’ve told you. Just treat him well.”

“How can we forget when it’s already in our heads?” said Hamsa. “I have a riddle for you. Why did the student call the teacher foolish?”

“Tell us quickly, and go back to your chores,” said

Devadatta.

“Because he filled the pot with rice, then told the rice to leave,” said Hamsa.

“I should punish you for insolence,” said Devadatta.

“Did you get in trouble?” Alankar asked us later, a smirk on his face.

“We don’t know,” said Hamsa, grinning at me. “We forget.”

I still burned to know the secret under the *neem* tree.

“Wait till everyone’s asleep,” I murmured to Hamsa. “Help me dig up whatever’s there.”

Devadatta smothered the lamp. I dozed until the rustles around me settled into steady breathing, then shook Hamsa awake, pressing my hand over his mouth to keep him from crying out. We slid off the cots and crawled to the door, wincing at the creak as

we eased it open, careful to leave the string off the latch for our return. I felt in the blackness along the outside wall for the brooms we had left standing there, and crawled ahead of Hamsa past Master-ji's verandah to the *neem* tree.

Cringing at the thought of the biting things that might lurk in the shadow, I ran my hand over the earth.

"There's a space between two roots here somewhere," I whispered. "I checked. Where the leaves are piled. I think that's where they dug."

My fingers groped over the ridged base of the trunk, vaster in the blackness than it had seemed during the day.

"Try here," I finally said.

We scratched at the dirt, fraying our broom-handle digging sticks and scraping our fingers, but only brushing the surface. Then my broom slipped and

sank into soft earth.

“Ow!” I exclaimed, as the rough handle jerked out of my hand, grazing my arm.

We held our breath, afraid even to blink, but no Master-ji burst onto the verandah, no sound filled the night but the chirp of crickets.

We pushed aside the earth. Our fingers touched something hard. More digging, and our hands grasped a corner. We levered out the object, dirt and pebbles slithering through our fingers.

I ran my hands across it in the dark. A box wrapped round with cord. Bronze, it felt like, bigger than the box Mata had given me for the *raja*. A box for jewellery, like the one my parents were filling for my sister’s wedding.

“The Tiger Aunt’s jewels?” asked Hamsa.

“I’m sure of it,” I said.

“Open it,” said Hamsa.

“We can’t manage the knots in the dark,” I said.

“And if it’s the Tiger Aunt’s, we shouldn’t disturb it.”

I sat back on my heels.

“We’ll bury it again until we think what to do,” I said.

We patted the earth and leaves smooth, wiping our hands on the tree trunk before we crept back to the sleeping hut and our *charpoys*.

“What questions do you have, Arun?” Master-ji asked the next morning during our lessons under the mango tree.

My mind was on the bronze box and the jewels.

“Master-ji, I have no questions,” I said.

“Because your attention is elsewhere, Arun,” he said.

“Listen to the words once more: The birds in the sky, the wind in the air, the thoughts in our heads.

The gods know all their pathways. Now, Arun, do you have any questions?"

"If the thoughts in our heads are bad, Master-ji, what will the gods do?" I asked.

"I'll tell you," said Master-ji. "They'll bring you in time to see that bad and good are two sides of the same stone."

Like the two sides of Master-ji, I thought, thief and holy man.

"Dharm," I said as we went for water, "Hamsa and I dug up what Master-ji buried. The stolen jewels, most likely. Do you still think he's a good man."

Dharm stumbled to a stop, his eyes uncertain, his lips pressed together.

"He's our Master-ji," he said. "Obey him. Don't judge him."

He was downcast all the way to the stream and back.

In the middle of our recitation a few days later, Master-ji stood abruptly, holding up his hand for silence.

“Your lessons are finished,” he told us. “Go to the forest for firewood. Quickly.”

His eyes were on Alankar as we hurried after Devadatta toward the back gate.

Bhagadasa and the headman appeared at the front entrance, dusty, their faces shiny with sweat.

“Arun and Dharm, you stay. Bring water for our guests,” Master-ji said, raising his hand in greeting to the two men who approached.

Dharm’s sandals slapped beside mine as we ran to the house for drinking and washing water.

“They’ve come for the jewels,” I whispered to Dharm.

“Or for Alankar,” said Dharm.

“Here are the boys, Bhagadasa,” said Master-ji, as we offered water. “My nephews. The younger one is the boy you saw yesterday, is he not?”

Dharm and I stood still under their inspection.

“The boy you pointed out, perhaps,” said Bhagadasa, “but not the boy I mean. Kumara was walking beside him, scuttling out of view while I watched. Round face, round belly, eyes soft as a cow’s. Bring him to me, Master-ji. I must speak with him.”

Out of his sight, the headman wrung his hands.

“I told him, Master-ji, that he’s mistaken, but he insisted on coming here,” he said, staring at Master-ji with eyes full of pleading.

“I came for your sake, Master-ji,” said Bhagadasa. “Kumara’s father will be grateful for his son’s safe return. And the gratitude of the Makara City *raja* is a great boon.”

My father wants to kill me, Alankar had said.

“May the gods grant that Kumara is re-united with his father,” said Master-ji. “But, Bhagadasa-ji, you misunderstand the part I can play in this.”

“Master-ji, I know the boy is here. Have him brought,” said Bhagadasa.

“Bhagadasa-ji, I am only a man. You ask me to do what I cannot do.”

Dharm drew in his breath.

“Master-ji, I wish to say something,” he said.

Master-ji raised his eyebrows.

“I wish to say something to Bhagadasa, if you permit me,” Dharm said.

Bhagadasa waited, arms folded over his hollow stomach. The headman’s eyes were wide with curiosity.

“Bhagadasa,” Dharm said, “my master is courteous, but I’ll speak openly. A wrong idea has rooted in your head. Kumara is not here. We never heard the name until you spoke it yourself. There’s no *raja*’s son here, no boy who matches your description. I know them all. I study with them every day and sleep in the hut with them every night. The boy you seek is not here. You must leave this place and look for him elsewhere. You’re not welcome here.”

Bhagadasa rose to his feet, like a cobra rearing up to strike. His hand gripped his staff, his shoulders swelled. When Dharm fell silent, Bhagadasa slammed the staff against the floor. His mouth twisted to form words but produced only an angry sputtering.

“Send this student away,” he finally spat out. “He’s not worthy of you, Master-ji.”

He stepped off the verandah and strode across the yard toward the gate.

The headman hurried after him, shrugging his shoulders as he glanced back at Master-ji.

We stood on the verandah, Master-ji, Dharm and I, and watched the two men disappear down the lane. Master-ji's face was stern.

“Dharm, you turned the truth upside down, and worse, you mistreated a guest,” said Master-ji. “I should have foreseen it. You who shone like a sun have fallen with a thud.”

I thought Master-ji should be pleased that Dharm had kept Alankar safe, but he was sunk in sorrow.

Dharm's eyes were filled with the same sadness I saw in Master-ji's.

“The guest is god,” said Master-ji. “Living here, do you not know this, Dharm?”

“I know it,” said Dharm, standing before Master-ji with his hands folded, his head bowed. “Bhagadasa

was your guest and I was disrespectful. I accept my punishment.”

“My duty’s clear,” said Master-ji. “You must leave my house. Dharm, son of Hari, you’re no longer my student.”

I groaned in dismay.

Dharm’s face was calm. He touched the floor at Master-ji’s feet, then left the verandah.

“But he was trying to help, Master-ji,” I said.

My words hung in the air unanswered.

Chapter Eight

I ran after Dharm. In the hut, he was piling his clothes on a cloth, folding them into a bundle. He untied his belt, placing it in a neat coil on his *charpoy*, then laid his staff beside it.

“I can’t have these now,” he said. “I’m not a student any more. But the jar I’ll keep. Master-ji knows I’ll need water.”

“You’ll need food too,” I said. “It takes two days to get home.”

“I’m not going home, Arun,” he said. “Mata won’t want to see my face when she learns I’ve been sent

away by Master-ji.”

“Where will you go?” I asked.

“The forest, I guess,” he said. “There’s fruit and honey to eat.”

“Dharm, we’re from the city,” I said. “We don’t know about those things. But I guess we can figure them out.”

I began to unwind my belt.

“What are you doing?” asked Dharm. “You made a vow to Master-ji. You can’t walk away from him.”

I folded the belt, set it on my *charpoy*.

“Stay here and study. Give our parents one son to be proud of,” Dharm said, hoisting his bundle over his shoulder.

“I promised Papa to stay by you,” I said. “I’ll explain to Master-ji. He’ll understand. Anyway, who cares?”

He's a thief. Just let me speak with him. Then we'll leave together."

I backed away toward the door, my eyes fastened on his, willing him to wait. He shrugged, and sat down on the *charpoy*.

Master-ji was not on his verandah. I found Go-ma behind the house, scouring a cooking pot with a handful of sand.

"I'll take you to him," she said. "Don't disturb him for long. He's very disappointed in your brother."

Master-ji was sitting on a striped mat by the window lattice, his legs folded, his hands on his knees.

"Master-ji, I ask you to release me from my vow so I can go with my brother," I said.

"Your duty is here," said Master-ji.

"I have a duty to my brother. My father told me so."

“And if I withhold my permission?” asked Master-ji.

I swallowed. Confronting a holy man, even one who stole jewels and buried them in the night, was displeasing to the gods.

“Then I must disobey you,” I said.

The words were bold, but my voice trembled.

“He’ll be back with your parents, and fine without you, and you’ll have given this up for nothing,” said Master-ji. “It’s a two-day journey. That’s all.”

I hung my head.

“Arun, you’re not answering,” said Master-ji, “and I think I know why. Dharm’s not going home, is he?”

“No, Master-ji,” I said.

“Stay with him then,” said Master-ji. “He’s taking a difficult path. Ask Go-ma for food.”

In the kitchen, Go-ma threw a rolled blanket over my shoulder and gave me another for Dharm.

“Take this packet,” she said. “Food for a few days. Keep away from the village. Bhagadasa’s still there.”

She tied a cord around me to hold the blanket in place.

“Go-ma,” I said. “I know Master-ji stole the treasure. Why did he do it?”

Her fingers fumbled. The cord slipped to the floor.

“Never ask about that,” she said. “It’s dangerous. Master-ji has his reasons. Now go. We’ll let your parents know you’re in good health. Make sure to stay that way.”

I crossed the yard to the hut, carrying the bundle of food and Dharm’s blanket. The afternoon was hot and silent. Devadatta and the others were still gathering wood in the forest.

“I have permission and I have food,” I called as I went from the sunlight into the gloomy hut.

Dharm was not there.

I slumped to the floor, Dharm’s blanket clutched to my chest. Did he think so little of me, to leave without a word?

The door scraped open, and Dharm entered the room.

“I thought you’d gone,” I said, rubbing my wet eyes with my shawl.

“My bundle of clothes is still on the *charpoy*. Did you think I’d go without it?” he said. “I’ve put your things in there too.”

I grinned through my tears.

“I took a pouch of shells to the servant’s lean-to,” he said. “At least he’ll remember us kindly.”

We left by the back gate, careful to tie it shut, and set out on the path the wood gatherers and the cows took every day.

“Aren’t you angry at Master-ji?” I asked once we were in the forest, the tree trunks pressing close.

“No, and you shouldn’t be either,” said Dharm. “Master-ji did his duty. Respect him for that.”

“But you did your duty, and he didn’t respect you,” I said.

“Listen, Arun,” said Dharm, stopping in the path, turning to face me. “I broke a rule that must never be broken. I was discourteous to Bhagadasa when he was our guest. Master-ji can’t permit such a thing. He has to turn me out.”

“Why did you do it,” I asked, “if you knew Master-ji would send you away?”

“You know why I did it,” Dharm said. “Bhagadasa

was oppressing Master-ji. Someone had to stop him.”

“Master-ji would have stopped him. Then you’d still be a student with a nice safe *charpoy* to sleep on, instead of wandering in the forest,” I said.

“A good student protects his master from blame,” said Dharm. “A lie was needed to save Alankar. I took that lie on my shoulders. Now Alankar’s safe, and Master-ji’s image still shines. And Bhagadasa’s so insulted he’ll not return.”

He gripped me by the shoulders, pressed me in the direction of Master-ji’s house.

“And your image shines too, Arun,” he said. “Go back. I’ll be fine on my own.”

“I’m staying with you,” I said. “I promised Papa.”

He turned his head away. I knew he was pleased.

“Let’s find a place to rest,” he said.

Under the trees the light had grown dim, the air filled with the rustle of wings, the squawks of birds and monkeys.

Dharm knelt by a tree, brushing the sparse ground cover with his hand, patting the trunk.

“This is comfortable,” he said.

“What about tigers?” I said. “There’s no thorn fence to hide behind here.”

Dharm frowned for a moment, then kicked off his sandals.

“We’ll climb the tree,” he said. “The gods had it all planned. That’s why they stopped me here.”

I lifted my eyes to the arching branches and leaves.

“It’s too high,” I said.

I leaped at the trunk, gripping it with hands and knees, wriggling upward for a moment then

thudding down, blanket roll askew, face and hands and stomach scraped from the bark. The branches curved above, out of my reach, black in the fading light.

“Don’t worry. We’ll be fine on the ground,” said Dharm, his voice listless.

“We need a rope,” I said. “Find a spare *dhoti* in the pack. I’ll look for a stone.”

Mata had been generous in the clothing she gave us, especially to Dharm, who had a moustache and was almost grown. His *dhoti* cloths were long. Three times the height of a man.

I crawled over roots and vegetation until I found a fist-sized rock, scraping my finger as I pried it loose. I tied it in a corner of the long *dhoti* cloth Dharm had unpacked, then heaved it toward the nearest branch. Hampered by the *dhoti* billowing behind, it thudded to the earth.

“Tear off a corner of the cloth,” I said, “gather it round the stone, tie it to a strip of cloth, tie the other end to the *dhoti*, throw the rock over the branch. The rock will pull the strip, the strip will pull the *dhoti*, and the *dhoti* will end up slung over the branch.

“I’ll throw it,” said Dharm. “I’m stronger.”

His first throw shot high into the leaves, then thumped down near our feet. His second grazed the underside of the branch. The third soared up and over the branch, the strip following, the *dhoti* attached behind.

“We did it!” I shouted, waving my arms in triumph.

“Now what?” said Dharm.

“Tie the ends together so it won’t slip off,” I said.

“Use the *dhoti* like a rope and walk up the trunk. You try first.”

Dharm was a grey blur in the near darkness. I watched him climb hand over hand, his feet creeping along the tree trunk, light-footed, graceful.

“Your turn now,” he called down. “It’s fine up here.”

I left my sandals beside Dharm’s and walked up the trunk, clinging to the rope, gripping the rough bark with my feet, struggling sideways onto the branch. I lost my hold and slipped backwards, yelping in terror, but saved myself by tumbling full length across the branch.

“Arun, are you all right?” Dharm asked, crawling toward me.

I felt the sting where the bark had grazed my cheek, but said nothing, using all my strength to hug the bough.

“Arun, are you hurt?” asked Dharm, stretching toward me on hands and knees.

“I liked it better on the ground,” I said.

We each sat in a fork of the tree, tying ourselves to one another and the trunk with the spare *dhoti*, chewing dates, sipping water, shivering in our blankets. Close to our heads, an owl hooted. Far beneath, twigs snapped, a distant roar was answered by a nearer one.

We dozed until the forest awoke in a frenzy of chirps and whistles. I leaned out from the tree to throw down our blankets and bundle of clothing, my hand brushing an offshoot of the branch. Dharm gasped. A snake, thin as an arrow, as long as I was tall, slithered by my fingers, writhed through the leaves to the tip of the branch. My eyes locked on the coiling back, the flat head, the wide eyes gleaming black in the rising sun. Beautiful, and who knew how poisonous.

It paid no attention to me, but lifted itself up, tail section swirling around the branch, head and fore

section arching in graceful curves. “Oh,” I groaned, as in a sudden swoop it thrust itself off the branch, soaring down through the air to a thicket of thorn bushes.

“A flying snake. I’ve heard of them,” I said.

“It could have killed us,” said Dharm. “The gods protected us.”

“Come down. You’ve nothing to fear,” a voice called out.

I teetered on my perch. Dharm hooked his arm in mine to steady me.

A man stood below, gazing up at us, his mouth draped in a thick moustache, his hair curling on his neck. He raised a hand to us in greeting, held a wooden bow in the other. A knife was stuck in his red sash, a narrower red cloth tied across his forehead.

“That snake has fangs, but it has no poison. Come down. You’re quite safe,” he said.

We clung to the tree, studying his face.

He spread his arms wide, the bow dangling.

“Examine me. Are you satisfied?” he asked. “Do I pass the test? Believe me, unless you have bad intentions toward me, I have none toward you. Come down. There’s no point staying up there.”

He watched us, sucking in his cheeks.

Dharm started down, and I followed, using the *dhoti* for support. The man folded his hands and bowed.

“I’m Mohinder of the forest,” he said, “protector and brother of the Tiger Aunt. “

The Tiger Aunt. Wherever we went.

Chapter Nine

“Dharm and Arun, sons of Hari,” said Dharm, folding his hands in return, glancing at me to do the same.

“Are you a temple guard?” I asked Mohinder.

“Never a temple guard,” he said. “The Tiger Aunt dislikes temples. She roams where she wishes.”

My mouth dropped open. Dharm’s did too. This Mohinder, did he believe footless stones wandered in the jungle?

“Yes,” said Dharm, “the goddess is everywhere. At first I didn’t understand.”

“You still don’t understand,” said Mohinder. “You’re thinking of holy stones and shrines. I’m talking of the Aunt herself who speaks through my sister.”

I wished Dharm and I were back in the tree, re-starting the morning without Mohinder’s strange talk.

“Listen to my warning, Dharm and Arun,” he said. “You’re in danger.”

I glanced over my shoulder. Tree trunks, straggling plants glinting with gold in the morning light. Nothing harmful.

“Not from snakes, not from men with bows and knives, but from your ignorance,” he said, pulling in his cheeks. “I’ve been watching you. Bright boys, but you know nothing of the forest.”

“We’re not afraid,” said Dharm. “The gods will protect us as they see fit.”

Dharm was confident, but I felt sick to my stomach.

“The gods rely on my sister,” said Mohinder. “That’s why I’m here. To take you to safety.”

I glanced at Dharm.

“You were watching us?” I asked. “How did you know we were here?”

“Two pairs of sandals by the track. It wasn’t difficult,” he said.

“What would your Tiger Aunt want with us?” said Dharm. “Ours is in the forest by Sindhapur. We left her there decked in flowers.”

“She’ll tell you herself when you see her,” he said.

Dharm pressed his hands to his forehead, then looked up and shrugged.

“Show us the way, and we’ll follow.”

“He might be honest,” he muttered to me as we stooped to put on our sandals. “But be watchful.”

For two days, we followed Mohinder’s red sash and headband through thorn and trees and sudden clearings. Once a man greeted Mohinder with a wide grin, a digging stick in one hand, a plant, all wispy leaves and dangling roots, in the other. Once two girls, wearing the short unpleated skirts of forest women and baskets of kindling on their backs, stooped to touch Mohinder’s feet, then ran giggling into the trees.

The caw of crows gave way to the shrieking of gulls, the forest gloom to reeds glinting in the sun and damp squeezing between our toes. Mohinder removed his sandals and, tying them together, slung them over his shoulder, dulling the red of his sash with mud. Dharm and I carried ours in our hands and squelched after him, almost losing our footing when a brown-headed duck flashed out of the reeds in a whirl of feathers. Water was lapping at our

ankles by the time Mohinder fumbled for a rope in the reeds and drew out a slender wooden boat.

“Get in,” he said, steadying the sides with his hands.

We huddled on worn wooden slats while Mohinder crouched on the prow, poling the boat into open water.

“What river is this?” said Dharm. “How far is it across?”

“Not a river,” said Mohinder. “A lake. Watch.”

He held the pole across the prow. The boat rocked in the gentle waves, sweeping us in a circle.

“No current,” he said. “Lake of the Ducks.”

He laid the pole on the boat floor and took up the oars. The boat shot across the lake, the breeze lifting the hair from our sticky foreheads. Beyond clumps of bush rising from the water and thin-legged *titihari* birds stepping on the rocks, a blur on the

horizon swelled into a stony slope, a fringe of forest, a row of bulky, square-ended boats moored near a bank of tall reeds.

“The Tiger Aunt is sheltering with the fisher folk,” said Mohinder.

He nudged our boat alongside a houseboat and seized a thick rope ladder, waving us up. Dharm went first, pulling himself only part way before arms reached down and hauled him onto the deck. I followed, the boat’s railing smooth and solid under my palm. Mohinder swung up behind us, acknowledged the bows of the two men waiting there, then motioned us into a dim space hung with reed mats and spread with cushions.

“Eat, then I’ll take you to my sister,” he said, slipping behind a striped mat, greeting someone in the inner room.

The fragrance of baking barley, the rumble of the guards’ voices, drifted from the outer deck. A

woman brought *chapatti* and chunks of fried *bhakura* fish, her mouth almost toothless but wide in welcome. Two children, naked hips hung with gold chains, peeked around the curtain while we ate until a young woman darted in to hurry them away by the elbows.

Our wait lengthened as the deck rocked and creaked beneath us. Perhaps we were captives, abandoned to the heavy-armed guards.

Then Mohinder returned, pulled the mat aside for us to pass into the next room, shadowy from smoky swirls of incense. A woman sat cross-legged on a tiger skin, the gold and black stubs of the beast's legs spread out on either side. A tiny woman, face bright as the moon, hair rippling dark as the river at night, glinting silver where the light pierced the ceiling mat. Gracious, though her wrap was wrinkled, unpleated, undyed, her finger nails cracked and broken. Except for her well-tended hair, she seemed more like one of our servants in Sindhapur than a goddess.

“Sister, these are the boys,” Mohinder said.

“Sit,” said the woman, patting the floor at her knees. “The older one is Dharm, is that correct? And you’re Arun,” she said, looking at me.

Her voice was high and thin like a child’s. I saw lines at the corners of her mouth, a looseness of skin behind her jaw. She was older than I had thought, older than Mata, older than Go-ma.

“You’re wondering whether I’m really the Tiger Aunt,” she said, her smile dissolving, her eyes burning. “The Tiger Aunt takes many forms. Sometimes a stone, sometimes a thought, sometimes flesh like me.”

A smile warmed her face once more.

“And you’re wondering why I had you brought here,” she said.

Mohinder crossed his arms, pulled in his cheeks.

“You’ve offended your teacher and been sent away,” she said. “Thakur told my brother. And I have a task for you.”

“Who is Thakur?” I blurted out.

“Do you not remember him?” she asked. “Just yesterday he was with you. A turban like a great canopy on his head.”

“The headman?” said Dharm. “The village headman?”

“But how did he know?” I asked. “He was gone before Master-ji sent Dharm away.”

“Thakur grasped what Master-ji would do,” she said. “There’s much you don’t understand, Arun, and much I cannot say. But Thakur, your Master-ji and I, we are known to each other. Go with my brother now. We’ll speak tomorrow.”

Mohinder’s red sash swung as he held back the

striped mat for us to leave, then helped us off the open deck into the little row boat.

“I’ll take you to my houseboat,” Mohinder said.

“Today you can rest. You’ll need your wits tomorrow.”

Chapter Ten

Mohinder's houseboat was moored at the end of the row. Smaller than the Tiger Aunt's, with a tiny cooking space near the prow, a room behind the hanging mats, a tall thin servant boy who leaped to his feet and bowed as we climbed over the railing.

"Quilts for our guests, Murli," said Mohinder as he left us, "and a set of dice so they can amuse themselves."

Dice, I thought. Dice were for men, not boys.

I curled up on the floor, my nose buried in a quilt that smelled of sunlit lake. Dharm sat cross-legged,

his hands on his knees.

“Dharm,” I said, “Are we safe here? Maybe the gods are angry with us.”

“The gods aren’t angry, Arun. It’s people we need to worry about,” said Dharm.

He closed his eyes and lost himself in his prayers.

Murli brought a red-painted box full of *vibhitaka* seeds, and a tray to throw them on. I looked at them, hard, brown, flat-edged. I tipped the tray so they clattered down the makeshift slope.

Dharm opened his eyes.

“Arun, I’ll show you how to throw the dice properly,” he said. “Set the tray down.”

Murli hung oil lamps from the roof beam. Dharm threw a handful of seeds to the floor.

“How many?” he asked.

I counted under my breath.

“No,” said Dharm. “You mustn’t count. Look quickly and decide.”

“Forty,” I said, the first number that came into my head.

“Now let’s count,” said Dharm.

There were thirty-one.

“Try again,” said Dharm.

This time I guessed thirty, then counted twenty-eight. The next I was off by ten.

“Just answer. Don’t think about it,” said Dharm.

He threw again. I barely glanced and said twenty-seven.

“Whatever you did that time, keep doing it,” said Dharm. “You’re exactly right.”

Twice more my numbers were correct.

“You’re good at this,” said Dharm.

“I half close my eyes,” I said, “and the number slides into my head.”

“I’ll teach you the game,” said Dharm, “but don’t play with anyone else. You’re too good. People will think you’re cheating.”

We played until the shadows were thick beyond the lamps. I won most of the throws.

Murli brought us boiled milk and rice.

“Mohinder will return late. You should sleep now.”

“Is it only you to look after this boat?” I asked. “How do you know what to do? How old are you, anyway?”

“My grandmother serves the Tiger Aunt and I serve Mohinder,” said Murli. “Since I was eleven. Now I’m

twelve.”

“I’m thirteen,” I said, “but I’m not as tall as you, and I don’t know how to cook rice.”

“It’s for Murli to cook rice,” said Dharm, “and for you to buy and sell it. You’re a merchant’s son. But what place there is for me, who knows? A student spurned by his master.”

Warm and safe under my quilt, I stretched my feet to the whirl of crickets. I woke when Mohinder’s little boat nudged the houseboat, but slept again before I could roll over.

In the morning, the beach was busy with men and women splitting fish and spreading it to dry on the rocks near the reeds. Gulls screamed, flying against the blue sky. Mohinder’s rowboat swept us over ripples tipped with silver to the Tiger Aunt’s houseboat.

“So will you carry out a task for me?” she asked

when we entered her room. Voice thin as the early sun, black hair pouring down her back, folded knees pressing the golden tiger skin.

“Yes Tiger Aunt,” I said.

“If it’s not against Master-ji’s wishes,” Dharm said. “We serve him first.”

“But not anymore,” I said, surprised. “He’s sent us away.”

“Arun,” said the Tiger Aunt. “Your older brother’s not like the rest of us. His every fibre sings ‘duty, duty, duty.’”

“We pledged ourselves to Master-ji. Nothing changes that,” said Dharm.

“Don’t worry,” said the Tiger Aunt. “Master-ji will be pleased when he learns of it.”

Dharm and I sat on the floor, Mohinder on a cushion at his sister’s elbow.

“There’s a boy who studies with Master-ji,” said the Tiger Aunt. “You call him Alankar.”

Alankar, I thought. I don’t even like him, but his name, his false name, follows us everywhere. For Alankar’s sake Dharm was banished from Master-ji’s house.

“Alankar is under Master-ji’s protection,” said Dharm.

“And mine too,” said the Tiger Aunt. “It’s his own father that Alankar has to fear, and the priest Bhagadasa. And you boys are going to take a message to Bhagadasa.”

Dharm’s head jerked up, but he swallowed his protest.

“Tiger Aunt,” I said, speaking for him, “Bhagadasa is angry with Dharm. He won’t let Dharm near him.”

“Arun, think before you question me. My smile is

sweet but my anger is terrible,” she said.

I lowered my eyes.

“I repeat. You’ll take a message to Bhagadasa,” said the Tiger Aunt. “You’ll go to Thakur’s village and wait for him there. He thinks Thakur’s his devoted servant, and Thakur encourages that belief. Sooner or later the priest will visit there and you can talk with him. He won’t hurt you in front of the headman.”

“What message do I give him?” Dharm asked.

“You’ll tell him how to find Alankar.”

“Alankar? Oh no!” I gasped.

“Be quiet, Arun,” said Dharm. “The Tiger Aunt will keep Alankar safe.”

“Go now,” the Tiger Aunt said. “My brother will explain. And put your mind at rest about your mother. I’ve sent word to her that both of you are

safe.”

“Our parents must be angry with us,” said Dharm.

“Mothers worry. It’s in their nature,” the Tiger Aunt said. “She’ll be glad of my message.”

We left her perched on the tiger skin, small, crumpled, smiling.

Chapter Eleven

“What I tell you must stay within these hanging mats,” said Mohinder when we were once again seated on his houseboat.

I hid my eagerness, folding my legs, clasping my hands in my lap.

“You know that Bhagadasa is evil,” he said. “An evil priest to an evil *raja*.”

“He wants to kill Alankar,” I said.

“Alankar,” said Mohinder, “and the Tiger Aunt as well if he could escape the blame.”

“But he’s a priest of the Tiger Aunt,” said Dharm.
“He wears the tiger amulet.”

“He does,” said Mohinder. “But listen to my tale.”

He waited, chewing the inside of his cheek behind his moustache, watching us try to hide our impatience.

“Here’s what you need to know,” he said. “The city you come from, Sindhapur, is a great city indeed, but it’s not the only city looking out over the mighty Sindhu. Further up the river is Makara city, its walls as high as Sindhapur’s, its water tanks thick with lotuses, its pillars painted red and yellow and black.

“At least they were once,” he said. “The colours in Makara city have faded with the years, but don’t say so in the hearing of the *raja* and his spies, for the *raja* of Makara city is quick to anger and quick to take revenge.”

Mohinder paused, folded his arms across his chest.

“That *raja* is Alankar’s father, isn’t he?” I said.

“Correct,” said Mohinder. “Now, deep in the forest outside Makara city stands a holy stone. I’ve seen the very one. You’ve seen others like it. Ancient and pitted, but if you gaze with reverence, the Tiger Aunt looks back at you. And from the face of my sister, also, who tends her. Or did until she was forced away. Fisher folk say she guards them from tigers and they show their gratitude with offerings of dates and lotus flowers. Foolish people believe that gold and jewels are hidden under her stony feet.”

I thought of the bronze box Hamsa and I had reburied under the *neem* tree.

“The priest Bhagadasa heard these stories of treasure,” said Mohinder, “and took the *raja* of Makara city to bow to my sister and gaze at the holy stone and dream of what lay buried beneath. The Makara *raja* returned to his city, but thoughts of the tiger stone and treasure burned in his heart. He

called his people to him, his soldiers in leather aprons and thick sandals, his courtiers in fluttering silks, his craftsmen with tools bundled on their heads, and led them through the forest back to the holy stone.

“‘This stone is not well cared for!’ he exclaimed. ‘What a shabby dwelling place for the Tiger Aunt! Her head scorched by the sun, her shoulders streaked with bird droppings, her feet littered with dead leaves.’

“‘He ordered bricklayers to build a wall, plasterers to smooth it, painters to brighten it with trceries of black and red, thatchers to crown it with a roof.

“‘Now this place is fit for the holy stone,’ said the *raja*. ‘Next we’ll make a dwelling fit for her priest. Drive away that grubby woman who gave us nothing but water when we came to the shrine, tear down her shack, throw her bow-wielding brother in chains, and build a house worthy of the true priest

Bhagadasa. A house with a verandah where I can take my ease and eat honeyed fruit when I honour him with a visit.'

"The soldiers crashed their clubs against the door posts, pounding my sister's grass hut into a pile of straw and splintered branches."

"Where was the Tiger Aunt?" I asked. "Your sister, I mean."

"Arun," said Mohinder, "the *raja* and Bhagadasa knew the tale of the treasure beneath the goddess stone, but they had no understanding of the Tiger Aunt, who lives in the stone and lives in my sister too. My sister understood everything. She saw inside Bhagadasa and the *raja*. She saw the greed in their hearts before they felt it themselves, knew what yearnings were behind their new-discovered love of the holy stone.

"So the first time they came she bathed them in the smiles she bestows on everyone, and filled their

cupped hands with water from the water gourd, but as soon as they left for the city, she and I dug up the sacred treasure box and took our leave of the holy stone.

“Then hidden behind the trees a few days later, we watched Bhagadasa and the *raja* return with all their retinue and smash the hut to the ground - though that loss was small since we had sturdier quarters with our friends. And we watched two soldiers dig at the foot of the stone, the *raja* and Bhagadasa peering over their shoulders, the trench deepening but only dirt and pebbles falling from the shovel. The *raja* shook his fist, the soldiers cringed, Bhagadasa slammed his staff into the ground, and finally the soldiers wrapped their arms around the stone and lifted it, their eyes round with fear, so that Bhagadasa could peer beneath. But of course, they found nothing, for we had sent the Tiger Aunt’s treasure far away to Thakur’s village.

“So Bhagadasa’s not a true servant of my sister and

the holy stone even though he wears the tiger amulet.”

“But what is the treasure, Mohinder-ji?” I asked.
“You said the Tiger Aunt has none.”

“Something passed on from long ago,” said Mohinder. “Only my sister knows. And Thakur will protect it well. He’s not always to be trusted, but in matters of the Tiger Aunt we rely on him. His village loves and fears her.”

Dharm lifted his eyes to Mohinder’s.

“You still haven’t told us about our task, Mohinder-ji,” he said. “Your talk is all of treasure, but the Tiger Aunt said the task’s about Alankar.”

“It is,” said Mohinder. “It’s connected.”

The boat rocked and shouts came from the outside deck.

“Mohinder-ji! Mohinder-ji! The Makara raja’s men!

Bhagadasa has come!”

A fisherman pushed in past the curtain, Murli hovering behind.

“Hurry! The *raja*’s men. Coming round the lake,” he said. “The Tiger Aunt’s already left. I’m to bring you and the boys to the island.”

Dharm and I lunged toward the door, but Mohinder thrust us back.

“Too late,” he said, easing open the curtain, peering toward the shore. “Stay here. Murli, fix Arun’s hair and dress him in a skirt. Dharm, strip to your loincloth and sweep the deck. Bhagadasa mustn’t recognize you. It’s not the time.”

He swung himself over the side of the boat.

Dressed like a girl, Mohinder had said. I felt like a fish in the net, waiting to be gutted and hung on a rock to dry. I hoped Alankar and Hamsa never found out.

Chapter Twelve

My scalp tingled as Murli tugged at my topknot, yanked my hair into a rough braid down my back. He wrapped my bark-stained *dhoti* around me like a skirt, then pressed me down by the hanging mat, thrusting a tray of dried peas onto my lap.

“Sort them,” he said, rolling one under his fingers to show me how. “If you’re busy, they won’t notice you.” He draped my shoulders with a cloth he pulled from the basket in the corner.

Taking a knife from the rack slung above the hearth, he turned to Dharm.

“Forgive me,” he said, “but it’s best if I remove your top knot.”

Dharm shrugged.

“Do it,” he said. “I’m just a boy now, anyway, not a student.”

Murli sawed off great hanks of Dharm’s hair, tying them in a scrubbing cloth and throwing the bundle into the lake, weighted with a stone from the hearth. Dharm was transformed into a servant boy, jagged hair, feet blackened with lamp grease, a twig broom to scrape across the deck.

“Forgive me,” said Murli, “but when the *raja*’s men come, I must be the upper servant. Like this,” he said, his voice deepening. “Move that cushion, lazy boy! Don’t think you can hide the dirt underneath.”

Dharm gasped, his eyes shocked, then remembered his role and lowered his head.

“Think like a servant,” Murli said.

The boat rocked and Mohinder’s voice called from the prow.

“He wants us all on the beach, Murli,” he said, stooping past the curtain. “They’re searching the boats. Smother the fire and go.”

He pressed us through the doorway, over the railing, and into the rowboat. A few thrusts of the steering pole, and the boat bumped against the shore.

Dharm stepped forward.

“Let me go first,” whispered Murli. “You’re a servant of a servant, not a merchant’s son. Just for a short while.”

Two guards watched us, clubs over their shoulders. Murli nudged Dharm toward the row of men hovering by the drying fish, and settled me on a rock where women and children were clustered. He lifted

a child from beside her grandmother and bundled her into my lap.

More guards swung down from the Tiger Aunt's boat and rowed onto the beach. They crunched over the gravel to Bhagadasa and Mohinder.

"The woman's not there, Bhagadasa-ji," said the oldest, striding ahead of the others. "But there's no doubt she has been. Garlands on the floor, cushions piled up."

"Where's your sister, hunter?" Bhagadasa asked Mohinder.

"As I've told you," said Mohinder, "she's the Tiger Aunt. She goes where she pleases."

"She's a thief who's taken treasure that's not hers to take," said Bhagadasa, the tiger amulet prominent on his upper arm.

He glared at Mohinder, thrusting out his chin, not

noticing that his guards behind folded their hands and bowed at the Tiger Aunt's name.

"If your sister's not here we'll find the box ourselves," Bhagadasa said. "Get on with the search," he told the guards.

"When you are finished," said Mohinder, "allow me to offer you food and drink on behalf of the Tiger Aunt. Once my servants are permitted to return."

He gestured toward us.

My heart thumped so hard I thought my eardrums would break. I bent my head over the child, pulling at her toes, making her giggle.

Bhagadasa barely glanced at us. Mohinder was clever. Hiding us by drawing attention to us.

"You offer hospitality when it's the box I seek," said Bhagadasa.

We waited in the sun while the *raja's* men

clambered over the houseboats rooting out boxes, presenting them to Bhagadasa. Two carved wooden boxes, three stone, one inlaid with coloured shell, six or seven straw, a bronze one without a lid. Murli gasped when the red *vibhitaka* box from Mohinder's boat slipped and knocked against the railing.

"It could break," Murli whispered. "Mohinder's dice will be lost in the lake."

Bhagadasa emptied the boxes one by one, ran his fingers round the edges, shook them, sorted through pots of ointment, earrings, bangles, cowrie shells, a knife with an engraved handle, then replaced the contents and set the boxes in a row.

"Nothing," he said, turning to the leader of the guards. "Make the announcement."

"People of the boats," the guard called out. "Hear these words of Bhagadasa, priest of the *raja* of Makara city and of the Tiger Aunt."

A ripple of disapproval ran through the crowd.

“Take your boxes and return to your fishing,” he said. “Bhagadasa is going now to Thakur’s village, but his search for the holy treasure isn’t ended. A reward will be given to any person who brings the box to him there. And if that person brings word as well of where to find Kumara, son of the *raja* of Makara city, the reward will be greater.”

A buzz of surprise rose from the group as the guards tramped off into the trees.

“The *raja*’s son Kumara? How should we know? How does he look?” they muttered.

Murli retrieved the clay box, ran his fingers over the *vibhitaka* seeds inside.

“They’re all here,” he said.

In Mohinder’s boat, jars and baskets were tipped, ash and charred firewood spilled onto the deck.

“Like a sudden storm, they’re gone,” said Mohinder. “Well done, boys. A dutiful girl, a humble servant. For a moment, I almost forgot who you really were.”

I ripped off the skirt, tugged at my hair.

“Will they come back?” I asked. “I’d rather be a servant like Dharm.”

“If they do, they’ll not find the Tiger Aunt,” said Mohinder. “She’ll be safe somewhere else. And they won’t find you, because you’ll be gone to Thakur’s. Is it not so?”

“I still don’t understand,” I said. “We’re going to Thakur’s village to talk to Bhagadasa? We could have talked to him here.”

“Remember, Arun, it’s Bhagadasa and the *raja* of Makara city we’re dealing with,” said Mohinder. “With them, the open road isn’t the way. Secret tunnels, tangled pathways, hidden thoughts. That’s how we approach them.”

Dharm wiped the dirt smears from his body and sat on the floor. His face beneath the greasy hair was thin and drawn.

“This is how we’ll do it,” said Mohinder. “You go to Thakur’s village. I’ll take you, but they’re not to know that, mustn’t suspect you’ve been on the Tiger Aunt’s boat and eaten her food. If Bhagadasa’s not already staying with his good friend, he soon will be. In Thakur’s house, you’ll not be the boys you usually are. You’ll be two sullen boys, burning for revenge against the master who sent you away. If you do this right, you might even win the reward Bhagadasa promised. A few shells or coloured stones for your pouch.”

“Do you mean we should tell them where Alankar is?” I asked. “We can’t do that.”

“You’ll name a place,” said Mohinder, “and Bhagadasa will scuttle off to find him. But Alankar won’t be there.”

I swallowed, feeling stupid for not understanding.

“But Bhagadasa will know we’re lying,” I said.

“He won’t if you change your memories,” said Mohinder. “I’ll fill your head with new pictures. He’ll believe your story, for you’ll almost believe it yourselves.”

Dharm lifted his head.

“Go back to the afternoon you left Master-ji,” said Mohinder. “Feel yourself in the forest, the roots on the path, the rustle of the leaves. Remember how hard you toiled to climb the tree? How rough the bark felt against your skin? How dull your head felt when you woke in the morning? How amazed you were to see a snake fly? Do you remember all that?” he asked.

“Yes, Mohinder,” I said. “And you were standing there, under the tree. You told us the snake was harmless.”

“Now we’ve reached the place,” said Mohinder, “where the path forks. Pull back. Take the other path.”

“I don’t understand,” said Dharm, his eyes brightening with interest.

“As I said, cast away your own memory and remember what I tell you instead. I’m not the man looking up at you from the ground. Another man stands there, another man whose hair’s not black as night, who has no bow, no belts of red on his hips and across his forehead. A man not at all like Mohinder, but with brown hair burnished red in the sun like the skin of a chestnut.”

“Vinod?” I asked. “Our prince? The prince of Sindhapur? His hair shines red in the sun.”

“There are no names in your memory, Arun,” said Mohinder. “Just pictures. A man, a young man, with reddish hair.”

Dharm's eyes widened.

"This young man calls you down from the tree," said Mohinder, "sits on the grass of the clearing with you, offers you food and drink. Almonds, we'll say. Almonds from the north, from his mother's people, he tells you."

Dharm sucked in his breath.

"You're making up stories about our prince," he said. "Why are you doing this? It's the *raja* of Makara city who's your enemy, not the *raja* of Sindhapur."

"No names," said Mohinder. "Only pictures. I'm giving you the pictures you must make Bhagadasa see."

Dharm's face was stormy.

"After you eat almonds and drink sweet water, the young man tells you it wasn't by accident he found you. He came to you on purpose, he says. Soon the

raja of Makara city and a great train of followers, he tells you, will journey to Sindhapur, where a great gathering of *raj*as will honour the greatest *raja*, the *raja* of Sindhapur.”

“Yes, Mohinder,” I said, “that’s true. Our *raja*’s great. I’ve spoken to him. He’s courteous though his chamberlain isn’t. But I don’t like his son Vinod, even if he is the prince and will be *raja* one day. Vinod would never give us almonds and sweet water. If he saw Dharm he’d throw him in chains. He said so.”

Dharm shook his head.

“That’s our business, Arun,” said Dharm. “Don’t waste Mohinder’s time.”

“First of all,” said Mohinder, “I never said this red-haired man was the Sindhapuri prince. That’s your idea. Secondly, your words interest me, Arun. Throw Dharm in chains? What’s he done?”

“In the forest by Sindhapur,” I said, “he defended the Tiger Aunt’s sacred space. Do you know that Vinod pursued a girl in the sanctuary of the holy stone? Right before our eyes. Her name was Amba.”

“The more this unfolds, the more interesting it becomes,” said Mohinder. “Amba of the flashing eyes?”

“Yes, flashing like sun on the river,” said Dharm. “And her hair sparkled like stars in the night.”

Mohinder grinned, clapped Dharm on the back.

“So, Dharm, you’re human like the rest of us,” he said. “It’s not only hymns and holy chants you pay attention to after all.”

“Mohinder, you know Amba?” I asked. “How do you know about her eyes?”

“The whole forest knows of her flashing eyes,” said Mohinder.

“Dharm sent her away from the holy wood,” I said. “The girl and Vinod. And the prince was very angry.”

“Forget all of that,” said Mohinder. “You have a different duty now. Vinod misbehaved, but that’s a small thing compared to what Bhagadasa and the Makara *raja* have done. They must answer for it, and you will help.”

Chapter Thirteen

“There’s a clearing not far from Thakur’s village,” said Mohinder, “near the road between Makara city and Sindhapur. And shading that clearing is a *sheesham* tree, a tall *sheesham* tree with spreading branches. Just to speak of it fills my nostrils with the fragrance of its blossoms, my ears with the rustle of its leaves. And by that *sheesham* tree the caravan of the Makara city *raja* will pass. Dharm and Arun, when you find Bhagadasa in Thakur’s village, you must give him a message about that *sheesham* tree. A message you say came from a red-haired stranger. The red-haired stranger who met you the morning after Master-ji banished you from his home. “

Dharm opened his mouth.

“Hear what I say before you speak,” said Mohinder. “I’m creating a memory for you. Infuriated by your treatment at the hands of Master-ji, and burning to cause him anguish, you agree to carry the stranger’s message. Or so you’ll say.

“‘Great Bhagadasa,’ you’ll say. ‘we bear a message from one who has your interests at heart. A message concerning the two things you seek - the treasure of the Tiger Aunt, the missing son of the *raja* of Makara city. On your journey from Makara city to Sindhapur, halt at the *sheesham* tree that overhangs the clearing by the track. There a red-haired stranger will be waiting, a stranger who has news of the Tiger Aunt’s treasure and the missing prince Kumara. Fill the stranger’s hand with silver and he will tell you what you want to know.’

“Those are the words you must say to Bhagadasa in Thakur’s village,” said Mohinder.

“But Alankar won’t be there, will he?” I said. “By the *sheesham* tree?”

“No Alankar, no red-haired prince seeking dealings with Makara behind his father’s back, no treasure of the Tiger Aunt,” said Mohinder. “But Bhagadasa’s not to know that. Confuse him. That’s how we’ll defeat him.”

Dharm sighed.

“I told a lie for Master-ji, and now I lie and trick with every breath. Nothing’s the way it should be.”

“This is the time for courage,” said Mohinder. “I’ll go now to check that all’s well with the Tiger Aunt. When I return in a day or so I’ll lead you to Thakur’s village, and you’ll play your part in Bhagadasa’s downfall.”

The boat rocked as he climbed over the side.

“Where exactly is the Tiger Aunt?” I asked Murli

when he came with food and fire for the lamps.

“Someplace hidden,” he said. “Mohinder knows. There are lots of islands in the lake of the ducks.”

“Why do they want Bhagadasa and the Makara *raja* at the *sheesham* tree? Just to steal their silver?” I said to Dharm as we chewed on chunks of fish cooked in oil and turmeric. “And why are they making up this story? The red-headed stranger? Anyone can see they’re talking about Vinod.”

“It’s what I told you,” said Dharm. “Nothing’s the way it should be. Mohinder and the Tiger Aunt lie like everyone else. But for now, we’re eating their *chapatti* so we should do what they say.”

We played at dice in the lamplight, throwing the *vibhitaka* seeds on the tray and guessing their numbers, until I curled up on the quilts and cushions Murli spread for me, lulled by the lapping of waves. Dharm recited his prayers in an undertone. I fell asleep gazing at his lifted chin and folded hands

outlined against the moonlight that seeped through the matting.

In the grayness before dawn, Murli pulled me awake.

“The guards are back,” he said, his voice low and urgent. “Your disguise. Hurry.”

Once more my hair was braided down my back and my hips wound in a skirt.

“They’re searching the Tiger Aunt’s boat again. They’ll soon be here,” Murli said.

He thrust a handful of twigs into Dharm’s hand.

“Scour the pots, Dharm-ji,” he said. “There’s sand by the hearth, in a basin.”

Dharm slipped past the hanging mats to the bow.

“Arun, when they come, busy yourself shaking out the sleeping mats, folding them in the corner,” he said, then joined Dharm by the hearth, kneading

barley dough and explaining how to clean greasy pots.

The rumble of voices, the thump of feet on decks came closer. A voice called from below the railing.

“Mohinder, we’re searching again on Bhagadasa’s order.”

Murli rushed to the edge, rubbing dough from his hands.

“I am Murli. I regret that my master’s not here, but in his absence I invite you aboard.”

The guards from the day before heaved themselves one by one onto the deck.

“The sister’s hidden, and now the brother too,” the leader said. “One the same as the other. Where did you say he is?”

“He left with the fishing boats,” said Murli.

“And will dart back like a water snake, no doubt, when he thinks we’re gone. Check for the box in case, but they’ve probably taken it with them. Move aside, pot boy, so my men can search.”

Hidden behind the mats, I strained to hear.

“I said move, pot boy,” the guard repeated. “Don’t sit there with your mouth gaping.”

Dharm forgets he’s supposed to be a servant, I thought. He has no idea the guard’s speaking to him.

“Murli, what’s wrong with him?” the guard asked. “Is he muddle-headed? Poor boy. Make him move. Tell him we won’t hurt him.”

Dharm won’t like that, I thought.

“Move,” I heard Murli say. “Let the soldiers do their work.”

I waited for Dharm to protest, but all I heard was the banging of cooking utensils as the men searched.

“Nothing out here. Let’s see what’s inside,” said one of them as they shoved past the curtain into the inner room.

I sank back against a wooden upright, clutching a half-folded quilt, as they shook the matting with massive arms and poked through bedding and clothes baskets with their clubs.

“No need to fear for your virtue, daughter,” said the leader, his gruff voice reassuring. “We’re soldiers, not bandits like the ones you serve.”

I felt giddy at the success of my disguise.

He pushed through the curtain back to the outside deck.

“Check over the side,” he said. “They might have hung it underwater.”

“We should tie the boys to the rail first, so they can’t run off with it,” said the second guard, following the

older man beyond the curtain.

“If you wish,” said the leader.

The third guard stayed, moving across the room, towering over me.

“What are you hiding?” he said, running his tongue over his lips, watching my face as he snatched away the quilt.

“No box, I see,” he said. “Just a girl, left on a boat by her master with a boy and a half-wit to look out for her.”

I shrank back, my heart thumping in terror. His hands were thick, crushing the quilt with stubby fingers.

“Perhaps I should search your clothing. Perhaps you’ve hidden the jewels from the shrine in your skirt.”

For a moment I wished I really was a girl, shrinking

from the thought of his fury when he realised I was a boy.

“Help me!” I shrieked. “Help me!” I strained to make my voice carry, but the sound faded into the air.

I sucked in my breath to call again, but he clamped my head in his hands, wrapped his fingers over my mouth.

I pushed at his chest, kicked his shin. He slammed my face to the floor, twisting my arms behind me.

“Such a fuss you’re making,” he murmured. “Proof you’re hiding something.”

I felt him lean down, his moustache brush my cheek.

“Listen to me,” he snarled into my ear. “I’ll let you go, but only if you keep quiet about this little game we just played. One word, and I’ll take you and the idiot and that pompous servant boy to Makara city in

chains. If I get you there, the game will be different. You won't like it. Understand?"

He yanked my head back by the hair at my neck.

"Yes," I said through the grit in my mouth.

He pulled himself up and, straightening his vest, strode past the curtain, cracking his club against the frame as he went.

"Nothing there," I heard him say to the captain.

"We've done our duty, Garak," said the older guard. "We're needed elsewhere."

The boat rocked as they thumped over the side. I slouched by the wall, my head against the post.

"What's wrong?" asked Dharm.

I opened my eyes. Dharm and Murli stood over me, rubbing their wrists. Thirteen years old, soon to be a man. What would they think if they knew I had

cowered on the floor, cried out in terror?

“Let’s leave before they come back,” I said.

“They won’t be back. They’re reporting to Bhagadasa, then traveling to Makara city. I heard them talking,” said Murli.

“We’ll leave as soon as Mohinder comes,” said Dharm. “I don’t want to meet them again either. I’m not as clever as Murli at pretending I’m simple-minded. Are you all right? I heard you scream, I think.”

“He tried to steal the quilt,” I said.

Dharm narrowed his eyes but said no more.

Chapter Fourteen

It took two days to reach the clearing shaded by the old *sheesham* tree.

“That’s the Sindhu over there,” Mohinder said.

Through the trees I saw glints of silver, heard the faint squeals of water birds. The river. Several days’ further walk along it would take us to Sindhapur and home, where there were no worries about stolen treasure and Bhagadasa. Tears of longing burned my eyes.

But we had to honour our promise to the Tiger Aunt.

“Look around you,” said Mohinder. “This is the clearing you’ll describe to Bhagadasa. The *sheesham*

tree you heard about from a red-headed stranger. Not from me, remember. The *sheesham* tree where I'll be waiting for the silver you'll tell Bhagadasa to bring."

"How will you know when to wait?" I asked.

"I'll know," said Mohinder. "You'll be waiting with me, because as soon as you've spoken to Bhagadasa, come back here to the *sheesham* tree. I'll find you."

Dharm passed his hands over his jagged hair and retied his *dhoti*.

"Smooth your clothes," he told me. "Thakur is Master-ji's friend. We should look our best for Master-ji's sake. "

Mohinder handed Dharm a cloth-wrapped parcel.

"Dates for the goddess stone by the village," he said. "A short walk along the river, then north on the track, and you'll reach Thakur. Leave now, and keep

the red-headed stranger in your head. Don't think of me till you've given Bhagadasa the message."

We left him under the *sheesham* tree, the red band across his forehead and the bow in his hand the same as the first morning we saw him.

"Is Thakur our friend or our enemy?" I asked Dharm when we were deep into the trees.

"Friend, I think," he said. "But I don't know. It's all mixed up."

We pushed through the trees to the river track, squinting against the rays of the afternoon sun. Near the village we passed the track that branched north through the forest to Master-ji's verandah, the track we had followed with Papa on the way to our new life as students.

We arrived at the stone outside the village. I bowed while Dharm added dates to the fruit and leaves already arranged there. We stood by the path,

hands folded, waiting for someone to approach. Geese flapped and honked at us from beside the pond, but the villagers ignored us, glancing up then returning to their tasks. The headman, his white turban wide as ever, sat with two companions under the *pipal* tree. At last, he tipped his head at the young boys squatting near him, who scrambled to their feet and walked toward us.

“My grandfather says to come,” said one, his bones delicate but his shoulders knotted with muscle.

We followed them to the *pipal* tree.

“You’re safe, and that’s good,” Thakur said, his hands dangling over his knees. “I’ll inform Master-ji and provide you with whatever you need, but then you must leave. I can’t keep you here without offending Master-ji, who has cast you off.”

“Thakur-ji, we don’t want to burden you, but we must wait here till Bhagadasa comes,” said Dharm.

“Bhagadasa?” said Thakur. “You wish to see Bhagadasa? With my own eyes I saw you offend him. Better to stay away from him.”

“We have a message for him,” said Dharm. “He’ll be glad to receive it, I think.”

“What message?” said Thakur. “I’ll deliver it. Then you won’t have to face him.”

“Forgive us, Thakur-ji,” Dharm said. “Your offer is kind, but we were told to speak directly to Bhagadasa. If he blasts us with his anger, so be it. We still must speak to him.”

Thakur looked at the two elders crouched beside him under the tree, stretched his arms wide.

“Look at these children,” he said, “still thinking like dutiful students though they’re stripped of staff and belt. Listen, boys, the sky won’t drop and crush us all just because you hide from Bhagadasa and ask Thakur the headman to pass on your message.”

Thakur's friends grinned and tipped their heads.

"But I won't interfere with what you see as your duty," he said. "Bhagadasa's been here but went off today. Stay until he returns. For your father's sake, I welcome you. Master-ji will respect that."

That night we ate and slept in Thakur's house by the *pipal* tree, four small rooms, a verandah and a packed-earth yard with an outdoor hearth. Three rooms opened onto the verandah, one for Thakur and his two grandsons, who slept on a *charpoy* with heavy carved legs and width enough for twice the number, one for Thakur's son and daughter-in-law, and a third left empty, ready for Bhagadasa's return. The fourth room opened to the yard for the family cows. Dharm and I were given a *charpoy* on the verandah.

I was wakened in the night by the moon beaming round and bright into my eyes. I rose on my elbow for a moment to gaze at the *pipal* tree, the village

roofs, silver and grey and silent in the moonlight. Such peace in the midst of danger. I slept again, pulling the quilt over my eyes to block the light.

When Thakur shook me awake, pulling the cover from my face, the street was alive with children and cattle and an angry donkey. Dharm sat close beside me, slurping milk.

“Have you become lazy, now that there’s no Master-ji watching over you?” said Thakur. “No matter, but time to get up. Where can I sit if you’re sprawled on the *charpoy*?”

By the time I returned from scrubbing myself at the pond, a visitor had arrived. Thakur’s daughter-in-law brought me milk and *chapatti* while I sat beside Dharm, listening to Thakur and the elderly stranger talk.

“Thakur-ji, this is the second time he’s done it,” said the man, moisture spraying from his mouth. “You’re the headman. You can put a stop to it.”

“But Riku-ji, how do you know it’s your milk he’s drinking?” asked Thakur, brushing saliva from his arm.

“Sorry about that,” said Riku. “How do I know? Because I found my cow standing in his cattle shed, that’s how. Twice.”

“Are you sure it’s your animal?” asked Thakur. He tucked his arms inside his shawl, leaned back to escape the spray.

“Am I sure? Of course I’m sure,” said Riku. “Who are the children who sleep in your bed? Your grandsons, you say? Are you sure? Of course you are. Just as I’m sure it was my cow, my darling Leeti, in Bala’s shed.”

“Was?” said Thakur. “Where’s the cow now?”

“I’ve brought her away, but the milk’s a different matter,” Riku said. “Bala’s daughter drank it already. I claim compensation from Bala for the milk. He’s a

young man with a strong back and in time will have sons to help him. Why is he thieving milk from an old man?"

"Your case seems sound," said Thakur. "But it's my duty to hear Bala, and then I'll answer you."

"Bala's long gone to the fields," said Riku.

"I'll see him at the *pipal* tree," Thakur said.

Riku stepped off the verandah and wandered off down the track.

By late afternoon, a cluster of people had gathered before the spreading branches of the tree. Bearded elders, shawls over their shoulders, sat on the brick platform at the base of the trunk, Thakur in the middle, two men on either side. Bala and Riku sat facing them. Bala was young, not many years older than Dharm. Dharm and I joined the crowd beside an old woman bent almost double over her walking stick.

“Thakur-ji,” said Bala, “my mother asked Riku’s wife to keep the cow from wandering, lavished affection, presented her with butter and a jar of *lassi* left from its churning. And Riku’s wife agreed. But still Riku lets the cow wander.”

“Are your son’s words true, Kamla?” Thakur asked the old woman standing beside us.

The woman pushed herself straight.

“They are true,” she said. “Why does she leave her cow untended when the millet ripens in the fields? What cow could resist? Let her send Leeti with the cowherd, as the rest of us do.”

“The first time I saw the cow pulling at my millet plants” said Bala, “I led her back to Riku’s home and roped her to the stake in his yard. The second time I returned her to her home. The third time, my mother said our duty was done. Two times returned was enough. The third time, we could milk her to make up for the millet we lost.”

“But I’m an old man,” said Riku. “Should an old man of the village not be respected? How can we watch the cow, now that our daughter’s married far away?”

“Riku,” said Thakur, “Could you not do as Bala and his mother have said? Send Leeti with the cowherd. He’ll guide her to the sweetest grass and Bala’s millet can grow in peace.”

Riku’s throat worked, but it was a moment before his words came.

“And when the herder asks for payment, what will I give him?” he said. “We have nothing to spare. All the milk that Leeti gives we trade for food.”

Thakur glanced at the companions sharing his seat. They shrugged, pursed their lips, gestured for Thakur to proceed.

“Riku and Bala, the right and the wrong of this case aren’t easy to see,” said Thakur. “If I declare for Bala, this will be an insult to Riku, who is an old man

and deserves to be respected, not deprived of the milk he trades for food. If I declare for Riku, then the farmers will cry that their work is for nothing, that their fields have been made into open pastures for wandering animals.”

Thakur planted his hands on his knees and gazed, first at Bala, then at Riku.

“If I ask the village to band together,” he continued, “and pay for Leeti to go to pasture, Bala will be happy and the crops will be safe but the villagers will be resentful. So today I decide nothing,” he said. “When the vegetable cart goes to Master-ji, I’ll go with it and ask his advice. He’ll know what to do.”

“It’s several days before the cart goes to Master-ji, Thakur,” Bala’s mother called out. “Several days for the cow to eat millet. Can’t you decide now?”

“It’s best for Master-ji to advise,” said Thakur.

Dharm leaned close to my ear.

“I already know what Master-ji will say,” he murmured. “I could save Thakur a long walk.”

“Don’t say anything,” I whispered. “Master-ji might not like it.”

“But Master-ji has taught me,” he said, his voice rising. “This is my skill.”

Bala’s mother turned to watch us, her eyes bright with interest.

“Keep your voice low,” I hissed, pressing his arm. “People are looking.”

“I’m telling you, I know exactly how Master-ji would speak,” he said, his voice louder.

“Thakur,” Bala’s mother called out, raising one arm from her stick to point at Dharm, “here’s Master-ji’s student, or student that was, ready to speak for Master-ji. Go ahead, young man. Tell Thakur what you know.”

The crowd nudged him forward. Bala's mother placed a hand on my shoulder.

"He'll be fine," she murmured, "an educated boy like him. He knows how to conduct himself."

"Speak then, Dharm," said Thakur. "We're silent, waiting for your words."

"Riku has lived for many years," said Dharm, "and in that time has become very wise, for he reminded you that Bala's fields should be guarded. Let him organise groups of boys to guard the fields of the village. Bala and the other farmers will be freed of the burden. The boys, instead of watching alone, can work together to chase off deer and monkeys. Riku will be respected and still have the use of Leeti's milk. The cowherd will welcome one more cow to the herd he takes into the forest each morning. The payment Riku receives for his service to the village he can give to the cowherd. That is what Master-ji would say."

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. Your ties to Master-ji are cut,” came a voice from behind.

I whirled around. Bhagadasa had arrived. The grey matted hair and sunken chest of a holy man and the hooded eyes of a snake.

A short while ago I had never heard of him. Now the sight of him filled me with dread.

Chapter Fifteen

“Bhagadasa, honoured friend,” said Thakur, “you’ve returned. These matters can wait. Come and rest.”

He bowed to Bhagadasa, gesturing toward his verandah, while his daughter-in-law hurried up the step, her sons following. Riku and Bala shrugged and walked off together.

“There’s merit in the boy’s suggestion,” I heard Riku say. “If I can protect the fields and do some service to the village, why shouldn’t I?”

People edged away down the track until Dharm and I were alone by the rustling *pipal* tree.

“We should speak to Bhagadasa now,” said Dharm. “Give him the message and leave. That’s what Mohinder said.”

“If he recognises us from the fishing boats, he’ll be angry,” I said.

“When he hears the message, he’ll be angry too,” said Dharm. “We’ll leave as soon as we’ve spoken.”

Bhagadasa was sitting in the room set aside for him, his legs dangling over the edge of the *charpoy*. Thakur dipped water from a basin on the floor and massaged Bhagadasa’s feet.

Dharm and I stood in the doorway, unsure whether Bhagadasa would allow us to approach. He ignored us while his feet were washed, then dried with a cloth handed to Thakur by his son, and the basin carried away by the grandsons. Settling himself on the *charpoy*, he waved his arm toward us.

“This insolent boy – you welcome him to your home,

Thakur-ji?" he said, fingering the tiger amulet on his arm. "Do you know Master-ji has banished him?"

"Even he needs food and a safe place to sleep," said Thakur. "Master-ji wouldn't deny him that."

"At least take him out of my sight. He taints the air. And his brother too."

"As you wish, Bhagadasa," said Thakur. "But they say they have a message for you. Should they deliver it before they go?"

"A message?" said Bhagadasa, his lip scornful but his eyes bright with interest. "Step forward, then. Say what you have to say."

"Be ready to run," Dharm murmured. He closed his eyes, his face solemn, preparing himself for the lies he had to spin. He lifted his chin, squared his shoulders, and bowed to Bhagadasa.

"Bhagadasa, we were given a message. It's for your

ears alone. No one else's. Forgive me, Thakur."

Bhagadasa raised his eyebrows.

"For an expelled student, you've become bold," he said. "But I'll indulge you. Leave us alone, Thakur. Stand outside with your club, in case I call for you. These boys aren't trustworthy."

Thakur waved away his daughter-in-law as she arrived with a tray of food, and he and his son bowed their way out of the door.

"Now, you two," said Bhagadasa, "give me this information you have. A message, you say?"

"Yes, a message," said Dharm.

"Whose message?" asked Bhagadasa.

"A red-haired stranger's. We bring you a message from a red-haired stranger," said Dharm.

"A red-haired stranger," said Bhagadasa, his eyes

brightening. “What’s the message?”

“When you journey with the *raja* of Makara city to Sindhapur for the great gathering of *rajās*, the red-haired stranger will speak with you in the clearing by the great *sheesham* tree,” Dharm said in one breath.

“Speak clearly. Don’t garble your words,” said Bhagadasa. “What about the *raja* of Makara city?”

“When you journey with him to Sindhapur,” said Dharm, “you can meet the red-haired stranger by the *sheesham* tree.”

“You’re discourteous, speaking in riddles,” said Bhagadasa. “Red-haired stranger? That tells me nothing. Who is he?”

“We don’t know,” said Dharm, his voice trembling, his hands shaking from the effort of telling lies.

“We never saw him before the day he saved us from a snake,” I said, embroidering to make the story

convincing. “We’d be dead in the forest if he hadn’t been there.”

“Describe him, this red-headed fellow,” said Bhagadasa.

“He runs fast, dances well,” I said, picturing Vinod the day he and Amba had burst out of the sacred wood into our path. “With clothes like a prince, blue like the sky, gold like the sun. Hair like flame.”

“But no name?” asked Bhagadasa.

“No name,” I said.

“Noble-looking, you say?” he asked.

“Like a prince,” I said, pressing my lips together to keep from smirking at the excitement in his eyes. Two rulers under his control, he was thinking. The Makara *raja*, already his, and now the prince of Sindhapur approaching him.

“And what’s his business at the *sheesham* tree?” he

asked.

Dharm cleared his throat, squeezed my shoulder. Be ready to run, his touch meant.

“Bhagadasa,” said Dharm, “when you and the *raja* of Makara city break your journey by the *sheesham* tree, the stranger has two things for you.”

He tightened the grip on my shoulder. Bhagadasa’s face was stiff with anticipation.

“He has gifts, and he asks you to bring silver in return,” said Dharm. “The generosity of Bhagadasa is known the length of the Sindhu.”

Dharm hates lying, I thought, but his lies are magnificent.

“Silver?” said Bhagadasa. “Gifts should be given freely.”

For a moment Dharm stared ahead, his jaw working. Bhagadasa’s ragged breathing filled the room.

“The stranger has two gifts you dream of,” Dharm blurted out. “The Tiger Aunt’s treasure and Kumara, the crown prince of Makara city.”

Bhagadasa snarled.

“What do you know of dreams and treasure, insolent boy?” he shouted, untangling his legs, lurching up from the *charpoy*.

Dharm hauled me by the arm toward the door.

“Stop them, Thakur!” Bhagadasa cried. “They know where the jewels are.”

We stumbled through the doorway onto the verandah, where Thakur and his son awaited us, wooden sticks raised. Dharm stopped short. I cowered beside him.

“Stop them!” Bhagadasa called, his voice coming closer.

Thakur shook his club, but catching our eyes, put a

finger to his lips and tipped his head toward the step. Dharm gasped, then pulled me across the verandah floor.

“Run!” Thakur mouthed silently, thrusting his arm at the forest, then yelling, “Stop, thieves! Stop, in the name of the priest Bhagadasa!”

His son pretended to stumble as he bounded after us.

“A thousand apologies, Bhagadasa,” we heard Thakur say. “They’ve tripped my son and gotten away. We’ll never find them in the forest.”

When I glanced back, Bhagadasa stood on the verandah, shaking his fist.

We sped out of the village into the forest. Deep in the trees, away from the track and the river, we collapsed on the ground.

“Do you think he believed us?” I asked.

“At first, maybe not, but he forgot his doubts when he heard the word ‘treasure,’” said Dharm. “Now we need to find Mohinder at the *sheesham* tree. Do you know the way?”

Birds swooped through the trees on their evening flight, the sun sank and the track grew dark. I was confident of the way along the river, away from the setting sun, but my shoulder blades twitched from fear that Bhagadasa’s men were stalking us. We stayed close to the water, guided by its murmur and the moon’s reflection, until we reached the clearing. Hungry and shivering, we settled down to wait.

Mohinder arrived from behind.

“Do you hope to spend another night clinging to a tree top, or will you come with me?” he murmured into our ears.

I sniffed back tears of relief.

“Mohinder,” I said, “we gave the message to

Bhagadasa.”

He pressed our heads to his chest in a rough embrace.

“Well done,” he said. “Now we wait. Through one full moon to the next. Bhagadasa has to journey all the way to Makara city and then set out with his *raja* to come back to Sindhapur. Right now, the Tiger Aunt expects us.”

“When Bhagadasa comes to the *sheesham* tree,” I said, “what will you do to him?”

“You mustn’t harm him,” said Dharm.

“His feelings toward you aren’t so kind,” said Mohinder, “but don’t worry. It’s not Bhagadasa or the Makara city *raja* we’re waiting for. That’s all I’ll say.”

Then who, I wondered. There was confusion in Dharm’s eyes, too.

I pushed down my misgivings. I felt safe with Mohinder, as if I had returned home. He had fire sticks, barley cakes, blankets, and two men, tall and silent, with bows over their shoulders and knives at their waists. We slept warm, with full stomachs.

Chapter Sixteen

Next morning we set off for the desert and the flint workers' village, where the Tiger Aunt waited. The first part of our journey was through forest, our backs toasted by patches of sunlight, our toes brushed by undergrowth. No worry about snakes while Mohinder probed with his staff. No fear of tigers or of Bhagadasa with a man ahead and one behind swinging their eyes from side to side, arrows ready.

“Stay away from the track and the river until we need to cross,” said Mohinder. “Why show ourselves when the forest graciously conceals us.”

I thought of Hamsa, back with Master-ji reciting verses and sweeping the courtyard. Of Alankar, hiding from his father.

The Tiger Aunt was hiding too.

“Mohinder-ji, why does the Tiger Aunt fear Bhagadasa?” I asked. “He can’t hurt her, can he? She’s the Tiger Aunt, after all.”

“Fear Bhagadasa? Never,” said Mohinder. “But it’s her duty to the gods to keep herself safe from him.”

“And why does Bhagadasa fear the Tiger Aunt?” I asked. “She has nothing. He has her shrine, he tore down her house, he must realise she’s lost the treasure.”

“He doesn’t have her knowledge,” said Mohinder. “He’s wise to fear her.”

When the sun was high we ate dates and cold *chapatti* under the trees, then turned toward the

Sindhu to dip our water jars.

A ferryman's hut stood a short walk down the river. An elderly man squatting on a *charpoy* by the door accepted a handful of shells from Mohinder, then hesitated.

"You I know. But not these boys. Are they runaways?" he asked. "Or have you kidnapped them?"

No wonder he was suspicious. Mohinder, black moustache swooping, red sash floating, two boys in the long white *dhotis* of students, but no staffs, no belts, one with his hair chopped off and unkempt, one with the usual topknot. And two thin and muscled men, bows on their arms. Protecting us? Or keeping us prisoners?

"What difference is it to you?" asked Mohinder. "It's passage across the Sindhu we're asking for, not your daughters in marriage."

He slipped more shells into the man's hand.

"Go with my son, then," the ferryman said, pointing to the river bank and the boat. "But if people inquire after you, what shall I say?"

He shrugged his shoulders, still holding out his palm.

"Tell them that three men passed this way," said Mohinder. "No need to mention the boys."

He placed more shells in the outstretched hand.

"Serve us well, and we'll have need of you again," he said.

We sped across the river, the boatman leaning into the heavy oar while we reclined on cushions. At the east bank, he jumped out with us when the boat bumped against the wharf and we left him squatting for a chat with his cousin, who looked just like him even to the thick silver rings in his ear lobes.

The weeds we scrambled through were as dusty as

the ones we had just left, the scrub just as thorny, the ducks breaking from the reeds croaked the same warning, their wings flashing the same blue.

“I thought it would be different here,” I said.
“Where’s the desert?”

“Breathe in the river air while you can,” said Mohinder, as we crossed the track and pushed into the forest. “When you feel the heat of the hills, you’ll long to return.”

The forest dwindled into scattered thorn bushes and twisted *kair* trees with bright red berries. The bowmen’s strides lengthened, their faces impassive as they gazed into the distance. We walked through grass that made our ankles itch, past patches of tiny yellow creepers, white spikes of sandbur, clumps of leaves sprinkled with pink and purple blossoms.

“Beautiful now from the rains,” Mohinder said. “In the dry time there’s only brown, still beautiful in its own way.”

Black against the sky, a train of camels skimmed across the horizon, humped backs piled with bundles.

“Blankets to trade at Sindhapur,” said Mohinder. “Or maybe Makara city, but most don’t go there by choice. Camel wool’s warm when nights are cool. You’ll be glad of it yourself where we’re going.”

Vultures, their long necks dangling, glided across the sky and sank beyond the tufts of grass.

“Something’s died, gazelle or antelope most likely,” said Mohinder. “Vultures are merciful enough to wait till it’s dead. Bhagadasa preys on the living.”

We plodded toward squat, flat-topped hills looming in the distance, shielding our heads with our shawls from the hot gritty wind. We camped for the night by a thorn tree, huddled by the fire, wary of vipers that might slither in the dark.

Two days more, and we reached the hills, steep cliffs

sprinkled with green at the base, cracked yellow rock higher up. The track circled the hill to where the slope was gentler, through the scrub to a mud-plastered hut. A woman, stooped and gap-toothed, kneaded dough at a doorway formed from tree branches. Murli's grandmother, who had served us food on the Tiger Aunt's boat.

She grinned, lifting her hands, peeling dough from her fingers.

"She'll be happy you're here," she said, "but I won't tell her yet. She's not to be disturbed. She's walking with the gods in another world."

"Watch over her then," said Mohinder. "I'll feed these boys, and later we'll greet my sister."

He touched the grooved trunk of the tree growing nearby, its long slender leaves fluttering in the wind, and led us along the track, past huts with curved walls smooth and gleaming in the hot sun, roofs shaggy with straw. Our guards turned aside at one

of the doorways, where a woman sat churning butter. The rope of the churning rod fell slack as they touched her feet and she kissed the tops of their heads.

“My sons,” she said.

“For one night we’re here, Mata,” they said. “Then we return to our duty.”

We crossed the beaten earth and sand and spiky-branched shrubs surrounding the village well. A camel tethered to a wooden stake swung its head to watch us while a woman in red and yellow and green that glistened in the sun drew a bucket from the well and tipped out water for the animal. Children kicked a leather ball. Two elderly men sat gossiping in the shade of a striped cloth strung on poles. The men broke into smiles at our approach, folded their hands in greeting.

“Mohinder,” said one, “we’ve kept your hearth ready.”

“Ancient one,” said Mohinder. He was pulled into a smothering embrace, pounded on the back, then passed on to the other man while the ancient one greeted Dharm and me.

“Mohinder has brought you, so we take you as our own,” he said. “Now you’re children of the village of the rock.”

The boys stopped to stare. The woman, her hands on the well rope, grinned in welcome and bobbed her head as the camel lowered its curled mouth to the stone basin.

Mohinder’s home was in a cluster of round huts on the other side of the well. A low mud wall curved in front of the doorway. Murli crouched behind it.

“Mohinder,” he said, rising from the stone slab and the *methi* leaves he was chopping, just as he had chopped vegetables on the houseboat in the lake of the ducks. “Four days we’ve been waiting here. I knew the gods would bring you safely.”

“Murli,” said Mohinder, “keep Dharm and Arun supplied with food and *vibhitaka* seeds. No need for disguises here.”

Murli’s face beamed as if we were old friends. He took us to the washing place behind the house, brought jars of water and fresh shawls and *dhotis*, then settled us on the *charpoy* by the door with salted water and fried *mung* beans. Our sweat-stained clothing he bundled up for the washer family.

“Wrap your heads from the sun, and I’ll take you to the stone workers,” Mohinder told us. “Not everyone can say they’ve visited the flint mines.”

A steep track, a jumble of footprints in the dry earth, wound through thorny shrubs and the buzz of cicadas and a wind that blew grit in our faces and sucked the moisture from our lips. As we neared the brow of the ridged yellow rock, the cicadas’ calls were lost in the clang of stone.

The path leveled out at a workshop with a thatched roof, sides open to the air. Flint workers sat cross-legged in the shade, chunks of grey rock balanced on their thighs, smooth oval stones hefted in their palms. The rock floor around their knees was littered with chips of stone.

A man swung his hammer stone down to the lump of rock on his lap. A graceful thrust, a gentle tap, and a thin wafer slid from the rock into his hand. He held it out for us to see.

“So these are the boys, Mohinder,” he said, brushing fragments off his legs, scratching at his neck behind his beard.

We bowed and folded our hands.

“Mohinder’s wise to bring you here if it’s refuge you want. We’re the forgotten ones. No one comes here anymore. Only the Tiger Aunt’s friends when they need a place to hide.”

“Ustad,” said Mohinder, “those who prize skill can never forget your blades.”

“Skill I have,” said Ustad. ‘A little tapping, a little trimming, and this bit of stone will slice through a leaf drifting in the air. No bronze blade cuts as fine as that, but even so, these days most prefer the metal.’”

The hot wind gusted through the workshop’s open sides, clearing the dust from our nostrils.

“Mohinder, take these two up to the mines to choose their stones,” Ustad said. “If you pry out the flint yourselves, my boys, the knives I’ll make you will never betray you.”

Mohinder gave us rags to protect our feet. The path took us to the top of the hill, yellow-brown rock pocked with holes and burning hot from the sun, ridged as if blasted into waves by the wind.

A man crouched by a pit, hauling on a rope. We peered over the edge at the chunk of grey rock

dangling from the rope, at the flimsy rope ladder clinging to the stony wall, at the heads and backs of the two men deep in the pit, the hollow clang of their hammers floating up to us.

“Miners spend their lives inside rock,” said Mohinder.

“Has Ustad sent you for flint?” said the man beside us. “He must like you if he means to make a knife for you. Down you go, one at a time.”

I jerked back. My stomach heaved.

“It’s safe if you’re careful,” the man said, heaving the rock up over the lip of the shaft, loosening the rope netted around it.

“I’ll go first,” said Dharm. “It’s no different down there from any other place.”

Maybe the hole is full of demons, I thought.

Dharm climbed down and returned without mishap,

and the man guided me over the edge. The ladder lurched under my feet as I eased myself from rung to rung, my upper arm gripped by Mohinder until I was out of his reach. One of the miners caught me at the bottom, showed me a nodule of flint embedded in the floor, gave me his chisel for my token scratch, then steadied the ladder while I climbed back up.

“We’ll lever it out and take it to Ustad,” he said. “When you leave our village, there’ll be a good flint knife in your belt.”

Back on top, I sank onto the hot rock, glad of the sun and the scorching wind.

“You see, Arun,” said Dharm, “it wasn’t so bad.”

“It was easy,” I said. “I knew it would be. I wasn’t the least bit frightened.”

“Arun, you were frightened,” said Mohinder. “We all knew it. And that’s to your credit. Doing what frightened you - that took courage.”

Dusk had arrived by the time we sat at Mohinder's doorway to eat our meal. Murli knelt by the hearth to make us fresh *chapatti*, his face shimmering in the smoke from the fire.

"My sister will be ready now," said Mohinder.'

Murli lit a torch from the fire and handed it to Mohinder, the smell of smouldering rags making my nose twitch. Mohinder led us past the well to the Tiger Aunt's hut.

The Tiger Aunt sat on her tiger skin, heavy hair falling on her shoulders, cheeks rounded like a child's. A wick burned in a bronze dish by her knee, two more in wall niches on either side. Her white shawl gleamed in the lamplight.

We touched the carpet at her feet, my fingers brushing the tiger jaw as I pushed myself up.

"Dharm and Arun, did you do as I requested?" she asked.

“Yes, Tiger Aunt,” Dharm said.

“We told Bhagadasa about the *sheesham* tree,” I said. “We don’t know if he’ll go or not, but I think he will. He was curious about the red-haired stranger.”

“I knew that would draw him,” said the Tiger Aunt. “But in truth the prince of Sindhapur is nothing to me. It’s my daughter I’m worried about.”

Dharm and I stared, too surprised to speak.

“Yes,” said the Tiger Aunt. “My daughter. The dearest thing I have. Stolen by Bhagadasa.”

Chapter Seventeen

She motioned for us to sit and for the elderly servant to pour us cups of water.

“I had a child who ran free in the forest,” she said, “graceful as a bird, and eyes as bright. And the *raja* of Makara city, hunting one day in the forest, happened upon her and was entranced by her beauty. He came to me with smiles and silver for the goddess and offered to take her away.”

“To be his queen?” I asked.

“To be his favourite, I thought,” said the Tiger Aunt. “Later I understood his lust was not of the body. It

was for riches.”

“Did she want to go with him?” I said.

“I didn’t ask her,” said the Tiger Aunt. “I sent her away before he could take her. To the priest near Sindhapur. To the tiger shrine there.”

“That’s our shrine. The priest there is very old,” said Dharm.

“But still with eyes to see and ears to hear,” she said, “if he had used them. But he saw nothing, heard nothing, said nothing, when my daughter ran in the forest with the prince of Sindhapur. Beauty in a daughter is a burden, not a blessing.”

“Your daughter’s name is Amba, I think,” I said. “We saw her.”

“My brother told me,” said the Tiger Aunt.

She paused, closed her eyes, slowed her breathing. The silence lengthened. Was she finished speaking

with us?

Mohinder caught my eye, tipped his head and crossed his arms over his chest. I settled back to wait.

The Tiger Aunt cleared her voice.

“When it was too late,” she said, “I learned things from my men who roam the forest. Things I should have asked about before. They said that my Amba, her bright eyes, her graceful arms, had the look of the Makara *raja*’s daughter who had sickened and died. Even her walk was the same, they told me. The Makara *raja* looked at her and was reminded of his old hopes, his dreams of joining his house to the house of Sindhapur, of using the wealth of Sindhapur to restore the lost glory of Makara city.”

The Tiger Aunt waved her hand at the pitcher of water. Mohinder poured water for her.

“Dharm and Arun,” she said, “I know your thoughts.

What's this all to do with Bhagadasa and the *sheesham* tree, you're wondering. So listen. I'll tell you of the *sheesham* tree and the task I have for you."

"Yes, Tiger Aunt," I said.

"If it's an honest task," said Dharm.

"Dharm, there are many ways to honour truth," said the Tiger Aunt. "Whatever I ask will be in truth's service. Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes," he said.

"When the Makara *raja* saw Amba in the forest," the Tiger Aunt said, "he almost thought the daughter he had lost was still with him. One daughter was dead, but why not take Amba into his house? My ward, he would say to the *raja* of Sindhapur. Take my ward as your son's wife. Never has a girl been more gently nurtured, more regal in her bearing, more finely featured.

“But when he offered me silver, and I feared for Amba, I had no knowledge of his intention, and in my ignorance I sent her for safety to the shrine at Sindhapur. I didn’t know I was presenting the Makara *raja* with exactly what he wanted.”

“Sister, don’t exhaust yourself,” said Mohinder.

“There’s no need to spare me, Mohinder,” said the Tiger Aunt. “The facts are painful, but they’re facts nonetheless, and these boys deserve to hear them. Dharm and Arun, I made a mother’s mistake. I never thought my Amba, so practical, so reasonable, would be dazzled by the silken clothes and golden earrings of the prince of Sindhapur.”

“When we saw them in the sacred forest, the prince was dazzled too,” I said.

“The prince was dazzled, Arun,” said the Tiger Aunt, “but it meant nothing. When a prince smiles on a forest girl like Amba, it seldom ends well for the girl. I thought Amba understood this, for even as a child

she guarded her heart. There was a peacock who slept in the *peepul* tree near our hut. She watched it every day with her father, for in those days he came sometimes, when he wasn't off fighting for the Makara city *raja*. Hand in hand they gazed at the bird's waving crown, its blue tail streaming over the branch like an embroidered shawl.

“He's your faithful pet,' her father said.

“No, he's not,” said my daughter. ‘I want no pets to love, for what if some day he wishes to fly away to a different *peepul* tree?’”

“Tiger Aunt,” I said, “she guards her heart still. It was the prince who had lost his.”

“Amba should have a friend, not a pet,” said Dharm. “A friend would keep her in his heart, whatever tree he chose.”

The Tiger Aunt nodded.

“But whether or not my daughter’s heart was touched doesn’t matter,” she said. “When Bhagadasa, that Makara spy, heard that Amba was serving at the Sindhapur shrine, he snooped and found her with the prince’s head in her lap, and the prince’s eyes gazing into hers.”

I glanced at Dharm. His face was stony, his mouth a thin line beneath his sparse moustache.

“Bhagadasa sent runners to Makara city with the news, and the Makara *raja* rejoiced,” said the Tiger Aunt. “My hunters told me. Clapped his hands with glee, his beaky nose bobbing from side to side. For his task would be easy, he thought, if the prince was already smitten with her. And he sent his soldiers – thank the gods Amba’s father is dead and wasn’t one of them – to steal her away and drag her off to Makara city. Now he calls her his adopted daughter, and gives her silk to wear and sleep on, but he keeps her a prisoner, guarded day and night.”

“That’s a great offence,” Dharm said. “To kidnap a child from a mother.”

“I’ve been wronged,” said the Tiger Aunt, “but life’s not for lamenting.”

Her shoulders sagged. Her voice had grown thin.

“I see a way to put things right,” she said. “I’ve told you everything, Dharm, so you see our cause is just. Mohinder, take them away now. Tell them what they must do.”

Mohinder grasped the torch offered by the servant and led us through the night back to his hut.

“When the Makara *raja* and Bhagadasa set out from their city for Sindhapur and the great celebration,” he said, “with them will be Amba my niece, secluded behind embroidered curtains, surrounded by guards, a beautiful bride offered to the Sindhapuri *raja* for his son. The Tiger Aunt’s runners will keep us informed, and when the wagon train is a few days

from the *sheesham* tree, we too will set out. I and the two of you. When we reach the *sheesham* tree, while I speak to Bhagadasa of treasure and the *Kumara*, you'll find Amba and carry her into the forest. Can you do that?"

"If she comes away willingly" said Dharm. "But not if she's happy to go to Vinod the prince.

Chapter Eighteen

We passed our time playing kick-ball with the village boys and throwing the *vibhitaka* seeds from the red box. Murli's eyes were wide as I called the numbers correctly time after time.

"Mohinder, you won't believe it," he said. "The seeds speak to Arun. He's never wrong."

Mohinder hunkered down to watch. Three throws in a row my numbers were wrong. I hung my head to hide my tears.

"You're clogging your mind trying to please me," said Mohinder. "Blow it clear."

“Mohinder,” said Dharm, “I’ve told him too. When he tries too hard, he fails.”

Dharm cast a cupful of seeds on the board and I opened my head to the wind.

“Thirty-three,” I said.

“Correct,” said Dharm.

Murli grinned.

“Well done,” said Mohinder. “You play like a prince.”

One evening, as we warmed ourselves by the hearth, Ustad brought our knives. He set the bundles on his lap, unwound the cloth wrappings, and held up two blades the length of a finger, bound to bone handles with leather cord.

“Hold them, feel the weight in your palms, then slip them in their cases. The blades are sharp. They could slice off a piece of your thumb. Or,” he told

Dharm with a grunt of laughter, “scrape the new hair from your lip. But I wouldn’t advise it. You’ll soon have a fine moustache.”

We spent many evenings by the fire, and saw the moon grow round, then shrink to nothing. Just before the new moon time, Mohinder’s two guards returned.

“We’ve had word,” they said. “By now Bhagadasa and the Makara *raja* are four days from the *sheesham* tree.”

And off we went, Mohinder, the guards, Dharm and I, back across the rolling desert, through clumps of grass now stiff and brown from the heat. For two days we wrapped our heads and shoulders against the scorching sun, the insect-filled air, the bees hovering over the yellow flowers of the thorn trees. For two nights we shivered by the fire, camel-hair blankets folded tight to block the chill.

The parched land gave way to forest, and then to

river and the ferry.

The ferryman's cousin steadied the boat while we climbed in.

"You're back again," said the old man from his *charpoy* when we reached the other side.

"Yes," said Mohinder, placing a small bag in the man's hand, "we're back, and if you shake that bag, you'll hear the rattle of cowrie shells. Keep the boat ready for us and tell no one you've seen us, and I have another of the same for when we return. Tell no one. Especially travelers from Makara city."

The old man pressed a finger to his lips.

"I've nothing to say to Makara city travelers. It's the *raja* of Sindhapur I serve," he said.

We trudged past the twisted tamarisk trees into the forest.

"Remember the way," said Mohinder. "I may not be

with you on your return.”

The Tiger Aunt’s men were camped deep in the forest, well away from the *sheesham* tree. We settled in to wait, while the guards slipped back and forth to the river, watching for Bhagadasa and his *raja*.

“The Makara *raja*’s wagons will be guarded,” I said, as we crouched by the fire, the croak of frogs and the howls of jackals floating in the night air. “How can Dharm and I break through to find Amba?”

Our new knives were more suited to slicing mangoes than hacking people.

“Yes, there’ll be guards,” said Mohinder, “but the rest of us will keep them busy while you do your job. Two boys in the dark can achieve a lot. Amba will trust you if you give her this.”

He pulled a small bowl from his blanket roll. It gleamed in the firelight as he held it out to Dharm.

“Silver,” said Mohinder. “Amba drank from it as a child. The Tiger Aunt says it will draw her home.”

Dharm secured it in the folds of his sash.

Late the next afternoon, a jungle fowl crowed in alarm from the direction of the *sheesham* tree.

“The signal,” said Mohinder. “The Makara *raja* and Bhagadasa have arrived.”

My ears buzzed. I stumbled behind a tree and vomited.

“Give him water to clean his mouth,” said Mohinder. “He’ll be all right now.”

Dharm poured water from the jug, pulled my shawl snug around my shoulders.

“There’s nothing to fear, Arun,” said Mohinder. “You’re a child. They won’t hurt you.”

I tried not to think of Bhagadasa’s guards in the

fishing village, of Garak threatening me, his smirk, his thick hands.

“Mohinder, I’m ready,” I said. “Let’s go.”

“It’s not time yet,” said Mohinder. “Just now Bhagadasa will be browbeating the servants, ordering them to bring rugs and a carved chair for the *raja*, a silken umbrella and cup of honeyed water. Then Bhagadasa will slip away through the trees to the clearing and the *sheesham* tree. But there’ll be no red-haired man to greet him, and he’ll slam a fist into his palm and turn to go.

“That’s when my guard, high on a branch above him, will toss a stone to fall at Bhagadasa’s feet, startling him into jumping back. He’ll look up at the trees, not seeing the guard lying flat on the branch, then pick up the stone, unwrapping the leaf tied around it.”

“What leaf, Mohinder?” I asked.

“A palm leaf with a drawing. A drawing of a five

days' moon. Bhagadasa will see tonight's moon is meant, and return to the *raja*. At moonrise he'll be back. And we'll be waiting for him. We'll hide there while there's light enough to see."

And so, when the moon pierced the starry sky, delicate as milk, curved like an acrobat's back, we were already by the clearing, concealed in the trees.

Mohinder pointed toward the track and the river.

"The Makara travelers are camped over there," Mohinder murmured. "When Bhagadasa arrives, Dharm and Arun, you must slip away on soft feet. I'll greet him here, my guards close if I need them. Bhagadasa will shriek with rage when he discovers there are no jewels and no *Kumara*. In the camp his guards will hear him and dash to his aid, leaving only two or three to guard the Makara *raja* and the princess."

"But how will we find Amba?" I said.

“They have fires and hanging lamps,” Mohinder said. “You’ll find her easily. She sleeps on a cart under a silken canopy. Cover her mouth with your hand before she has a chance to scream, and wave the token from her mother in front of her eyes. Talk to her softly and gain her trust, then run like deer to the ferryman.”

Bhagadasa came, his way lit by two guards with torches.

“You honour us by being punctual,” said Mohinder from the darkness.

“Mighty prince, is that you?” asked Bhagadasa.

I pressed my mouth to keep from giggling. Bhagadasa would look a fool, expecting a red-haired prince but finding Mohinder.

Bhagadasa’s guards slanted their torches toward Mohinder’s voice. Dharm and I edged away toward the Makara camp.

“You’re blinding me with your torches,” said Mohinder. “Shine them on your own faces, for I won’t speak to the darkness.”

Dharm and I moved with careful steps toward the track, guided by moonlight and croaking frogs near the river.

“Shine them also on the silver you have brought,” said Mohinder, his voice fading as we moved away. “Let it gleam in the torchlight.”

The lamps in the royal camp flickered through the trees. Bullocks grunted and swung their heads toward us, their keepers peering into the forest. The rest of the camp remained quiet, the thick tent curtains shimmering in the torchlight. We skirted the edge, feeling our way from tree trunk to tree trunk, nervous of rousing the sleeping forms around the fire and the *raja*’s guards standing slack and bored.

We crouched behind a wheel. The largest tent rose

beside us, a huge umbrella hung with curtains fluttering in the evening breeze. A guard

appeared, patrolling round the tent, sliding his eye over the carts but not noticing us huddled in the shadow. From inside came a ragged snore, the creak of *charpoy* ropes, a cough. The sleeping *raja*, I thought.

One of the wagons resting on huge wheels had sides of woven straw, a top draped with pale cloth. I pointed to it at the same time Dharm gripped my arm.

“Amba will be there,” he murmured.

We stared at the embroidered hangings. A guard cleared his throat and slapped his club against his palm, crickets chirped, leaves rustled, but no sound came from the wagon. No breathing, no shifting of blankets. Still, Amba must be there. A cart with embroidered curtains, Mohinder had said.

A jumble of jeers and shrieks erupted from the direction of the *sheesham* tree. Footsteps hurried, shadows darted toward the *raja's* tent calling “*Raja-ji! Raja-ji!* Bhagadasa is under attack!”

“Go to their aid!” called a raspy voice from inside the tent. “Bring me the Kumara.”

“What’s happened?” someone mumbled as feet pounded away into the trees.

“Go back to sleep,” said a guard as he rushed past.

“Are there bandits?” the questioner persisted.

“We’ll handle it. Go back to sleep,” said the guard.

“We need you alert tomorrow to bake our *chapatti*.”

Dharm squeezed my arm and tipped his head toward the end of the wagon.

“It’s time,” he mumbled.

Chapter Nineteen

We waited for the guard on patrol to disappear behind the *raja's* tent, then scurried to the wagon. Dharm lifted a corner of the curtain and stooped to peer inside. He let the cloth drop and dragged me back to our hiding place.

“She’s there,” he muttered into my ear. “I saw her long braid. There’s someone with her. The maid, I guess. Make sure she doesn’t cry out, while I get Amba.”

“I’m not very strong,” I said. “If she fights me, she’ll win.”

“I think she’s just a child,” said Dharm.

We crouched on our feet, poised to spring, watching for the next passage of the guard. The shouting from the clearing by the *sheesham* tree had subsided. Were men hurt? Was Mohinder a captive? Or had he escaped.

“The guard - I don’t think he’s coming,” I whispered. “Maybe he’s tired of walking in circles.”

“That’s good if it’s true,” Dharm murmured. “Let’s go.”

We leaped toward Amba’s wagon. Dharm hoisted himself over the edge and crept under the curtain. I caught my breath and crawled after him, scraping my knee on the wood.

Light from the lamps outside seeped through the cloth roof. Amba lay on her side, her cheek on her hands, her long braid snaking across the pillow onto the quilt. A young girl slept beside her, arms and

legs flung out, mouth open. Dharm pulled himself on hands and knees through the narrow space between them until he knelt by Amba's face, jerked his head toward the other girl when he saw me holding back.

"Forgive me, Amba, but I must do this," he muttered.

He pressed a hand over her mouth, shook her by the shoulder.

"Amba, wake up," he said. "We're here to rescue you. We promised your mother."

Her eyes flashed open, stretched wide with fear, the whites gleaming in the dim light. She pushed herself up, slammed her hand into Dharm's chin, making him wince.

The girl next to her jerked awake, opening her mouth to scream. I clamped my hands around her face, almost losing my grasp as she threw her body from side to side, pulling me with her. The wagon

rocked from our struggles. Any moment the guard would come running.

Beside me, Amba weakened as Dharm pressed her back.

“Amba,” he pleaded, his voice breathless. “My name is Dharm. I’m your friend. Your mother sent me. I have your silver bowl.”

With one hand he covered her mouth, while with the other he drew the little dish from the pouch at his waist. He held it to her eyes.

She stared at it.

“If you wish to come, be quick,” said Dharm.

For a moment she was still, and then, her mouth still gripped by Dharm’s hand, she tipped her head in acceptance.

The young girl in my grasp stopped struggling, her eyes on Amba.

“So now my mother wants me?” Amba gasped as soon as Dharm pulled his hand from her mouth. “The last time she spoke to me, it was to send me away.”

“She wants you free of Bhagadasa and the Makara *raja*,” said Dharm, urging her back along the wagon floor.

She looked at her maid.

“You’ll be fine here, Roshani,” she said. “Lie down again. My mother’s called me. I have to go.”

“Hurry, Arun,” Dharm hissed.

Roshani’s eyes were dazed, uncomprehending, but there was no time to tend to her. I snatched my hand from her face and slid after Dharm and Amba, who were lost in the shadows of the other carts, hurrying toward the forest.

Then Roshani began to howl.

“Save me! Save me! My mistress is taken! “

Feet rushed toward us. One guard? Two or three? I dropped to the ground and stumbled past the carts into the forest, the air filled with Roshani’s shrieking. Once under the trees, I hesitated, until out of the darkness Dharm caught my arm and spurred ahead, pulling me with one hand, Amba with the other. The shouting of the guards grew faint.

Amba stopped short. Dharm struggled to keep his balance. I fell headlong into the dirt.

“This is crazy. Where are you taking me?” asked Amba, swinging around to check behind us.

“To the desert, where your mother is,” said Dharm.

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter,” said Amba. “We’ll never escape. The Makara *raja* has guards everywhere.”

“Dharm,” I said, as we came to a place of fallen

needles and pine trunks looming in the moonlight, “we can hide in a tree. Just like before.”

“There’s no time,” said Dharm, looking up to the branches beyond our reach. “They’ll be here any moment.”

“I know how,” I said. “Give me your *dhoti* and squat by this tree.”

Dharm stood still.

“Do what he asks,” said Amba, her voice urgent. “I trust him.”

Dharm and I unwound the short *dhotis* Murli had found for us in the flint village, and stood in our loincloths while I tied the cloth ends together.

“Let me try,” said Amba. “It needs to be tighter.”

She knotted the *dhotis* together at the corners, tugged hard to test their strength.

“Dharm” I said, “I’ll climb on your shoulders and throw this *dhoti* rope over the branch. Then we can climb up like last time.”

Dharm crouched down. Handing my shawl to Amba and slinging the *dhotis* across my back, I set my bare feet on his shoulders, stretching my arms around the tree trunk, digging my fingers into its ridged surface for support. I rose toward the branch, scraping off chunks of bark with my chest, as Dharm straightened his back.

Voices from the camp floated to us on the night air.

“Bhagadasa must have returned,” said Dharm.
“Hurry, Arun. They’ll be after us now.”

Hugging the trunk with one arm, I stretched the other toward the lowest branch, thrusting my arm to slip the *dhotis* over it. I lifted my heels off Dharm’s shoulders to give me height. My head pounded from the strain, but I was too short, the *dhoti* in my hand too limp to throw.

“I can’t reach it,” I said. “The *dhoti*’s too floppy to throw. I need a stick.”

“I’ll get one,” said Amba.

The shouts still came from around the carts. But soon the guards would spread out into the trees.

“Here, Arun,” said Amba. “I had to run back to find a shrub. It’s wobbly, but the stronger branches wouldn’t break off.”

Amba handed me a length of sapling. Dharm grunted, pressed himself closer to the tree.

“Hurry,” he groaned.

I folded the *dhoti* over the end of the stick, then reached for the branch above. The stick flexed in my hand, but added the needed length, and the *dhoti* rose like a giant banner above the bough. I aimed the stick like a spear and heaved it over the branch, Dharm clutched one end of our *dhoti*-rope, and

Amba caught the other as it fell, still entangled with the stick.

“I can see their lamps. They’re in the forest,” said Amba, her heavy braid slipping over her shoulder as she swung her eyes between the tree and the edge of the forest.

I glanced toward the lights flickering through the trees, lost my balance and bumped to the ground, splayed on top of Dharm. I pushed myself to my feet, ignoring the shock. There was no time.

“You first, Arun,” said Dharm, handing me the dangling *dhoti* ends. “Show Amba how it’s done. Then Amba. Then me.”

One by one we hoisted ourselves up the trunk and onto the branch, hauling up the *dhotis* behind us. Two guards broke through the trees just as I pulled myself higher to leave space for Dharm and Amba. I stiffened, my cheek jammed against the bark, pine needles pricking my hand, sure they would see my

dangling foot.

“There’s a dip in the ground. Check there,” said one, his bearded face and leather breastplate flashing in and out of the light as he swept his torch in circles. “They won’t go far in the dark.”

“They’ll be sorry when I get my hands on them,” said the other, kicking pine cones as he walked. “I’ve done my duty already today, keeping quiet while that ruffian Mohinder bargained with Bhagadasa. I should be sleeping by the fire now, not shivering in the forest tracking runaways.”

I knew the voice. It was Garak, the one who had threatened me in the fishing village.

“The sooner we find them, the sooner we sleep,” said the first guard, the pool of light from his torch skimming the forest floor. I held my breath as the brightness darted up our tree trunk, then hovered just below the branch where Dharm and Amba clung.

My hand went to my waist before my head thought of it, to the knife Ustad had made for me. I braced myself against the trunk and tossed the knife into the dark. I heard it scrape on a branch then hit the ground.

“Over there,” said the first guard, pushing forward.

The torchlight veered away from our tree, sliced deeper into the forest.

“What did you do?” muttered Dharm from below me.

“Ustad’s knife,” I said. “It saved us.”

I felt the place on my hip that had grown used to the weight of the knife.

It’s all right, I thought. I’m too young for a knife anyway.

“We’ll stay here till morning,” said Dharm.

Amba and I settled into the forks of the tree, bound to the branches with the *dhotis* Dharm wound around us. I hunched over, wrapping my arms around my knees.

“Take one of the shawls,” said Dharm. “You’re trembling.”

He was right. I was cold, but it was the guard with the stubby hands that brought shivers to my stomach.

“We’re all cold, Dharm,” I said.

Amba was wrapped in a thin sleeping cloth and Dharm and I were in loincloths, with two cotton shawls for the three of us.

“Take one, Arun,” said Dharm.

He stretched up to wind it around me. I leaned my head against the tree, drowsy from the warmth.

“The other’s for you, Amba,” he said. “And don’t

protest. I'm in charge."

"If you crawl closer," said Amba, "it's long enough for both of us."

"I'm fine," said Dharm. "I don't mind the cold."

"Yes you do," said Amba, combing her hair with her fingers, throwing the braid over her shoulder.

"You're just afraid of me. Which is ridiculous, since you've seen me at my worst."

"No, no," said Dharm, "you look very nice."

"I'm not talking about that," she said. "Stop pretending. You know I'm the girl you saw with Vinod in the wood. I recognized your voice the moment I heard you ordering Arun around."

"Yes, it's true. We saw you in the sacred wood and I was angry. But now I understand better. It was a solemn place for me but a place of amusement for you.

“Did you tell my mother? Is that why she sent you?” she asked.

“It isn’t my place to tell your mother anything,” said Dharm. “Anyway, she already knew.”

“So she sent you to snatch me away from Bhagadasa and the Makara *raja*. Runaway students or whoever you are. Why you?”

“We don’t know,” said Dharm. “You can ask her when you see her.”

“She always has a reason,” said Amba, “but she never tells.”

I roused myself to speak.

“Amba,” I said. “The prince of Sindhapur. Do you like him?”

“Arun,” said Dharm, “that’s discourteous. Amba, don’t be offended.”

“I’ll answer you, Arun,” she said. “The prince doesn’t notice who likes or dislikes him. He’s too taken up with liking himself.”

“If you like him, I’m sorry, because your mother won’t allow it.”

“You’re a kind boy, Arun,” she said. “Both of you are kind. Come and share the shawl, Dharm. Your shivering’s not helping anyone.”

Dharm crawled close to Amba and tied himself to the tree beside her, pulling an edge of the shawl around his shoulders. Pressed close to Amba, was he thinking of Amba and Vinod laughing and flirting in the grass?

“I’ll keep watch,” Dharm said. “You can take your turns later.”

Chapter Twenty

I dozed, cramped and cold, but reassured by the chirp of crickets and the *dhoti* around my midriff tying me to the tree. Sometime during the night a band of guards shuffled beneath us back to the camp. I thought with longing of the warm blanket rolls awaiting them.

“Arun, Arun, wake up,” said a voice. It took me a moment to realise it was Dharm’s.

“Arun, I need you to watch now. My eyes keep closing.”

“Let him be,” said Amba. “He’s just a child. I’m

awake. I can do it.”

I wriggled close to the tree, sinking back asleep. It was good to be young and cared for.

We started out for the ferry while it was still dark, the air filled with bird squawks and whistles. Throats dry, stomachs empty, bodies sticky with dirt and pine gum, we hurried toward the river, angling well away from the Makara *raja*'s camp.

“We’ll probably find Mohinder at the ferry,” Dharm said.

We dashed from trunk to trunk, hollow to hollow, hot and sweating but too nervous to care.

“Guards could be anywhere,” said Amba. “I tried to get away from them, but they always popped out of nowhere and forced me back.”

But by the time we passed out of the forest onto the sunny track by the river we had not seen a single

guard.

“Where are they?” said Amba, as we pushed through the reeds, scooped water into our mouths, sank into the shallows of the river to dissolve the dirt and sweat from our bodies. “Something’s not right. They should be combing the forest for us.”

I was more worried about crocodiles than I was about guards, and was glad to finish our washing and climb back up the bank to the track. We walked to the east, water from our tattered *dhotis* and the shawls Amba had tied round herself dripping into the dirt.

“Either the guards come or they don’t,” said Dharm. “If it happens, we’ll deal with them. Right now fix your mind on reaching the ferry.”

We walked until the sun had passed into the last quarter of the sky.

“Dharm,” I said, “we must be close. The river’s edge

is rocky here, like at the ferry.”

We stooped to take a last drink from the river and slipped into the forest.

“In case the Makara guards are at the crossing,” said Dharm.

We crept through the trees, then bumped to a stop as a cry rang out. We edged closer.

“There’s nothing I can tell you,” pleaded a voice.
“My son has taken men across. Never a young girl.”

We peered through a bush into the dusty yard. The old ferryman cowered beside his toppled *charpoy*, his sunken chest puny next to the shoulders of the two guards threatening him. I recognised the thrust of Garak’s chin.

“Old man, you should help us,” Garak said, bouncing the side of his club against a meaty hand. “Your son’s health depends on it.”

Amba tapped our shoulders, pointing across the yard. Through the leaves I could see the ferryman's son gaping in fear, his arms gripped by the guard behind him.

"Mala, my son," moaned the father. "Let him be, honoured guard. We know nothing."

"The Makara *raja*'s adopted daughter," said Garak's companion. "Tell us what you know about her, or bear the anger of the Makara *raja*. Spare yourself that, old man, and speak."

"I know nothing," said the father, his words muffled by his ragged breathing.

Garak nodded, and a guard cracked his club across Mala's knee. Mala clamped his lips shut, his neck rigid. Amba clapped her hand over her mouth, Dharm pushed forward, I hung on his arm to restrain him. But when the guard made no more passes with his club, Dharm shrugged and held back.

“I can stop this,” whispered Amba. “I’ll give myself up.”

“Garak likes hurting people,” I said. “Finding you won’t make him stop.”

“You’ll just be one more to mistreat,” said Dharm.

Mala’s father sank to the ground, his joined palms raised in supplication.

“Honourable guards,” he said, “I’m the one you should beat. My son does what I tell him to. If we have angered you, I’m the one who should answer for it.”

My attention was shattered by a hand clamped on my mouth, an arm falling on my shoulders.

I struggled to pull away.

“Be easy,” said a voice in my ear. I recognised one of Mohinder’s hunters. Dharm was in the grip of the other. Mohinder held Amba, his hand pressed over

her mouth, her eyes stormy above.

“Don’t make a sound,” Mohinder murmured, easing his hand away from Amba’s face, signaling with his eyes for the hunters to do the same for Dharm and me.

Amba wiped her mouth with her fingers.

From the yard came another crack of the club, and a muffled scream.

“Mohinder uncle,” whispered Amba. “Make them stop.”

“Six. I’ve counted six,” said Dharm. “Six men with clubs against two, and one of them old.”

“Shoot them,” I muttered. “Two arrows from each of you, and all six will be down.”

““It’s because of me they’re doing this,” said Amba.

“Be calm,” said Mohinder, nocking an arrow onto his

bowstring. "Everything's arranged. Wait here while I talk to them."

He pushed through the bush into the yard.

"One day you'll be grateful for what I do," he said, looking back at us for an instant.

"Dharm," I whispered. "We should leave. Mohinder's mood is strange."

"Stay," said a hunter, threatening us with his bow.

I gasped and Amba sniffed. Dharm's mouth fell open.

The other hunter pulled aside a branch to widen our view of the yard. We watched Mohinder stride into the open.

"Garak," he called. "By whose authority do you threaten an old man and beat his son?"

The ferryman's eyes widened with hope. Garak raised his club, his brow squeezed in anger. Two

guards drew knives, then stood transfixed as Mohinder tracked them with his bow.

“Can you not answer, Garak?” said Mohinder. “In whose name do you act?”

“I serve the *raja* of Makara city, and Bhagadasa his priest, as you well know, bandit,” said Garak.

“If you serve them, you must know of the pledge I made to Bhagadasa by the *sheesham* tree,” Mohinder said. “Why are you beating an innocent man when I’ve already pledged to hand over the boys?”

Dharm gasped. The hunter tightened his hold on my arm.

“Mohinder tricked us!” I said.

“Bandit, I know about your pledge,” said Garak. “I was there to hear it, but only a fool would think a bandit would keep his word. As I told Bhagadasa.”

“Then only fools know the truth,” said Mohinder, “for I’m here, as promised. But where is Bhagadasa? My pledge was to him.”

Garak swung his head toward the ferryman’s hut. Bhagadasa stepped out of the door, the image of an upright priest with his grey topknot and *dhoti* wound high over his thin ribs. He thumped his staff on the verandah floor, peering at Mohinder through half-closed eyes.

“Give me the boys and go,” he said. “You had your silver last night.”

Dharm and Amba stood stiff and defiant. I lifted my foot to run, but one of the hunters threw down his bow and twisted a rope around the three of us, crushing us together.

“Better leave this with us,” he murmured, snatching Dharm’s knife and sliding it into his own sash.

I opened my mouth to scream, then closed it. There

was no friend to hear me.

“The story has changed,” came Mohinder’s voice from the clearing, his arrow still trained on the guards. “The girl’s here too, if you want her.”

Amba spat, writhing against the rope.

“Vipers, you are,” said Dharm to the hunters. “We thought you were friends. You’re snakes.”

“Because of the girl, the cost is higher,” we heard Mohinder say.

“It’s you who’ll pay a high price once the Makara *raja* learns you’ve taken the princess,” said Bhagadasa.

“Bhagadasa, listen to my offer,” said Mohinder. “On your part, honour me with a second pouch of silver and the service of your guard Garak. For my part, I give the boys and my niece into your care, and will return Garak to you upon the children’s safe arrival in Sindhapur.”

Garak grunted, brandished his club.

“Bandit,” said Bhagadasa, “there’s no need for a new agreement. Pass the children to us as you agreed last night. The silver already hanging at your belt is enough. And you have no business with Garak. He stays with me.”

“The boys are yours,” said Mohinder, “although they won’t go willingly, but another purse is required in exchange for Amba and our pledge to allow you safe passage through the forest. And the guard Garak must come with me, for I’ll not permit him to travel near my niece. You’ll see him again in Sindhapur.”

Mohinder swept his bow across the courtyard, sighting his arrow on each guard in turn.

“Is it my habit to carry purses of silver for any brigand who happens by?” Bhagadasa asked.

“Bhagadasa,” said Mohinder. “I understand your difficulty with the silver. So I’ll adjust the plan. Send

Garak with me now but give me the purse in Sindhapur when Garak is returned to you. A wiser Garak, for who knows what robber secrets he'll spy out while he's with us? It's you who'll gain."

Daring and unruffled. A true tiger, I thought. I had trusted him. And now I hated him.

Bhagadasa gazed into the distance, his staff planted in front of him.

"I'm not interested in how you brigands live," he said. "But it's true that Garak's not needed here to nurse a bunch of children. Let him try the forest for a while."

He waved a hand at Garak.

"Go, Garak. Do your duty," he said.

"Your weapons, Garak," said Mohinder. "We'll keep them for you while you're our guest."

Garak, his face stiff, passed his club to Mohinder.

“And your knife,” said Mohinder.

Garak pulled a knife from his belt and passed it over. My eyes fastened on his thick fingers. At least Mohinder had taken away that threat.

Amba, Dharm and I were pulled from the bushes and passed to a Makara guard.

“Princess,” Bhagadasa said to Amba, “in the camp of the *raja* your guardian, cushions for your back and fragrant oils for your chafed wrists await you. Until then your hands must stay bound, and you’ll walk as a captive with these robber boys.”

He kept his face solemn beneath his silver top knot, but I could see a sneer trembling at the corner of his mouth.

“And for you two boys,” he said, “no silk cushions. I tremble at what the *raja* has planned for you. Kidnapping his adopted daughter. Hiding away his son Kumara. He’ll make you answer for that.”

I glanced at Mohinder, who ignored us as we were led off by Bhagadasa. Except that I thought he winked at me before he looked away.

Chapter Twenty-one

Bhagadasa took his procession of guards and captives away from the ferry without another word to the trembling old ferryman and his son. We left Garak standing by the hut, guarded by Mohinder's hunters, and Mohinder squatting in the dirt tending to the son's knee. I shuffled along behind Amba and Dharm, too disheartened to cry out when I stubbed my toe on a root and a wave of pain shot up my leg.

Bhagadasa's steps were brisk, his staff tapping in rhythm with his feet.

"The younger boy's dripping blood," he said. "Stop for a moment. Clean and bandage the foot. And

they look hungry. Feed them. I don't starve children, whatever they've done."

One of the guards pressed his club against Dharm's midriff. Dharm swung out his arm to keep his balance, forcing Amba forward, and jerking me against Amba's back, knocking my teeth together. As we dropped to the ground, my head ringing, he waved a water jar in front of our faces and tipped water into our open mouths, then over my toe. Another guard pulled a rag from the pouch at his waist and bound it around my foot. A third drew a packet from inside his leather vest, pushed chunks of dried fish and *chapatti* into our free hands.

The guards sat apart, eyes on us, eating, drinking, chatting. Bhagadasa rested under a tree, sipping water and chewing a morsel of food. I ripped off a piece of *chapatti* with my teeth.

"Have mine too," said Dharm. "I won't eat food offered by such people."

“Eat, Dharm,” said Amba, “for strength. You have a young brother to care for.”

Dharm ate. For Amba, not for me, I thought.

“What will happen to us, Dharm?” I asked, glancing at the guards to check I was unheard. “We were rescuing Amba, not kidnapping her.”

“Don’t worry, Arun. I’ll tell the Makara *raja* you were acting on my orders,” said Amba, her eyes fiery. “Right now he wants to keep me happy because he needs me.”

“We know,” I said. “He wants you to marry Vinod and make Makara rich.”

Dharm frowned and looked away.

“But your mother doesn’t want that,” I said. “So why did Mohinder give you up, Amba? To save the ferryman?”

“Some plan of my mother’s, I’m sure. My uncle acts

as my mother asks. But I'll shape it the way I want it," said Amba, staring at Dharm through narrowed eyes, smoothing her stained shawl on her shoulder as if it was newly starched. "Even though the Makara *raja* and my mother think they can pass me around like a ruby on a golden platter."

Bhagadasa rose from his seat by the tree and clapped his hands.

"Enough rest. On your feet," he said.

A guard hauled us up and we continued our march through the trees. When we reached the Makara *raja's* camp, night was closing in and the lamps were lit. My dread made it into a nightmare place, donkeys braying, black shapes flickering in the firelight.

"Princess, go to your cart," said Bhagadasa as a guard loosened the rope around her wrist.

"Roshani's waiting to serve you."

“Roshani and how many guards?” said Amba.

“You’re a princess,” Bhagadasa answered. “You’re due many guards. They’ve learned their lesson. This time they’ll protect you well.”

Amba sniffed, stalked ahead of the guards to the cart.

Bhagadasa planted his staff on the ground before the Makara *raja’s* tent. Dharm and I were hauled through the doorway, almost lifted off our feet by the guards. I glimpsed a small ante-chamber, a hanging lamp, shadows dancing in the flickering light. Then, I saw nothing, pushed to my knees, my forehead pressed into the sweet-smelling straw covering the ground.

“So this is how Sindhapuri students show respect to their master,” said a voice like cart wheels on gravel. “Stand up, so I can see what such creatures look like.”

The guard yanked us to my feet. I stood straight, my head high, as Dharm did beside me.

The Makara *raja's* voice was arrogant, but his appearance was frail, his beard soft and white, his eyes dim, his upper arms sagging and fragile. Only the fierce hooked nose the Tiger Aunt had described and his thick gold armbands and pointed helmet were what I expected in a *raja*. He stood in the doorway to the inner room, thrusting out his arm toward Bhagadasa.

“Priest-ji,” he said, “you promised me my son. Instead, you bring two ruffians from the forest. You promised me a goddess’s treasure. Instead you bring thieves.”

Bhagadasa cringed. The man who terrorised fisher folk and ferrymen cowered like a child caught stealing sweets.

“*Raja-ji*, if you permit me, I can explain. We were promised the *Kumara* and the treasure, but when we

met at the *sheesham* tree, Mohinder refused to honour this promise. But in your name, *raja-ji*, and with the clubs of the Makara guards, I forced him to offer up these two boys instead. And in my heart I was overjoyed, for these are the very boys who kidnapped your adopted daughter. Please accept them as a gift. They know the secrets of the treasure and of the *Kumara*.”

Two musicians by the wall drummed and sang in a steady rhythm. A servant squatting before the *charpoy* massaged the *raja*'s foot with oil.

The *raja*'s eyes closed, then shot open.

“And what of my adopted daughter?” he said.

“She's safe in her wagon, *Raja-ji*,” said Bhagadasa. “Safe from these malevolent boys.”

The *raja* tapped his knee in time with the drum, held out his other foot to the servant.

“Take the boys away. We’ll be in Sindhapur in two days,” he said. “I’ll deal with them there.”

We spent the night on the ground tied to a wagon shaft. We had blankets and enough play in the rope to lie down flat, although Dharm flinched when the rope was tightened around his arm.

“A blister,” said the guard, peering at Dharm’s wrist. “Pray that’s the worst thing Bhagadasa gives you.”

By morning, the wrist was red and puffy. Dharm passed me his barley porridge after one fingerful, gulping water instead of eating. The camp bustled with servants loading carts while the Makara *raja* reclined on a *charpoy* set under a tree. Amba’s companion Roshani peered through the curtains of Amba’s cart, then climbed down, followed by Amba swathed in a shawl, an anonymous figure except for the fire in her eyes. Bhagadasa returned from chanting by the river, his *dhoti* and shawl gleaming white in the rising sun.

“Take the princess for a few turns around the camp, Roshani,” said Bhagadasa. “Let the servants get on with packing up.”

Roshani touched Amba’s arm to guide her away from the activity. Trailed by guards, the two girls wandered at the forest’s edge, Roshani self-conscious in her role as Amba’s caretaker, and Amba stormy-faced, slumping her shoulders in defiance. They circled close to where Dharm and I crouched on the ground.

“Dharm and Arun,” she called, breaking away from her keepers before they realised her intention. “Are they treating you properly?”

Roshani scurried after her, pulling at her arm.

“Princess, you must come” she said. “Bhagadasa will be angry.”

Amba shook away her hands.

“Guard,” she said, “if they’re tied to a cart, I should be too. We acted together.”

Our guard tipped his head, saying nothing.

Amba came closer. I grasped Dharm’s arm, held up the inflamed wrist.

“You’re injured, Dharm,” she said.

“Come, Princess,” said Roshani, tugging again at Amba’s hand.

Bhagadasa hurried toward us, his shawl flapping.

“The *raja*’s ready to leave,” he said. “Return to your cart.”

Amba turned her back to him and glided away like a queen.

The Makara *raja* stepped from a footstool into a cart hung with red silk and golden fringe. Drivers manoeuvred their carts into a line, bullocks snorted,

wheels creaked, and the Makara caravan pulled onto the Sindhapuri road.

Chapter Twenty-two

Dharm and I walked behind the carts. We were captives, unwashed and ragged, but the rope around our wrists was flimsy and the guards were friendly, now that the *sheesham* tree affair was over and we were rid of Garak's presence.

"The gods might smile on you yet," said the one in charge, grey-bearded, hard-muscled. "It'll be all feasting and good cheer in Sindhapur. They might just beat you and let you go so they can get on with the fun."

"When will the competitions be?" asked another, the one who had cracked the knee of the ferryman's son

the day before. "That will be a sight to see - the look on the Sindhapuris' faces when our wrestlers defeat them."

"Not for several days," said the leader, striding on long legs, the rest of us hurrying to keep up with him. "First our *raja* will pledge himself to the Sindhapuri *raja*".

"Then the cartloads of gifts are presented," said a third guard, the one who had held Mala still for his beating. "I loaded them. Polished stones, blankets soft as down on a baby's head, slabs of salt and sweet *jaggary*, vessels and knives of bronze. Sindhapur will bless the day the Makara *raja* offers his allegiance."

"Feasting," said the grey-bearded captain. "Food for the taking. Rivers of milk, mountains of sweets, vegetables dripping with *ghee*, our noses quivering from the smell of roasting meat and baking *roti*. Be careful, or your stomachs will be too heavy to win at

the wrestling.”

The midday sun was hot, even in the autumn air. I struggled to fling my shawl over my head. The captain took the shawl from my bound hands and tied it over my forehead himself.

“We don’t want you dropping from sun sickness,” he said.

He did the same for Dharm.

“I don’t like the look of that blister,” he said. “Is it throbbing?”

Dharm shrugged.

“He won’t say, Captain-ji, but I know it hurts a lot,” I said.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said, and strode ahead past the line of carts.

“Bhagadasa agrees,” he said when he returned.

“You’re to ride on a cart, Dharm. After the next halt.”

The drivers shouted, the carts creaked to a stop, servants ran past us balancing baskets and bundles on their heads. The Makara *raja* and Bhagadasa sat on cushions under an umbrella, eating and drinking from painted trays. The rest of us gnawed cold *chapatti* and stretched out on the dirt and straggling vegetation. Dharm sat against a tree, unable to do more than breathe in and out.

The guards who had chatted with us as we walked drew a circle in the earth and brought out a bag of stones, tossing down a handful.

“What’s your call?” one asked his companion.

“Even,” said the other.

“More like odd,” the first guard said.

“Thirty-two. Even,” I whispered to Dharm, to bring

some life back to his face. Only Dharm could hear, I thought, but I misjudged.

“Hoi, boy!” said the guard. “Don’t interfere. I’ll let it go, but most would make you regret it.”

“But he’s right. There are thirty-two,” said his companion. “How did you do that, boy? You’re not a cheater, are you?” He glared at Dharm. “You’re his brother,” he said. “You should control him.”

“Yes, guard-ji,” Dharm said, too sunk in pain to follow what was happening.

The guard threw the stones again. I counted twenty-seven.

“Call it, boy,” he said. “What’s your count, since you claim you’re so good at this?”

“Thirty,” I said, giving the wrong answer deliberately.

“Twenty-seven,” he said. “Not so clever, are you? Leave the game for those who know how.”

The captain came to take Dharm to a cart.

“You too,” he said to me. “Keep an eye on him.”

We perched on a pile of blanket rolls and bundled clothing, our ankles tied to the wagon shafts, our hands gripping blanket folds as the load swayed beneath us. The wheel lurched over a root, throwing us from side to side. Dharm grunted in pain, losing his hold and slipping toward the edge. I cried out. The driver turned and caught him just in time.

“Try another cart,” said the captain. “That one for example. Tuck him in between those chests. Safe and comfortable.”

“Forgive me,” said the driver, “but not there. These are gifts for the *raja* of Sindhapur. We can’t allow captives to lounge on them.”

“Another one, then,” said the captain. “It doesn’t matter which. Just somewhere he won’t slip off.”

“It’s difficult,” the driver said. “The *Raja*’s tent, the priest’s tent, their food and clothing and furniture. Which of those things should be soiled by the filthy feet of a boy? A kidnapper, at that.”

The curtains trembled on Amba’s cart several wagons ahead, and Amba’s face broke through the folds of cloth, her dark eyes curious.

“We have room,” she called. “Let him ride with us.”

“Princess, he’s fine here, for the time being,” he said. Then, added in a voice Amba could not hear, “It’s not fitting.”

He walked on, saying nothing more, keeping pace with our rolling cart. My back ached from holding Dharm’s arm with one sweaty hand and clutching the blanket pile with the other.

“Not fitting,” the captain repeated. “The princess and the captives together – not fitting.”

He reached out to feel Dharm's forehead.

"But we're travelers. We make do with what we have," he said. "Hang on, Arun, for a few moments more."

Once again he strode past the carts to the head of the wagon train. There was a spring in his step when he returned.

"Bhagadasa's given his permission," he said, looking past Dharm's glazed eyes to me. "Because of your brother's fever. You'll travel in Amba's wagon. He can lie flat there."

The bullocks slowed to a stop, Bhagadasa peered from behind his curtains, servants clustered at the side of the track to watch. I trailed after the two guards, who half-carried Dharm to Amba's cart. Amba and Roshani held back the drapery, squeezing to the sides to make room as Dharm was hefted onto the floor.

“Arun too,” said the captain.

“How should we bind him?” asked the guard who heaved me into the cart, dim and airless behind the curtains.

“No need,” said a voice from outside.

I heard Bhagadasa’s staff tapping on the ground, saw his grey topknot sway into view around the end of the cart.

“No need to tie him,” he said. “He won’t jump off. He’ll not leave his brother.”

He gestured behind to a servant, who handed me a round-bellied pot and a handful of soft rags.

“Bathe the wrist with this,” Bhagadasa said. “All the way to Sindhapur. Don’t be lazy about it. I want him in good health to answer for his misdeeds.”

He turned away, flourishing his staff, the servant scurrying to keep up. I glanced at Amba, crammed

up against the side railing, her long braid shining through her thin shawl. She raised her eyebrows.

“Tie the curtains open, Roshani,” said the captain. “Better the princess’s face scratched with blowing sand than her reputation ruined.”

The crimson curtains shimmered in the sun as Roshani drew them into her arms and twisted them around the cart frame. I moved to help, but she finished while I was still untangling my legs. Amba smoothed the embroidered mat where Dharm sprawled, worked a cushion edged with silver under his head.

“I’m glad you’re here, Arun,” said Amba. “You’ve brought the air with you. It was too stuffy.”

“Dharm’s very ill,” I said.

“Use the mixture Bhagadasa gave you,” said Amba. “He knows about healing.”

I dipped a rag in the pot and laid it on Dharm's red and swollen wrist. He brushed at his arm as drops of water and bits of leaf trickled over it.

"I don't think he knows where he is," said Amba. "Dharm," she said, bending to speak into his ear, "it's Amba. You're here with me."

Dharm groaned. His eyelids trembled but stayed shut.

I squeezed liquid onto the sore.

"Put more," said Amba. "Do you think the swelling's less, Arun? Is he recovering?"

"He must recover," I said. "I promised my father."

My voice faltered.

"I can see why you respect your brother," said Amba. "He understands things. Just like my mother, but he doesn't push us around the way she does."

Dharm moaned through crusted lips.

Roshani offered a jar to Amba, who seized it and dribbled water into Dharm's mouth.

"Bhagadasa and the Makara *raja* think they'll receive thanks from the *raja* of Sindhapur for carrying me to Sindhapur," said Amba. "But they won't."

"Will you become the wife of the *raja's* son?" I asked.

"Arun, right now it's convenient if they think so," said Amba. "What will happen when we arrive in Sindhapur I won't say, for there's a spy sitting here who'll repeat every word to Bhagadasa."

Roshani hung her head.

"He's promised she'll serve in the royal house of Sindhapur," said Amba. "I coaxed it out of her."

Roshani was silent, pressing her lips together, squeezing her hands into fists. Amba was unfair, I

thought. A servant girl could not defy a priest. I caught Roshani's eye and shrugged. A smile quivered at the corner of her mouth.

"Look, Arun," said Amba, "stop asking questions and pay attention to Dharm's wrist. Soak it again."

She dipped a fresh cloth in the jar and passed it to me. For the rest of the afternoon, cramped in the small space, we watched over him, bathing his arm, cooling his forehead.

By the time we stopped for the night, Dharm was sitting, propped up by cushions.

"Much better," said Bhagadasa when he picked his way down the line to check us.

He handed me a small stone pot.

"Smear it with this ointment and bandage it up. You'll ride here again tomorrow."

"There's no need, Bhagadasa," said Dharm. "The

cart's not meant for four people. Arun and I can walk."

"You contradict me?" asked Bhagadasa. "A captive? A kidnapper? I've said how it will be. Let it be done."

He turned to the captain.

"Tie him by the ankles tonight. Let the wrist heal."

One more day, and we would be in Sindhapur. Home. But not a happy homecoming.

Chapter Twenty-three

By morning, the swelling was almost gone. All day we bumped along the track until we drew up before the city walls, black against the sunset. The servants set up tents on the dusty weeds, served lentils and *chapattis* from trays set on the ground, laid out blankets by the fire.

“Where will we sleep tomorrow?” I asked Dharm as we huddled against the cart wheel, tied by the foot. “In Sindhapur prison? Will they give us blankets? Will they tell Papa what happened?”

“Arun, I’m ready for whatever comes. But don’t worry. You’ve done nothing. I’m the one they want.

I'll tell them to let you go."

"Not without you," I said. "I promised Papa."

The guards shook us awake before dawn and led us through the reeds to wash in the river, then back to the carts. Dharm was almost recovered. He chewed his morning *chapatti* and dried dates with relish, and the fiery red of his wound had faded to pink.

I was too nervous to eat. I peered beneath the wagon at the activity in the camp. Bhagadasa chanted his prayers at the river's edge, guards curled their moustaches and polished leather breast plates and caps, servants tidied away breakfast things and wound themselves into fresh clothing.

Then the camp grew still, silent but for the gulls and the river. The guards drew up on the packed earth, the servants stood in a line, hands folded, watching for movement from the city.

A throng of people flowed out of the open gateway,

Sindhapuri guards with gleaming helmets and great carved bows, officials with intricate turbans and *dhotis* and shawls of silk. Striding in front, as haughty as I remembered him, was Vinod the raja's son. Red hair glowing in the sun, sash and turban heavy with gold thread, *dhoti* so fine it billowed.

The Makara *raja* and Bhagadasa stepped from their tents. Bhagadasa, goatskin on his shoulder, beads around his topknot and his neck, tiger amulets gleaming on his upper arms. The Makara *raja*, his crown like a golden sun.

"Our *raja*," said the Makara guard tending Dharm and me. "Eighty years old and still majestic as a god."

Amba pushed aside the curtain and swung her legs over the edge of the cart.

"Princess, stay out of sight," said Bhagadasa. "Busy yourself with your ointments and oils. Your time with the prince will come later."

The Sindhapuri procession reached the camp. I wriggled under the wagon as far as the rope would let me, twisting my head to view the gathering. Our guard ignored me, engrossed in Vinod's arrival.

"*Raja* of Makara city," proclaimed Vinod, "I've come to escort you to my father the *raja* of Sindhapur, who waits to receive you and the priest Bhagadasa."

His words were courteous, but his eyes wandered.

"Prince," said Bhagadasa, "I make one request. In our charge are two evil doers who deserve to be caged like tigers. Does your city have a place to confine them? The *raja* of Sindhapur will thank us for their capture."

Such lies from a priest. Dharm's eyes were closed, his chin squared, determined to subdue his anger. But I bubbled over with fury.

"Vinod of Sindhapur," I shouted from beneath the cart, "look on us with favour, your loyal servants,

who are not evil-doers, not raging tigers.”

The prince, the Makara *raja* and Bhagadasa all turned their heads. Bhagadasa flung his arm to summon help. The guard hauled me back by the rope around my ankle, clamping his hand over my mouth.

“I’ve treated you well and you get me in trouble,” he muttered into my ear.

“Prince, pay no attention,” Bhagadasa called out. “It’s as I told you. These are dangerous captives. But safely chained in your father’s prison they’ll cause no harm.”

“I’ve become curious, Bhagadasa,” said Vinod. “Bring these villains into the open. I want to see them.”

Two guards came running to help. They dragged us by the arms out from behind the carts.

“Dharm and Arun of Sindhapur,” said Bhagadasa, “sons of Hari the merchant, expelled from their master’s school, a disappointment to their parents, perpetrators of heinous crimes which I won’t speak of here but only into the private ear of the *raja* of Sindhapur.”

I stiffened. The guard’s hand hovered near my mouth, but I said nothing.

The prince thrust out his chin.

“Dharm, son of Hari the merchant,” he said. “I remember that name. I remember your insolence in the sacred wood. I see you didn’t return to your father in Sindhapur, as I advised. Bring them, Bhagadasa. I am certain there’s a place for them in my father’s dungeons.”

He turned and walked off with his guests and escort of guards.

Amba and Roshani climbed down from their cart and

strolled under the trees while tents were dismantled and packed. The captain steered them away when Amba moved toward us.

“They’re prisoners, Princess,” he said. “Not fit for your company. Soon you’ll be in the presence of the *raja* of Sindhapur and the prince.”

“Dharm, I made things worse by calling out to Vinod,” I said as the guards roped us to the cart.

“Bhagadasa had already decided,” said Dharm. “What you or I do makes no difference.”

Chapter Twenty-four

We were led down the main road to the market, between the walls with discoloured patches and hanging vines that I remembered, the wheels rattling over bricks I had walked on many times. Our guards gazed wide-eyed at the garlanded walls, the brightly dressed Sindhapuris gathered to cheer the visiting *raja* and throw the flower petals.

I averted my face from the throngs. If one of Mata's friends or Papa's clients or even our parents themselves recognised us, the shame would be unbearable.

We were halted near the market, while the others

rolled on up the slope leading to the palace.

“No palace for you,” said our guard, hauling us by the arms across a courtyard to a barred door.

“Prisoners of the *raja* of Makara city,” he told the sentry. “I’m to leave them here.”

The sentry raised the bar and urged us through the entrance.

“You won’t be lonely once your companions wake up,” he said, scraping the door shut. “But be careful of them. They broke a wine vendor’s nose when they didn’t like his price. “

I had walked past it many times, this little building by the market. Now I was inside, my feet scratched by the straw on the floor, my eyes growing accustomed to the gloom.

“Over there,” said Dharm, “on the floor. Are they sleeping?”

A shape turned over and began to snore. The other lifted his head to stare at us, his eyes gleaming in the shadows, then flopped back down.

“Maybe Mohinder will rescue us,” I said, thinking of his wink.

“He’s the one who put us here,” said Dharm. “He gave us up to Bhagadasa.”

“Maybe Papa will give Bhagadasa jewels or something and they’ll let us go,” I said.

“Pray Papa doesn’t find out,” said Dharm.

For two days we waited while the Makara *raja* swore allegiance to Sindhapur and the city celebrated. Two days of hard *chapatti* and lukewarm water, of lying in straw that made my skin itch and sitting against a flaking plaster wall staring at cracks in the door and dust motes in the light.

Our companions played at dice with a handful of

pebbles.

“Join us,” they said.

Dharm warned me away with his eyes. Foolish to gamble with men of short tempers.

“No,” he said. “We have nothing to wager.”

They scowled at the rejection.

“Our parents have forbidden us,” I invented, to ease the tension.

“Still nestled in your mother’s lap?” they scoffed, their anger forgotten.

Dharm and I made our own amusements. I twisted pieces of straw into little figures. One of them reminded me of Bhagadasa, caved in at the stomach, a bump like a knob of matted hair on the head. I wrapped its arm around a straw staff.

“Look, Dharm,” I said. “I’ll call this one Bhagadasa

and tear it to bits. And I'll make one of Mohinder, too, and do the same."

"Don't do it, Arun," said Dharm. "It's wishing harm on ourselves to wish harm on others. Master-ji said so. Do what I'm doing. It calms the mind."

He was arranging lengths of straw. Piles of long, medium, and short, and one of the dried blossoms that fell out of the tangle. Counting with rapt attention, as if he was sorting rubies and emeralds.

On the third morning, the sentry ushered in two Makara city guards.

"You're wanted," said one, as they bound our wrists and led us outside. "As tribute."

"We're to be given as gifts?" I asked.

"Trophies," said the guard. "Tokens of Makara's friendship with Sindhapur."

They marched us up a long avenue, up a staircase,

into the audience building.

“Bhagadasa wants you clean and oiled,” said the guard, hurrying us to a side room along smooth floors, past carved doors, latticed windows, and walls painted in delicate bands of red and black.

Then freshly barbered, wearing new shawls and *dhotis*, we waited with the Makara servants for the Sindhapuri *raja's* summons's, the same servants who had walked covered in dust from Makara city, but now dressed in starched yellow sashes, the men with turbans shot with silver thread, the women with flowers in their hair.

The summons was slow to come.

“He's meeting with his ministers,” said a Makara servant. “They found cheaters in the market place. They put people to death here if they use false weights, I hear.”

“Not to death,” I said, “just chop off their hands. Or

maybe fine them, my father says.”

“Don’t talk of punishment” said our guard. “These two boys will face it soon enough. Leave them in peace till then.”

What did Sindhapur do to kidnapers, I wondered. Papa had never mentioned that.

The Sindhapuri chamberlain entered, his moustache curved like bullock horns. The same chamberlain who months before had let me into the audience hall, then abandoned me in a dark corner. He eyes swept over me now without recognition.

He pounded his staff on the floor.

“The *raja* of Sindhapur,” he said, “awaits the *raja* of Makara city in the audience chamber.”

The Makara guards formed a column, passing through the door into the great hall. Servants followed, chests and baskets of precious stones and

bronzes balanced on their heads, then the Makara *raja*, beak-nosed under the arch of his golden crown, majestic in spite of the servants hovering beside him to steady his shrunken body. Bhagadasa paced beside him, stately and remote, flourishing his wooden staff. New amulets were bound to his upper arms, the tiger eyes outlined in black.

More guards followed, leading Dharm and me like bullocks for a sacrifice.

Amba watched from the inner room, her thick braid wound with pink blossoms and hung with gold, her skirt stiff with pleating. Roshani's wary eyes peeked out at her side.

Amba caught Dharm's eye, lifted her wrist and tapped it with her finger. Dharm looked down at his bound wrists and healing blister, then looked at her and bowed. She nodded, satisfied.

The procession flowed down the central aisle of the great hall. Satya the Sindhapuri *raja* was supported

by the massive carved legs of his throne, shaded by a fringed canopy, the golden rays of his crown fanning out behind his head. Beside him, sat Vinod, red hair glinting. One by one, the bearers laid baskets and boxes at Satya's feet and passed back down the aisle. Satya acknowledged the offerings with folded hands.

Dharm and I were kept in the shadows at the rear, where months before I had stood holding Mata's tiny wooden box.

Bhagadasa stood before the throne.

"Great *raja* of Sindhapur," he said. "To mark the friendship of Sindhapur and Makara city, if you allow it, the Makara *raja* will perform two services for his brother *raja*."

Satya regarded Bhagadasa with eyes as searching as his son's, but kind where Vinod's were haughty.

"As you wish," he said.

“Bring the captives to the throne,” said Bhagadasa.

A Makara guard pulled us forward from the shadow behind the pillar. Rigid with terror, I concentrated on my footsteps.

Chapter Twenty-five

“Satya, *raja* of Sindhapur,” Bhagadasa said as Dharm and I were hurried up the side of the hall, “here before you are two boys, Sindhapuri boys, cherished and protected by your city, who left its sheltering walls and fell into iniquity, abusing the good character their city so graciously gave them. My men, out of duty and at peril to themselves, have seized them and brought them to you for your proper attention.”

An elegant speech from such twisted truths. There was a look in Satya *raja*'s eyes, courteous, attentive to Bhagadasa's words, but with flashes of

amusement quickly suppressed, that gave me hope.

“Even your son was annoyed by their insolence,” said Bhagadasa. “The prince can tell you himself.”

Satya’s face hardened. My hope died. Satya would not tolerate insults to his son.

“Also to me, the priest of the Makara *raja* and of the Tiger Aunt, they were discourteous. And worse, they’ve stolen the Tiger Aunt’s treasure from beneath her feet.”

Satya studied us for a moment, then pronounced judgment.

“Let them return the treasure to the Tiger Aunt, and consult with her priests how to atone,” said Satya. “As for the rest, these are the acts of mischievous children. It’s for their father to chastise them and teach them manners. That is the practice in Sindhapur as I’m sure it is in Makara city.”

My heart beat fast. The Sindhapuri *raja* was releasing us.

“Your words are wise,” said Bhagadasa, “but I have misled you by leaving their gravest crime until the end.”

A flutter of interest passed through the hall.

“You might have heard of the beauty of the princess of Makara city,” said Bhagadasa. “Hair like night’s curtain, eyes flashing like stars.”

“I know of the Makara *raja*’s adopted daughter,” said Satya, “and I know of his son. The Makara *raja* is twice-blessed, a son and a daughter both.”

The Makara *raja* cleared his throat as his attendants helped him to stand.

“Satya *raja*,” he called out, his voice husky but still commanding, “my son is a great disappointment. Do not speak of him.”

“As you wish,” said Satya, his eyes narrowed in distaste.

I remembered Alankar shivering under the mango tree as he thought of his father.

“But Amba my daughter is the solace of my old age, gentle and obedient,” said the Makara *raja*, falling back into his chair.

Dharm covered his mouth to hide his smile.

Bhagadasa resumed the tale.

“These two sons of your city attempted to kidnap the Makara princess,” he said, “and it was only my swift action and that of the Makara guard that saved her from being carried off to the outlaws’ desert stronghold.”

The *raja* of Sindhapur glanced at us, then stared in astonishment at Bhagadasa.

“Kidnapping!” he said. “This I didn’t expect. They’re

only boys. Who made you do this?" he asked, looking at Dharm.

Dharm folded his hands and lowered his face. I concentrated on the arms of the whisk bearers waving away insects behind Satya.

Bhagadasa broke the silence.

"I can give you the answer," he said. "Kidnapping's customary for them. They're part of a robber band. Mohinder and his outlaw sister. It's the sister's doing. She's made these boys her puppets."

Dharm gasped. The Sindhapuri *raja* held up his hand for silence, then gestured for Dharm to speak.

"Satya *Raja-ji*," said Dharm, "whatever I've done was at the urging of my own mind, no one else's. Not Mohinder's, not the Tiger Aunt's. Whatever punishment you require, I accept in my own name. And my younger brother Arun's punishment I accept for myself too, for he's a child, and I'm responsible

for him. Let him return to my father's house."

"Satya *raja*," said Bhagadasa, "his speech is dutiful, but not to be trusted. This once virtuous boy has become one with the robber bands of the forest. So, tied to their evil that even when the scoundrel Mohinder betrayed him in front of his eyes, still he tries to shield him. Evil brother. Evil sister. You are a great king who will never allow such evil to go unpunished."

I forgot my resolution to stay silent.

"Satya *raja* of Sindhapur," I called out.

The guard's hand tightened on my arm. Dharm hissed with alarm. The servants stared, fly whisks suspended in the air. My legs shook, but there was no turning back.

"Mohinder and the priestess aren't evil," I said. "It's the Makara city people who did the evil. They broke the Tiger Aunt's hut and drove her from her shrine."

The guard twisted my arms behind my back and looked to Bhagadasa for direction. Bhagadasa lunged toward me, eyes blazing, then pulled back. The Makara *raja's* mouth spewed meaningless sounds.

“One moment,” said the Sindhapuri *raja*. “I recognise this boy. You once gave me a small box.”

I lowered my head in an agony of nervousness.

“Answer,” the guard muttered, squeezing my arm, but my throat had tightened.

“You were a timid boy playing at boldness then, and you’re the same now,” said the *raja*. “And the mother who sent you with that box. Is it at her request that you’ve come here again to be bold?”

“Speak, or I’ll shake the words from you,” the guard growled, but my mouth would not unclench.

Dharm cleared his throat.

“Our mother has no idea that we’re in Sindhapur,” he said. “Nor my father. They’re happier not knowing.”

“Your care for your mother is as it should be,” said the Sindhapuri *raja*, “but you should have remembered her when you plotted a kidnapping. Bhagadasa has spoken correctly. You must answer for such a crime. Tomorrow you’ll learn your punishment.”

He tipped his head toward his bronze-helmeted Sindhapuri guards. Two of them gripped our elbows and marched us away from our Makara guards.

“*Raja* of Makara city,” I heard the Sindhapuri *raja* say as we were urged down the length of the hall, “it was mentioned that you had two services to perform. One is the presentation of these captives. What’s the other?”

Bhagadasa answered for the Makara *raja*.

“These two boys have made us feel unclean. Our second service is joyful and godly. Allow us to approach you tomorrow with the last gift.”

At the door of the little jail, the keeper was waiting for us. “I thought I’d see you back here,” he said. “You’ll be alone. The others paid their fines and went off with their families.”

“It’ll be different for these two,” said one of the guards who had marched us through the bazaar. “Driven into the forest, most likely.”

“Or sent into slavery,” said the other.

“Or walled into their father’s courtyard, so we’ll never see their pretty faces again.”

I sat on the floor in the gloom, sunk in the same despair I saw in Dharm’s eyes.

Chapter Twenty-six

“Explain to me,” said Dharm. “The Sindhapuri *raja* knows you. How can that be? And what’s this box he’s talking about?”

“Dharm, I can’t tell you. Mata said you mustn’t know. It was just a way of helping you.”

“If I ask Mata, do you think she’ll tell me?” asked Dharm.

“I think so,” I said. “It was a long time ago now.”

“But she’s not here to ask,” said Dharm, looking into my eyes, daring me to object.

I knew his reasoning was faulty, but it gave me an excuse to explain.

“Dharm, when you scolded Vinod in the sacred wood, Mata sent me to the *raja* with this box to smooth his anger. She was afraid the prince would complain to his father and you’d be punished.”

“Why you? Why not me?” Dharm asked.

“Mata said you and Papa would forbid it. So I went.”

“But what box was it?” asked Dharm. “What was in it?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Mata wouldn’t say. A tiny box. Maybe a jewel or something. The Sindhapuri *raja* didn’t open it.”

“And he remembered you all this time? Something’s going on we don’t understand. He would have freed us except for the Makara *raja* and Bhagadasa. Maybe he still will.”

“Whatever happens, we’ll be fine,” I said, my voice shaking.

Dharm’s body sagged.

“I keep saying that, but I don’t believe it,” he said. “How can things be fine if Amba marries that arrogant Vinod? How can I accept that?”

Dharm’s eyes were squeezed together in anguish.

“Oh,” I sighed, feeling like a traitor as a wisp of excitement flickered in my chest. For if Amba came to live in Sindhapur, perhaps she would bring Roshani with her.

Next morning, guards led us to the well by the courtyard wall. A servant drew water for us, gestured toward a bench and a pile of folded clothing.

“Wash yourselves, change your clothes and scrub the old ones,” said the guard. “The Sindhapuri *raja*’s

busy with a band of hermits. You won't be called till afternoon."

Our clean clothes had been dried and returned to us, smelling of fresh air and cooking fires, before the summons came. The sun was low, striking the side of my face, as once again we climbed to wait at the back of the audience hall.

The Sindhapuri *raja* sat cross-legged on his throne, the slanting light glancing off his helmet and the golden rays fixed behind it, the carved lion heads of his arm rests, the luminous ruby on his chest. The chamberlain hovered near, straight and lean as his gold-topped staff, whisk bearers clutched whisk handles to their shoulders, courtiers with jewelled head bands or turbans of gold-flecked cloth perched on cushioned chairs. The prince sat in front of his father's dais, russet hair curling from under his helmet, his head fixed on the four people before the throne.

The Makara *raja*, Bhagadasa, Amba, her long braid hanging down her back, and Roshani.

Amba and Roshani. Tiger and flower.

“Sindhapur and Makara city, joined together,” the Makara *raja* was saying in his cracked voice. “It’s just as the ancient tales have told. A prince, a princess, a chance encounter in the forest, an instant revelation they were meant to be one.”

The Sindhapuri *raja*’s fingers drummed on his knee, his face irritated. Bhagadasa raised his eyebrows in warning, but the Makara *raja* was too caught up to notice.

“The prince might not have confided it,” he said, “for young people are shy concerning these things, but I discovered the situation through observation. They’re smitten with each other, a great opportunity for us. The children joined in marriage, the fathers joined in friendship.”

The Sindhapuri *raja* made no response. Amba edged into the shadow of the nearby pillar, drawing Roshani with her. The hall was hushed, expectant.

Vinod rose to his feet.

“Ask the Makara *raja*,” he said, “by whose consent he tosses my name about like a whisk bearer tossing insects. If this is how Makara city understands courtesy, then he must teach his subjects better habits.”

The Makara *raja*'s head jerked in surprise.

“Satya, *raja* of Sindhapur, I assure you,” said the Makara *raja*, “the honour of the prince is my highest concern. Is it not honourable to join two great houses into one? And all the better, if the prince has his heart's desire by his side.”

“Makara *raja*,” said Vinod, “whoever your informants are, they're mistaken. This woman you call your daughter might be esteemed in Makara

city, but never in Sindhapur.”

He glanced toward Amba, sniffed and turned away. Amba’s face was a blur in the shadow, but I could see her eyebrows lifted in mockery.

Beside me, Dharm groaned in distress. The guard tightened his grip.

The Makara *raja* took a halting step backward, his eyes shocked, his mouth trembling. A guard raised an arm to steady him.

“I mean no insult to you, Makara *raja*,” said Vinod, “because you might be unaware of her behaviour before she came under your care. Shameless, running unchecked through the forest. Not the conduct of a princess.”

He glanced again at Amba, his face screwed into a sneer. Dharm sucked in air through his teeth. I thanked the gods that the prince was paying no attention to our end of the hall.

“Watch Amba,” I muttered to Dharm. “She’s making Vinod look like a fool.”

Amba held Vinod’s eyes as she twirled the end of her sash, yellow like the one he had teased her with in the sacred wood. Vinod stared, his mouth hung open, his eyes bulged, until he pulled his gaze away.

“Still she misbehaves,” he said, his tongue stuttering over the words.

The Sindhapuri *raja* must have noticed how Amba taunted his son, but he sat at ease, his composure untouched. His eye swerved to the entrance behind us. I heard shuffling feet and whispering, and turned to look.

“Dharm,” I muttered. “Look.”

New arrivals to the great hall. Friends I had last seen the day Dharm was banished from the *ashram*.

Master-ji, Alankar, and Hamsa.

They stopped inside the entrance, Master-ji's arm around Alankar's shoulders, Hamsa to the side. Hamsa, unsubdued by the grandeur of the audience hall, grinning at me, mouthing words I was too far away to decipher. Master-ji, with his knob of black hair, his little round stomach attached to his thin body like an afterthought, his brown eyes that seldom blinked. Alankar, his mouth pursed with self-importance. Why was he here, in the same room with Bhagadasa and the Makara *raja*? Weren't they trying to kill him? Or was that just a story he'd made up?

"Raja of Makara," said the Sindhapuri *raja*, "send your daughter to rest in your quarters. Then you and I can talk at leisure."

Amba bowed as she passed us on her way to the door. Roshani imitated her. Amba's eyes were gleeful.

"Raja of Makara city," said the Sindhapuri *raja*, "A

delegation came to me this morning with a strange tale. I asked them to return this afternoon to tell it in your presence.”

The Makara *raja* and Bhagadasa shifted uncomfortably, though their chairs were sturdy and well-padded with cushions. Bhagadasa glanced at the Sindhapuri guards drawing in around them and sucked in his lips.

“Let Master-ji approach,” said the Sindhapuri *raja*.

Master-ji patted Alankar’s shoulder, then moved to meet the chamberlain, who led him, pot belly, jagged toenails and all, past the sitting nobles to the throne.

“Master-ji, you had much to say when we spoke earlier,” said Satya *raja*. “I wish to hear the details again.”

Master-ji bowed.

“*Raja* of Sindhapur, I have come to plead the cause of Kumara, prince of Makara city, a boy too young to stand alone against the wiles of his elders,” he said, his wooden staff balanced beside him. “My tale is sorrowful, and I regret that for the second time your ears must hear it.”

Alankar stood at attention, his chin thrust high.

“For though the birth of a son is greeted with thanksgiving by most families,” said Master-ji, “it was not so when a boy was born to the queen of Makara city. In that city, a fever raged, there were deaths in every household, and cries of grief rose over every courtyard wall. Just days before the birth of the infant, the beloved daughter of the royal house was taken, and even as the queen laboured to give birth, she wandered in delirium, and two days later, despite the vigilance of the realm’s greatest physicians, she too left this world.”

In the audience chamber, heads turned toward the

Makara *raja*, who sat with lowered face and half-closed eyes. Hamsa slung a protective arm over Alankar's shoulders.

"Charna, *raja* of Makara city," continued Master-ji, "shook his fist in anger at the gods. They had taken his gentle wife and his daughter of the dancing eyes, and left in exchange a squalling stranger.

"These gods carry off what we want, and give us what we don't want,' he moaned.

"The *raja* of Makara city had a priest, Bhagadasa, who trembled to hear the gods spoken of with scorn.

" 'Great *raja* of Makara city,' he said, 'it's the duty of a *raja* to accept with grace what the gods ordain, for how else will his subjects learn the proper way to behave?'"

"The *raja*, realising his priest was right, calmed himself, and remembered that his son was the son of a king. He named him Kumara, and called for

nursemaids to wait on the child, priests to purify his rooms, acrobats to amuse him, fine cloths to wrap him in and gold to wind round his wrists and ankles.”

Hamsa pulled Alankar by the arm to the place by the pillar where Dharm and I stood with our guards. He grinned at us, then held out his hand toward Alankar.

“This boy,” he murmured to the guards, “is the very Kumara you’re hearing about.”

The guards’ eyes widened.

In front of Satya’s throne, Master-ji continued his tale.

“Bhagadasa watched over the progress of the prince, and taught him to bow down to his father on the few occasions the *raja* visited his son’s apartments. Until one day Bhagadasa made a remark, and fear gripped the *raja*’s heart.

“‘*Raja* of Makara,’ said Bhagadasa, having no idea

what turmoil would be stirred up by his words, ‘it’s time for Kumara to study the arts of governing, of warfare, of diplomacy. Bring teachers to train him in kingship, for one day he’ll rule in your place and must be prepared.’”

The Makara *raja* and Bhagadasa were rigid in their chairs, the tendons in their necks thick as ropes.

“The *raja* of Makara was overcome,” said Master-ji, “stricken by a sudden understanding. In order for Kumara to become *raja*, Charna would have to die. This knowledge shot through him like a burning arrow.

“‘This child has brought me pain from the moment of his birth,’ the Makara *raja* said. ‘And now I see he’s biding his time, waiting for me to leave this life. What kind of son puts all his hope in his father’s death?’

“In vain, Bhagadasa reminded him that it was always so,” said Master-ji, “that new seeds fall from fading

flowers, that Charna himself was *raja* only because his own father was dead.

“‘Guard me from this child,’ cried the Makara *raja*, ‘or he’ll be the death of me.’”

Master-ji paused, leaned into his staff. The hall was silent. The Makara *raja* drew up his legs and folded them beneath him. Servants brought torches to light the lamps hung on the pillars and I realised afternoon had passed into evening. The Sindhapuri *raja* held up his arm.

“It’s late,” he said. “The audience is finished for today. Return tomorrow, and we’ll hear the end of this tale, and deal with the boys as well.”

He strode down the aisle to the entrance, the chamberlain rushing behind. We bowed as they passed, and bowed once again as the Makara *raja* and Bhagadasa came after. Even Alankar, out of his father’s sight behind the pillar, joined his hands and bowed. Master-ji was still far off, caught in the knot

of courtiers and officials making their way toward us.

“Back to the prison house for you two,” said the guards when the *rajās* had gone, nudging us out of the hall. ‘You’ll have to wait till tomorrow to hear your fate.’”

Hamsa and Alankar stared as we were led away.

“But Arun, I have a riddle for you,” Hamsa wailed. ‘When is a *raja* not a *raja*?’”

“No riddles today,” said the guard, hurrying me through the entrance.

I looked back at Hamsa.

“When he’s an assassin,” he mouthed.

Master-ji watched from a distance, too far off to talk to us.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Another evening spent slouched against crumbling plaster eating boiled lentils and rice, another night sleeping on prickly straw, waking to Dharm's chanting.

The bar scraped, the door squeaked open, the guard, outlined in morning light, peered around the edge.

"This way, merchant-ji," he said. "They're respectful boys. They won't give you any trouble. But just a few moments. They'll be called to the audience hall soon."

"I understand," said a voice.

Papa's voice.

I held my breath, Dharm too, as Papa's square face, the shock of hair hanging over his forehead, appeared in the doorway.

Dharm bent to touch Papa's feet. I burst into tears, my arms dangling at my sides.

"Arun, greet your father as you've been taught," Papa said.

I crouched at his feet.

"We didn't mean to make you angry," I mumbled.

"Papa," said Dharm, "How did you find us?"

"Master-ji arranged it," said my father.

"We wanted to spare you," said Dharm. "It was better for you not to hear."

"The world is full of falsehood," said Papa, "but at

least to your parents be truthful.”

He turned to the guard.

“I’ll sit with my sons till they go to the *raja*,” Papa said.

The guard bowed and left us, closing the door behind him.

“Papa,” I said, “Dharm lied, but it was to keep Alankar safe. So Master-ji wouldn’t have to.”

Papa sat on the floor.

“Dharm, your fault was not in lying. Your fault, if there was one, was being too blunt. You scolded the prince, you were discourteous to the priest Bhagadasa. I’m not surprised. You’re my son and I know you well, though your shoulders are wider than when I last saw you.”

“A lie is a lie no matter what,” said Dharm, “but even if the gods turn against me, I’d lie again to shield

Master-ji from their anger.”

“Dharm, you’re like Master-ji. You uphold the principles,” said Papa. “I’m pleased with you, but I wish this hadn’t happened. Your mother and sister won’t rest till you’re back in our courtyard. I must rely on Master-ji to arrange your release, because I know how to barter for goods, but not for prisoners.”

The guard opened the door. Our escorts from the day before pushed in behind him.

“May the gods walk beside you,” said Papa.

“Papa,” I cried, “won’t you be with us?”

“Master-ji will be there,” he said, patting our shoulders. “You’ll be fine.”

But his eyes were worried as the guards led us off.

In the audience chamber, Master-ji was speaking at the far end of the long, pillared aisle, waving his staff

to emphasise his words. The Sindhapuri *raja* was on his dais, the Makara *raja* and Bhagadasa in their cushioned chairs by the aisle. Across from them sat the prince.

Near us in the shadow of a pillar stood Hamsa and Alankar. Hamsa grinned at me as Dharm and I and our custodians took our places. We edged as far up the aisle as we could without intruding on the seated nobles.

“*Raja*,” Master-ji said, “the situation for Kumara, son of the *raja* of Makara city, is grave.”

He waved his hand toward Alankar.

“While other fathers say ‘my son is my life,’ the Makara *raja* says ‘my son is my death.’ And Kumara has had to flee for his life.”

The Makara *raja* and Bhagadasa pressed the arms of their chairs, preparing to rise, then slumped down when the Sindhapuri guards closed in around them.

Their own guards had withdrawn to the passageway.

“Kumara’s uncles knew the story, but they’re dead,” said Master-ji, “murdered on their way back to Makara city after bringing Kumara to me. So it falls to my lips to tell you.

“One day Kumara was high in the *pipal* tree in his father’s courtyard, playing that he was in a great wheeled vehicle processing through the streets of his kingdom.”

Hamsa grinned at Alankar, nudged him with his elbow. Alankar scowled.

“He heard his father and Bhagadasa walking toward the tree, heard the words his father was saying,” said Master-ji. “He gripped the bough and shrank back, praying that the sound of his breathing would be lost in the rustling of the *pipal* leaves, because the words were evil things, meant for no one’s ears but Bhagadasa’s.

“This treasure at the shrine I’ll have for myself,’ Kumara heard his father say. ‘And you’ll serve me in this, Bhagadasa, for your fate is tied to my good will.’

“Then Kumara heard the priest Bhagadasa protest.

“‘But *Raja-ji*, the treasure is holy. The Tiger Aunt’s a holy woman,’ said Bhagadasa.

“‘If the tiger woman disappears into the next world,’ said the boy’s father, ‘the gods won’t care about the loss of one forest dweller among so many. Or, I’ll remind you, of a priest who turns his back on his *raja*.’

Courtiers gasped. Alankar stared at his father, his breath ragged. The Makara *raja* glared back, then glanced from side to side at the guards hemming him in.

Yes,” said Master-ji. “You’ve heard correctly. The Makara *raja* wished harm to a woman sacred to the gods. And the priest Bhagadasa surrendered to him.

“It will be as you say,’ he told the *raja*, glancing up at the tree as he and his king left the courtyard.

“Perhaps Kumara had been discovered, perhaps he had not. In the night, his uncles, the brothers of his mother, slipped away from Makara city and brought him to my school for safekeeping. For if the *raja* could think of killing a holy person, he wouldn’t hesitate to slaughter a boy who knew his ugly secret.”

Master-ji paused, then spread his arms wide, his staff gripped in one hand.

“Satya *raja* of Sindhapur,” he called out, “great *raja* of Sindhapur, to whom other *rajās* bow down, restore this young boy Kumara, prince of Makara city, to his rightful place in his father’s city, and keep him there unharmed.”

The Makara *raja* and Bhagadasa stared with wooden faces at the latticed windows, past the row of courtiers, past the prince and Alankar and Hamsa.

“*Raja* of Makara city,” said the Sindhapuri *raja*, “it’s my duty to ask what truth there is in the words just spoken.”

The Makara *raja* pushed himself to his feet, straightening his bent back. A Sindhapuri guard held out an arm to steady him, then stepped back at his angry wave.

“*Raja* of Sindhapur, I’m the *raja* of Makara city and an old man. There’s no need for me to answer,” he said.

“A case left unanswered is a case lost,” said Satya *raja*. “You must give your account or see the judgement go to Master-ji.”

“The *raja* of Makara city accounts to no one,” said the Makara *raja*.

“Then you, Bhagadasa,” said Satya, “will you speak for the Makara *raja*?”

Bhagadasa rose to his feet, his ribcage protruding over his sunken stomach, the tiger amulets prominent on his thin arms.

“Kumara should serve his father, not gather up enemies to speak against him,” said Bhagadasa. “And Master-ji has become Kumara’s mouthpiece and should not be trusted.”

We waited for the Sindhapuri *raja’s* reply.

Satya *raja* gripped the lion-head arms of his throne, the golden rays of his crown blazing.

“First judgement, the shrine,” said the Sindhapuri *raja*. “*Raja* of Makara, you must remove Bhagadasa from the tiger shrine, and return it to the Tiger Aunt, if she so wishes.”

Bhagadasa folded his hands, jerked his head in a stiff bow.

“Second judgement, the prince Kumara,” said Satya.

“Kumara, I acknowledge you as *raja* of Makara city. Return to your city and take up your duties. Since you’re young and inexperienced, my brother-in-law and nephew will go with you to guide you. My guards also, to keep you safe.”

Two of the courtiers lining the aisle rose to their feet and bowed to Alankar, one grey-haired, the other younger, both glittering in gold-edged *dhotis* and jewelled armbands.

“*Raja of Makara*,” said the Sindhapuri *raja*, “when you and Bhagadasa return to Makara city, spend your days in prayer and talking over past times. Leave the governing to Kumara.”

Courtiers stifled their murmurs. The Makara *raja* bowed, his eyes red-rimmed and moist. I tried to catch Alankar’s eye, but his face was fixed on the Sindhapuri *raja*, his mouth sagging open. Alankar, the pompous little tale bearer from Master-ji’s school, was going to be a *raja*.

“Bring a suitable seat for Kumara-ji, so that he may sit like a *raja*,” the Sindhapuri *raja* called out.

Servants set a chair with golden legs and silk cushions on the dais beside the *raja*. Satya *raja* placed a shawl woven in gold and crimson on Alankar’s shoulders, and pressed him onto the cushions. Alankar gazed down the length of the hall, his nose in the air, his nostrils flaring. He reminded me of a pudgy-cheeked child playing make-believe, but his eyes blazed with confidence and his hands lay with authority on the carved arms of the chair.

It was in his nature to sit on a throne, I thought. He was born to it.

Chapter Twenty-eight

The chamberlain tipped his head toward Dharm and me, and the guards hurried us up to the front of the hall. Master-ji laid his hand on our heads as we reached the dais.

“So here are the boys who were rude to my son, who stole from a holy shrine, who kidnapped a princess,” said the Sindhapuri *raja*. “We are waiting to hear from you where you took the treasure.”

“*Raja-ji*,” said Master-ji, “permit me to speak.”

The *raja* tipped his head in assent.

“These boys have no knowledge of the treasure. When the Makara *raja* turned his eye to the shrine, the treasure was carried to safety by friends of the Tiger Aunt. Only they can say where it is.”

The Sindhapuri *raja* caught Dharm’s eye.

“So you stole no treasure?” he asked.

“*Raja-ji*, I have never seen this treasure, let alone taken it,” said Dharm.

It was true. Even Hamsa and I, who had dug up the box from under the *neem* tree, had replaced it without seeing the contents.

“Then rest now, Master-ji, while I question these boys on other matters.”

Servants placed a chair for him, and Master-ji perched on the edge, his eyes watchful above his black beard. Hamsa stood behind, his eyes popping with anticipation.

“Kidnapping a princess,” said Satya *raja*. “You’re young for such a crime. What do you have to say?”

Without warning, Hamsa sprang to my side, hopping from foot to foot in excitement.

“Don’t worry, Arun,” he said, “I have a riddle.”

“Not so fast, my boy,” said a guard, swooping him up by the arms, his bare legs dangling.

“Hamsa!” scolded Master-ji. “This is the *raja*’s audience chamber, not a playground.”

The chamberlain’s mouth opened in shock, courtiers muttered, the prince smirked, the Makara *raja* and Bhagadasa stared ahead, lost in disgrace.

The guard turned to carry Hamsa from the hall.

“One moment, guard,” said the Sindhapuri *raja*. “Put the boy down and let him speak. He’s made me curious, with his talk of riddles.”

“Be careful, Hamsa,” I murmured as he was set down beside me. “You’ll end up in jail with Dharm and me.”

The chamberlain pounded his staff on the floor and the hall fell silent.

“State your name and your reason for interrupting the *raja*’s business,” he pronounced.

“I’m Hamsa of the island,” said Hamsa, “and this kidnapping made me think of a riddle.”

“The *raja* is listening. You may ask your riddle now,” said the chamberlain.

Hamsa drew himself up to speak. I saw he was trembling, but his voice was clear.

“Sindhapuri *raja*, this is my riddle. When is a kidnapping not a kidnapping?”

“Don’t keep the *raja* waiting,” said the chamberlain. “Give the answer.”

Hamsa stepped toward Satya, his palms raised.

“There are two answers,” he said. “First, a kidnapping’s not a kidnapping when the Makara *raja* kidnaps a daughter and calls it an adoption. And second, a kidnapping’s not a kidnapping when that daughter is kidnapped back, for then it’s called a rescue.”

He clapped his hands over his ears and hunched down, overcome by terror. I clutched Dharm’s arm, waiting for the *raja*’s wrath to fall.

But Satya *raja* smoothed his moustache, his face thoughtful.

“Stand up beside your friends, Hamsa of the island,” he said. “Where did you come by this knowledge of kidnappings?”

“From Master-ji’s friends, who came with us to Sindhapur,” said Hamsa. “From the Tiger Aunt and Mohinder her brother.”

The Makara *raja* and Bhagadasa sucked in their breath.

“Master-ji,” said the *raja*, “Where are these friends, that they aren’t here to speak for themselves?”

“They’re forced into hiding, in fear for their lives,” said Master-ji.

No matter,” said the *raja*, “for the *raja* of Sindhapur can’t in honour allow a princess of Makara to be kidnapped, even if it is to her benefit.”

He turned to his right, where Alankar sat, his feet on a golden stool, his shawl shimmering in the sun piercing the window screening.

“But for Kumara, *raja* of Makara city, the situation is different,” said Satya. “Kumara, it’s your adopted sister who was abducted. It’s your family matter we’re speaking of. You’re the Makara *raja* now. You have the power to help your friends.”

“Or punish them, right?” asked Alankar. “I could I collect a great fine from Arun, couldn’t I?”

The Sindhapuri *raja* shrugged.

“Or send him and his brother to the dungeons?”

“Master-ji,” said Satya *raja*. “Is this how your students show concern for each other?”

“*Raja-ji*,” said Master-ji, “perhaps the young Makara *raja* has forgotten Arun’s and his older brother’s protection him when he feared for his life in my forest school.”

His eye was stern, fixed on Alankar’s face.

Alankar rocked back and forth, propping up his elbow on the chair arm and leaning his chin into his hand. He smirked, then smoothed his face.

“Let Dharm and Arun go free,” he said, pursing his lips. “But only because I say so.”

“It’s settled,” said the Sindhapuri *raja*. “The Makara *raja* has spoken and the audience is over. The boys may go home to their mother.”

Satya gestured to Alankar and the two *rajas*, one old, one new, strode out of the hall, followed by the chamberlain. Dharm fell at Master-ji’s feet, then stood, his eyes wide with worry.

“Go home,” Master-ji said. “Your parents are waiting. Then return to me at the school. You may work through the rest of your punishment there.”

Papa and our old watchman Prabhu met us outside. Papa crushed us in an embrace, pulling our heads against his chest. Prabhu kissed our hands, straightened our shawls on our shoulders.

“It’s all due to Master-ji,” said Papa. “He knows how to talk to a *raja*.”

In a daze we returned to our courtyard.

“The gods be praised,” sobbed Mata, smiling through her tears. She sat us on cushions and heaped food in front of us. Wheat fried with sugar and ghee, *urad* beans in broth, thick and rich as cream, okra stuffed with spices, golden saffron threads steeped in milk to restore our strength.

“Too much responsibility he gave you,” she said. “He’s my elder brother and a holy man and I respect him, but in this he was too harsh. Two untried boys, banished to the forest.”

“Master-ji had to, Mata,” said Dharm. “I mistreated a guest. He couldn’t allow it.”

Our sister Sita ladled more milk into our bowls.

“You were brave, Arun, to go with Dharm,” she said.

“Arun did his duty,” said Papa, “as I knew he would.”

Chapter Twenty-nine

When evening fell, we moved inside, sitting cross-legged on *charpoys*.

“The poor child,” said Mata, when she heard how the prince had treated Amba.

“Well done,” she said, when she heard how Amba had taunted him.

I grew drowsy and stretched out on the *charpoy*, drifting off to sleep.

When I awoke, the room was dark. Dharm was asleep beside me, and a cotton quilt had been

thrown over us. Sita must have gone to her sleeping room, for Papa and Mata sat alone talking in undertones. Papa waved his arm and the shadows jumped in the lamp's flickering light. I lay still, curled on my stomach, straining to hear what they said.

"His family's been patient, but they won't wait much longer," said Mata. "We finally had enough to provide for her, and now it's gone again. A full-grown daughter in the house – we can't delay her marriage any longer."

"Somehow we'll find a way to pay for Sita's marriage."

"You're a good father to her," said Mata, "but how can I not worry? A father will always prefer his sons to a daughter not his own."

A daughter not his own? Sita?

"She's in my heart as I pledged she would be," said Papa, "and I'll provide for her, but this Garak was not

to be denied.”

Garak. So he had arrived in Sindhapur. I wondered if Mohinder had received the promised silver from Bhagadasa.

“Garak is evil, Papa,” I said, pulling myself up from the *charpoy*.

“Arun, we thought you were asleep,” said Mata. “You’ve heard things you shouldn’t have.”

“Garak hurts people,” I said. “Don’t let him come here.”

I could hear the panic in my voice. Dharm rolled over and sat up.

“What about Garak?” he asked.

“He’s gone,” said Papa. “I’ve dealt with him. You boys concern yourselves with your studies. Leave the rest to me.”

“They need to be told,” said Mata. “They should know what dangers lie in the world.”

“Then listen,” said Papa. “Garak came to our courtyard, told us you’d abducted the princess, said the Makara *raja* intended to throw you away in the Makara city dungeons, offered to prevent it if we paid him. I didn’t believe him, but I knew he’d stir up trouble if I refused, and our trading house has done well the last few months. So I gave him gold. And I was glad to do it. No price is too great when it comes to my sons.”

“But I heard Mata say that was Sita’s wedding gold,” I said.

“We’d finally collected enough,” said Mata. “With all the feasting in Sindhapur, three times the city came for our spices. And the gold they gave was generous. Now it’s gone, and no way to replace it with the feasting finished. And what if Garak returns for more? Brutes like him are never satisfied.”

“In all these years, have I ever failed to provide?” asked Papa. “Through the grace of the gods Sita will be fine.”

“Once you bring in the gods, there’s nothing more I can say,” said Mata.

“So let’s speak now of Dharm and Arun,” said Papa. “Dharm, you’ve paid the price for your insolence, and Master-ji will take you both back. But first, go tomorrow and make offerings at our Tiger shrine.”

In the morning Dharm and I trudged along the river to the track through the *sal* trees. The avenue was choked with undergrowth, the priest’s hut empty, but the Tiger Aunt’s holy stone stood solid and comforting. Monkeys shrieked as we laid our offerings of dried fruit on the weedy ground and draped a garland of red hibiscus blossoms over the blunt stone shoulders.

“We were never in danger, Arun,” said Dharm. “The Tiger Aunt was watching over us.”

“Because of the treasure we gave her?” I asked.
“Before we left for Master-ji’s?”

I touched my chest where the tiger amulet had hung until Dharm buried it.

“Perhaps,” said Dharm. “Whatever treasure is given to the goddess, she returns threefold.”

His voice died away at the sound of footsteps brushing through the forest undergrowth.

Three Makara guards stepped into the clearing, caps pressed onto their foreheads, leather vests bulging across their chests. Two of them clamped meaty hands around our arms. The third was Garak.

“I knew it was worth our while to follow the merchant’s brats,” said Garak. “You had no idea we were trailing you, did you? Treasure, you say?”

Another three Makara guards burst from the forest, dragging a fourth man by a rope. A thick-bearded

captive, red band slanted across his forehead, lips curled in a sneer. Mohinder. He folded his bound hands together and bowed to Dharm and me. I wriggled my shoulders, trying to break free, but the guard's grip was solid.

"Here he is, boys," said Garak. "Mohinder, fearsome brigand of the forest. He's not so haughty now, away from his bandits and surrounded by honest Makara soldiers."

"If rain falls upward, then your guards are honest," said Mohinder, straight and dignified beside his captors. "When Bhagadasa learns you've stolen the purse he gave me, he'll teach you the true meaning of honest."

"I've broken no rules," smirked Garak. "I've done exactly what Bhagadasa ordered. I surrendered my weapons, trotted along with you to Sindhapur, and watched while Bhagadasa gave you payment for betraying these two boys. Never was I told I couldn't

waylay you, steal it back.”

Mohinder snorted.

“Mohinder,” Garak continued, “you ordered me around on the route to Sindhapur, but you’re at my mercy now. And you, Arun. Pretending to be a girl. Did you think you could fool me? You can’t play tricks with Garak and get away with it.”

The guard jerked my arm for emphasis.

“Show us where this treasure is and I’ll let you go,” said Garak.

“There’s no treasure here,” I said.

“You’re playing games again,” said Garak, slapping my face, snapping my head to one side.

“Leave the boy alone,” said Mohinder. “Surely even Garak draws the line at torturing children.”

“Use your club,” said Garak to one of the guards

holding Mohinder. “Hit the goddess stone. That will frighten them into telling us.”

The guard drew back in horror.

“Garak-ji, not the Tiger Aunt. We can’t attack the Tiger Aunt,” said the guard.

“Garak of Makara city, the world trembles at your evil,” said a voice from the trees. A woman stepped into the clearing. Tiny, wrapped in rough cotton, hair waving over her shoulders. The Tiger Aunt.

Garak smirked. The other guards dropped to their knees and touched their foreheads to the ground, pulling Dharm and me down with them, tripping Mohinder with the rope clutched in their hands.

“You have the courage of a fool, Garak,” said the Tiger Aunt, “risking the fury of the gods for worldly riches.”

Garak hoisted his club, swung it close to Mohinder’s

head.

“Direct us to the treasure, Tiger woman,” said Garak, “or you’ll drown in grief at the death of your brother.”

The guards staggered to their feet, caught between bowing to the Tiger Aunt and gripping the arms of their three captives. Their eyes were nervous, flickering from Garak to the Tiger Aunt to the holy stone.

Beside me, I felt Dharm shudder, catch his breath.

“Garak,” he said, “there’s no need to threaten the Tiger Aunt and offend the gods. She has no idea where the treasure is. My brother and I can tell you.”

I blinked in surprise. What treasure? Under Master-ji’s *neem* tree?

“You’re soldiers,” said Dharm. “You must be

gamblers. If one of you has *vibhitaka* seeds, I offer you a game. Your best player against my brother Arun.”

“Dharm!” I muttered through the side of my mouth. “These people are dishonest.”

Garak smirked.

“Not when they’re being watched,” Dharm said. “Soldiers don’t like gamblers who cheat. Garak won’t want word passed along the Sindhu that he misused the dice.”

Mohinder raised his bound hands in a salute, caught my eye and winked. Whose side was he on?

“One of you against Arun,” Dharm repeated. “If your man wins, you keep us as captives and we reveal where the treasure is. If Arun wins, you set us free. Garak, do you agree? You can’t refuse a wager and keep your honour both.”

“Why waste time throwing *vibhitaka* seeds? Our clubs will pound the secrets out of you in a few moments,” said Garak.

“The seeds are honest,” called the Tiger Aunt from the forest edge beyond the reach of the guards. “Your clubs are not. Throw the seeds and learn how honour tastes.”

“And when this child Arun loses his throws, you’ll allow him to lead us to the Tiger’s treasure?” said Garak.

“With my blessing, if he loses,” said the Tiger Aunt. “And if you unbind Mohinder and let him preside.”

“I’m the best player here,” said Garak. “I’ll accept the boy’s challenge.”

Mohinder rubbed his wrists, freed of the rope, and straightened the red headband on his forehead. He knelt with Garak in the dirt, smoothing out a casting area.

“Dharm, why did you do this?” I muttered, shivering. “If I lose, we’ll be Garak’s prisoners.”

“We’re already his prisoners,” murmured Dharm. “If you lose, it doesn’t change anything. Just that Garak gets the treasure. Our tiger amulets. Not what he’s expecting.”

Mohinder scratched a circle in the dirt. A guard drew a pouch from his waist. The *vibhitaka* cubes clattered to the ground.

“Check the dice, Mohinder,” said Garak. “Satisfy yourself that our game is honest.”

Mohinder hefted the seeds in his hands, ran his fingers through them.

“Five rounds. Let the boy go first,” said Garak, sniggering. “Maybe he’ll call the first three correctly and I’ll be saved the trouble of dragging two slaves back to Makara city.”

“Be calm like the Tiger Aunt,” said Dharm in my ear.
“Win or lose, it doesn’t matter.”

Chapter Thirty

I sat cross legged by the playing circle and scooped up a handful of seeds. Sucking in my breath, I tossed them into the circle and, barely glancing at them, called out “odd”. Garak sat back, pulling at a fingernail, as Mohinder counted the seeds.

“Thirty-one,” he said. “Arun has the round.”

I grabbed up another handful, saw Garak’s sneer, Dharm’s raised eyebrows, and threw down the seeds with a jerk of my wrist.

“Even,” I said, my voice trembling.

“Odd,” said Mohinder. “The round is Garak’s.”

“Ha!” said Garak, seeds rattling in his cupped hands.

“Calm,” Dharm murmured in my ear.

The guards hung over the throwing circle, a blur of gaping mouths and eager eyes. Mohinder presided from the side, his face rigid as a mask. The Tiger Aunt’s face watching from the tree trunks was the same. Shadows moved behind her. Mohinder’s men, their arrows nocked.

Garak tossed the seeds onto the ground.

“Odd,” he said.

“Odd it is,” said Mohinder. “This round to Garak.”

Garak grinned as he swept up the next handful. He would win the game if he called this one correctly.

The guards held their breath. Dharm’s fist was clenched on his knee. Garak spilled the dice into the

circle.

“Odd,” he called.

Mohinder counted the seeds one by one, the guards watching intently.

“Even,” said Mohinder. “This round to Arun.”

The guards muttered, their eyes angry.

Mohinder glared at them.

“The seeds don’t lie,” he said.

Two rounds to Garak and two to me. It was in my hands now.

“Arun,” murmured Dharm, “be inside the seeds. Dark, silent, alone.”

He moved away, leaving me alone by the seeds.

I gathered a handful, dry and light against my palm,

and tossed them into the circle. My breathing slow, my eyes half-closed, I watched the seeds, wrinkled, brown, each one distinct, a bulging side, a pointed end, a shape like a mongoose's head. Thirty-seven seeds. I saw them clearly.

"Odd," I said, knowing I was correct.

"Odd," said Mohinder. "Arun wins the game."

"Impossible," said Garak, raising his fist. "The boy has cheated. The wager's off."

"Arun won fairly," said Mohinder. "Set the boys free."

Garak nodded at his companions. Dharm and I were hauled up, our arms pinioned behind. Garak raised his club above Mohinder's head, then jumped back as an arrow thudded to the ground at his feet. He snarled as two men from the fisher village emerged from the forest, arrows pointed at Garak and his men.

Two Makara guards drew knives from their leather belts, pressed them at our necks.

“The wager’s off, I say,” Garak repeated. “Tell us where the treasure is, or the boys’ throats will be cut and Mohinder squashed like a rat.”

“Six soldiers against two fishermen and a small woman,” called out the Tiger Aunt. “A Makara city custom. That’s how my shrine was destroyed. That’s how my daughter was taken.”

“So where’s the treasure?” Garak said, shoving his fist under my nose. “Don’t pretend you don’t know. I heard you talking.”

“That’s not what Dharm and I meant,” I said, my voice trembling. “We were talking about something else.”

“Garak,” Dharm said. “Arun’s too young to understand. Ask me.”

My mouth dropped open. What did I not understand?

Dharm raised his eyebrows, thrusting his chin toward me in warning. The Tiger Aunt tipped her head to one side, a faint smile on her lips.

“Garak,” Dharm said, “you hold knives to our throats and a club to Mohinder’s head, while Mohinder’s archers train their bows on you. Nobody can move. Release my brother and Mohinder. Then I’ll tell you about the treasure, and we can leave this place to the gods.”

Garak squinted at Dharm, then snorted through flared nostrils.

“Release the forest thief and the boy,” he said. “But hold this Dharm.”

The guards lowered their arms and Mohinder pulled me toward the Tiger Aunt.

“Dharm, too,” I cried. “Not without Dharm!”

“Dharm has a plan. Don’t hinder it,” murmured Mohinder.

“Garak,” said Dharm, “I’ll tell you where to find the Tiger Aunt’s treasure, but only if you’re certain you want to know. Stealing the treasure will unleash a great anger in the gods.”

“Just tell me,” said Garak. “I’m not frightened by children’s tales.”

Garak was fearless, but the other Makara guards were not so bold. Their shoulders were hunched, their eyelids fluttering.

“Dig at the feet of the stone goddess,” said Dharm. “I myself buried the treasure there.”

He folded his hands and bowed to the flesh and blood Tiger Aunt, who gazed back with steady eyes from the shadow of the trees.

Garak lifted his brow at the guard who had just released me and jerked his head toward the stone. The guard cringed, then crept to the base, folding his hands in reverence before setting aside the fruit and offerings. He scratched with his fingers, switching to his knife when his fingers made no impression on the hard dirt.

“Find him something to dig with,” Mohinder whispered.

I scabbled through roots and musty undergrowth to find a chunk of fallen branch.

Mohinder reached out to the guard.

“Use this,” he said. “Don’t spoil a good knife, even to steal from a goddess.”

The guard hesitated.

“Get on with it,” said Garak, brandishing his club. Mohinder’s archers stiffened their arms on their

bows.

The guard worked the stick into the ground, brushing away loosened dirt with his hands. Two others found digging sticks of their own and stooped to help. We watched as the cavity deepened, the Tiger Aunt's and Mohinder's faces impassive, Garak's shining with anticipation, his companions' eyes dull with fear.

I caught Dharm's eye. Where were our amulets? Solid stone, they should be where we had buried them, but there were no shouts of discovery.

"Forgive me, Garak, but there's nothing here," said the guard, his voice relieved.

Garak growled in disappointment, then collected himself.

"No problem," he said, gripping Dharm's arm, raising his club. "I'll take the boys instead. Hand back the other one, Mohinder, or this one's dead."

“One moment,” said the guard, plucking at his fingers. “Something’s caught here.”

The heavy midday silence was undisturbed even by birds or monkeys as he untangled a cord from the clump of dirt in his hands.

Was it mine or Dharm’s he had found, I wondered.

“A talisman,” he said. “A tiger cut into the stone.”

He held it out to Garak.

“The gods be praised!” exclaimed Dharm. “It must be a sign! There’s nothing else? A box sealed with clay?”

“Don’t pretend surprise,” said Garak, his club raised. “Your promise was false. You’ll pay now for trying to make a fool of me.”

“Wait, Garak!” cried Dharm. “You’re not understanding. The Tiger Aunt has saved you from a great crime. Don’t you see what the holy stone has

done? My brother and I buried her treasure right here. She has whisked it away before you could steal it, and left this amulet as a token. You've been saved from a great crime! Garak, wear the amulet and bow at the feet of this holy stone, for the gods have shown you great favour."

The other guards moaned, threw down their clubs, slid their knives back into their belts. They bowed to the stone goddess and to the Tiger Aunt, dipping their foreheads to the ground, springing to their feet with shining faces. Mohinder's bowmen lowered their bows.

"The gods have spoken, Garak" said a Makara guard. "You've been blessed, saved from offending the goddess."

"The Tiger Aunt's hand is everywhere," said another.

Garak glowered at Dharm, his arms crossed on his chest.

“There’s nothing for us here,” he said at last, fingering the tiger amulet. “You boys have wasted our time with your talk of treasure. We’re needed in Makara city.”

He stalked with the other guards out of the clearing, bowing at the last moment to the holy stone and the Tiger Aunt.

“Forgive us for allowing our offering to be disturbed, Tiger Aunt,” said Dharm, when they had disappeared down the avenue. He crouched by the foot of the stone, scooping dirt back into the hole. “The guards found just the one. The other amulet must still be there. Perhaps the holy stone will be content with half an offering.”

“Dharm,” said the Tiger Aunt, “I chose well when I asked Mohinder to bring you to me many months ago.”

“Dharm lied again,” I said. “Made Garak think we’d buried a coffer of jewels.”

“Dharm didn’t mislead him,” said Mohinder. “He just allowed him to follow the path he was already on.”

“Dharm,” said the Tiger Aunt, “you’ve done two tasks for me, you and your brother. You brought Bhagadasa to the *sheesham* tree. You rescued my daughter from the Makara *raja*’s camp. Now I have a third task. Are you curious?”

“Whatever you wish, Tiger Aunt,” said Dharm, “I’m ready.”

“When you return to Master-ji’s, I’ll reveal it,” she said. “I’ll be waiting for you there.”

She slipped away through the trees.

Chapter Thirty-one

We bowed to the stone goddess, the garland of red hibiscus still fresh on her shoulders. Mohinder and his bowmen escorted us all the way back to the Sindhapuri gates.

“Just in case Garak appears,” Mohinder said.
“Although I don’t think he’ll interfere with you again. His companions believe Dharm brought down the power of the gods. They’d lose their respect for Garak if he abused you. He doesn’t want that.”

I walked beside Mohinder with my head lowered, unnerved by his friendliness.

“If Garak does turn up, go to the Sindhapuri *raja*,” said Mohinder. “He’ll help you.”

“The *raja* has no interest in our problems,” said Dharm.

“Master-ji says otherwise,” said Mohinder.

“Mohinder,” I asked. “Why are you kind to us now, when a few days ago you had us roped and brought to Bhagadasa? Even Amba, your own niece?”

“Arun, I gave you to Bhagadasa because my sister asked me to. Her orders are strange, because she sees things the rest of us don’t. And as prisoners of Bhagadasa, you travelled safely.

“Dharm, here’s your knife back,” he said, handing Dharm the stone knife Ustad had worked for him. “I’ve kept it hidden since we took it from you at the ferry.”

Mohinder left us before we reached the gates.

“It’s best if the gate keepers don’t see me,” he said. “They’re suspicious of people who don’t live inside plastered walls.”

Dharm and I trudged through the wide streets, thinking of our evening meal. As we turned into the lane by our courtyard, Dharm tugged me back. A crowd of neighbours stood craning their necks toward our house. Two litters with squat carved legs stood by the wall, their gold-spangled canopies and fringed cushions bright in the evening sun. A cluster of bearers in flowing *dhotis* and sashes squatted nearby. Two guards stood at attention by our courtyard entrance. Guards of the Sindhapuri *raja*. I recognised their bronze caps and breastplates and red sashes.

“First we had Makara guards at the tiger shrine,” I said, “and now Sindhapuri guards at our house. Have they come to take us back to jail?”

“In golden palanquins?” said Dharm.

“Or Papa? Do you think he made the Sindhapuri *raja* angry?”

We tried to enter our courtyard. The guards crossed spears to block us.

“Go carefully, Dharm and Arun,” said one. “The glorious Satya, *raja* of Sindhapur, and his son the prince have honoured your house and are within. “

Our watchman darted toward us through the gate, a basin of water in his hand.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” he said.

“Prabhu-ji, what’s happening?” I asked.

Under the eyes of the guards and bearers and neighbours, he scrubbed our faces with his fingers, smoothed Dharm’s hair, still short from being chopped off on the fisher boat, re-coiled my hair, and re-tied our *dhotis* and sashes.

“Hold out your hands,” he said, pouring water over

them, emptying the rest on our feet. “Now you’re fit to see *Raja-ji*,” he said.

Two more guards, the two who had gripped our arms in the *raja*’s audience hall the day before, stood in the courtyard by the door into the sitting room. They moved their spears aside and motioned us inside.

“Enter quietly, and don’t approach him unless he calls you,” said one.

We slipped through the door. The Sindhapuri *raja* and Vinod were cross-legged on *charpoys*, Papa and Mata and Sita sitting at their feet.

“Dharm and Arun,” said Satya *raja*. “Stand where I can see you.”

They sat on embroidered cloths against fat rolled cushions I recognised from a neighbour’s house. . Vinod’s red curls glinted on his neck. Satya’s black hair swept back from his forehead, gleaming in the

lamps Mata must have ordered though it was still afternoon. Heavy gold edged their sashes, jewels studded the gold bands on their arms and necks and the knobs of the sandals set on the floor by the *charpoy*s. Mata's garland of mango leaves over the doorway, the striped cloths edging the shelves, were clumsy in comparison.

The *raja* drank from the bowl in his hands, then placed it on the tray Mata held up to him. Vinod reached over to replace his bowl as well.

"Arun," said the Sindhapuri *raja*. "Many months ago you brought me a message. Because of it, I'm here today."

"The little box?" I asked.

"Yes, the little box," said the *raja*. "You brought it to me, with great courage, I believe. 'I'm Arun son of Hari the merchant' you said. The chamberlain noted it."

Mata's head was bent, the knuckles white in her clenched hands. Sita cringed beside her. Papa's jaw was rigid.

"Arun," said Satya, "after you left, I pried open the box. Do you know what I found?"

"No, *Raja-ji*," I said.+

"A flower," said Satya, "shriveled and brown. I made inquiries: Hari the merchant, an honest man who deals in spices and respects the gods, father of two studious sons and an older daughter soon to be married. And I remembered the shrub the flower came from, a *yuthika* shrub in a clearing, fragrant, thick with white blossoms. Three days ago, when you and Dharm appeared in the audience chamber, I decided it was time to reveal myself."

Sita shifted her folded legs, her head hanging down like barley on a broken stalk.

"All daughters of this city are my daughters," said

Satya, “for the *raja* is the father of all. As you are the brother, Vinod.”

Vinod folded his hands and bowed to his father, not hiding the bored set of his mouth.

“But, Vinod, because of the *yuthika* flower sent to me by her respected mother, Sita’s under our particular care,” said Satya. “Where’s the purse, Vinod? Give it to Sita’s mother for her daughter’s marriage.”

The prince, his face slack with disinterest, held up a pouch, carnelian beads dangling from the braided drawstring, embroidered fabric bulging as the weight settled into his palms. He lifted it toward Mata, who glanced uncertainly toward the *raja*, shifting her legs to stand up, then sitting still when Papa pressed her shoulder.

“Take it to her, my son,” said the *raja*. “She’s your elder.”

Vinod stepped down and placed the purse in Mata's hands.

The *raja* stood.

"Arun, tell the bearers I'll leave now," he told me.

He folded his hands and bowed to Mata, eyeing her until she returned his gaze. He bowed to Papa and held his eyes in the same way. Then *raja* and prince swept through the door, our family trailing behind to stand in silence while they were carried off in the palanquins.

"I don't understand about the *yuthika* flower," I said when we had straggled back inside.

"Arun, this is not the time for questions," said Dharm.

"Sit, all of you," said Mata. "There are things that must be said. I knew there would be when I sent you with the box, Arun."

She peeled the embroidered cloths from the *charpoys*, folded them and stacked them on the floor with the borrowed cushions. Papa slipped from the room as she climbed on the *charpoy*."

"This is your story to tell," he said.

"Sita, Dharm, and Arun, your father wants to keep this in the past, but I brought it to the present by sending the *yuthika* flower to the *raja*."

Sita's eyes were huge, her face solemn.

"Dharm," said Mata, "this Amba you speak of, the Tiger Aunt's daughter, the princess of Makara city. She's not the only girl who roamed the forest floor with a prince of Sindhapur."

I hung my head, knowing what she was about to say.

"Sita, when Hari the merchant took me as his wife, he took you as his daughter, although you weren't yet born. Master-ji arranged it. Willingly Hari

received you, because of the gold my brother gave him, to be sure, but mostly because he's a good man. The *raja* knew nothing about it."

The room was silent. Dharm's eyes were closed, I stared at the frayed cord at the edge of the charpoy, Sita twisted her fingers in the edge of her shawl. Mata massaged her hand with her thumb, then shuddered and sat still.

"Behind our father's back you sent secret messages to Satya *raja*," said Dharm. "The *yuthika* flower."

"Dharm, be at ease," said Mata. "Your father has had no cause for complaint since the day I stood with him before the marriage fire. It was for your sake I sent Arun to the audience hall. Your sake and Sita's. And I did well, for now Sita can enter the home of her parents-in-law hung with jewels and respected. Be content about that, Dharm and Arun, for brothers must always look to their sister's happiness."

"What was the power in the *yuthika* blossom,

Mata?" I asked.

"It was by a *yuthika* shrub that I stood with Satya the afternoon we obeyed his father and took our leave of each other. We never thought it would be otherwise, you understand: a prince, as Satya was in those days, and a girl from the merchant quarter. Satya wound *yuthika* blossoms in my hair. I told him I'd keep them forever."

I was uncomfortable hearing such private things. And realising there was a part of our mother that had nothing to do with us.

"There's no need to fidget, Arun," said Mata. "This tale's no different from the ones the story-tellers act out in the bazaar."

"It's not such fun when you're inside the story," I said.

"When I returned to the city," said Mata, "after that last afternoon by the *yuthika* bush, I found that Satya had tied a ruby in the corner of my sash. My brother

and Hari used it well. The trading house of Hari the merchant grew from that ruby.”

“Papa’s trading house is because of the *raja*?” I asked.

“In the beginning,” said Mata. “Your father and I faded into the merchant quarter, far from the affairs of court. It was only because of Vinod’s anger that I approached the *raja* after so many years.”

“Mata,” said Dharm, “I’m sorry we accepted his gifts. Now we’re in his debt.”

“Dharm, there’s no shame in receiving what a *raja* bestows,” said Mata. “Subjects of a *raja* are always indebted to him. That’s as it should be.”

“Hari the merchant is my father,” said Sita, avoiding Mata’s eyes. “My only father. If the *raja*’s purse makes my father’s burden lighter, then I’m grateful to the gods. But don’t speak to me of the *raja* again.”

Mata’s face was bleak, her hands limp in her lap.

Chapter Thirty-two

“Return to Master-ji,” said Papa a few days later.
“We’ll call you back at Sita’s wedding time.”

My farewell kisses for this Mata who had frolicked with a prince were hesitant at first. Then she enveloped me in her arms and my muscles unknotted.

“Study well with my brother,” she said. “His wisdom is deep.”

“Go with the gods, little brother,” said Sita.
“Remember how frightened you were the first time you left? Now you’ve become brave. The tales I’ll

tell my new in-laws about you – their mouths will fall open.”

“Some stories you can relate,” said Papa. “Some you must leave sleeping.”

He turned away to tug at Dharm’s shawl, although it was already smooth on Dharm’s back. Sita smiled at Mata, laid her head on her shoulder.

This time Papa took us only as far as the Sindhapuri gate, sending us off with the driver and a cart full of spices and cotton cloth for the *ashram*.

We walked along the track through sprinklings of rain, and slept cold and damp under the cart. We entered Thakur’s village, offering a handful of dates to the rough stone column at the village edge. Two of Thakur’s friends sat under the *pipal* tree, their white beards shiny and tinged yellow with *ghee*, their heads tipped to catch each other’s words.

“Here’s the boy who made old Riku a watchman,”

said one. "What quarrels have you come to settle today? Don't worry. The priest Bhagadasa's been put in his place by the Sindhapuri *raja*. You won't find him here."

Thakur's daughter-in-law came from the house with bowls of milk and roasted barley.

"We wish to greet Thakur," Dharm said, "before we return to Master-ji."

"Then you must go to Master-ji's," said the daughter-in-law, "for Thakur is there."

We followed the rutted track to the *ashram*, the driver chewing the last of his barley as he went. Hamsa was watching for us at the edge of the clearing and pushed open the thorn gate into the yard, his head bobbing with excitement.

"You took a long time," he said, his voice low. "And I have a riddle for you. What's the difference between a puffed up little tattle-tale and a *raja*?"

“Tell us quickly,” said Dharm. “We must find Master-ji.”

“The difference is this,” said Hamsa. “There’s no difference. They’re the same, if we’re talking about the *raja* of Makara city. Can you believe it? That whiney little snoop a *raja*?”

“Alankar’s suffered a lot,” said Dharm. “Master-ji understands it.”

Master-ji sat beneath the drooping leaves of the mango tree. Alankar knelt at his feet, pearls hanging from his ear lobes, gold circling his arms and neck. Go-ma poured water for the courtiers, father and son, sent by Satya to watch over Alankar in Makara city, and for Thakur, his turban flat and wide as a wheel. Hamsa sank down beside the students of the *ashram* arranged in a row behind.

“Dharm and Arun, said Master-ji, “join your fellow students. Today you two return, and Alankar Kumara departs.”

We settled beside Hamsa.

Alankar placed a tray of offerings on the ground at Master-ji's feet, a starched shawl and *dhoti*, red-brown dates, five fat mangoes. He bowed, then turned toward the gate and the track to the river. He stopped beside Dharm and me.

"This one time I'm letting you go free," he said, "but be careful if you come to Makara city, for I won't do it again. Next time, I'll throw you in prison. The gods and my people rely on me to uphold the law."

He bowed and continued on his way to the river and Makara city. The two courtiers shrugged as they followed.

"It takes time to learn graciousness," the younger one murmured, catching our eye and grinning as he passed.

Go-ma patted our heads, then took me by the arm.

“Master-ji, has work for you, Arun,” she said. “You too, Hamsa.”

No summons for Dharm. His face fell.

“Arun and Hamsa,” said Master-ji, “one night, you dug up something from beneath the *neem* tree and then re-buried it. You thought you were unwatched.”

“Yes, Master-ji,” I said. “We did that. It’s our fault.”

“Forget about fault,” said Master-ji. “Go to the *neem* tree and find again what you found then. Our friend Thakur can claim it now. The rest of you, go to your duties while Thakur and I rest on the verandah.”

Dharm set off with the other students to gather wood while Hamsa and I dug under the tree by Master-ji’s house. The earth was matted with grass and packed hard, unlike the soft dirt we had pushed aside the first time, but at last the digging stick clattered on metal. The bronze box was still there,

dirt caked in the knotted cord.

“Good,” said Thakur. “I’m grateful to you, Master-ji, for keeping this treasure safe. Your students should understand what a great friend you’ve been to our village.”

That night the students were slow to fall asleep.

“Did you really kidnap a princess? Get thrown in jail?” they asked me. “Win at dice with a Makara soldier?”

“I told you they were brave,” said Hamsa.

Devadatta allowed us to talk a while longer before forcing us to lie down on our *charpoys*.

At dawn, Master-ji called us to the mango tree for recitations. As the sky grew light, four figures moved through the mist at the forest’s edge. Mohinder, the Tiger Aunt, Amba and Roshani.

“Dharm,” I whispered. “Amba’s here.”

Dharm ignored me, his neck rigid, his throat working.

“Amba’s here,” I said again. “Aren’t you happy? She must have escaped from the Makara *raja*.”

Dharm’s knuckles were white from gripping his knees. He lowered his head, jerking back his eyes when they slid toward Amba.

I watched Roshani, fine-haired and tiny beside Amba’s thick braid and darting eyes.

Go-ma led them to the verandah where Thakur already sat. We followed as Master-ji stepped from his platform and trudged to his house. The Tiger Aunt stood waiting, and the two holy people gazed at each other, wrapped in wrinkled white, Auntie-ji’s hair springing down her back, Master-ji’s boney shins splayed beneath his *dhoti*.

Go-ma settled the Tiger Aunt on one *charpoy*, and Master-ji on another. The Tiger Aunt drew Amba and Roshani onto cushions at her feet. Mohinder

squatted by Thakur.

“Tiger Aunt,” said Thakur. “Mohinder gave my village the duty of safeguarding the tiger shrine’s holy treasure, and with Master-ji’s and Go-ma’s help we’ve done so. When Bhagadasa demanded it, Master-ji took it away, and I cried that it was stolen. Now that the Sindhapuri *raja* has dealt with Makara city, the danger’s past, so as you requested, I’m returning the casket unharmed, its cords still knotted.”

Hamsa and I grinned at each other.

Thakur bowed to the Tiger Aunt, his broad turban dipping as he placed the bronze box on the striped mat. She bowed in return, then passed the box to her brother.

“Open it, Mohinder-ji” she said in her thin high voice. “The guardians should look upon what they risked their safety to protect.”

We watched in silence as Mohinder worked the cord away from the beaded and scalloped bronze, pried off the lid, teased open the skin-wrapped bundle within. A yellowed bone lay on his palm, curved like the new moon, cracks of age splitting the polished surface.

“A tiger tooth,” said the Tiger Aunt, “from the ancient tiger, some say, who roamed the forest when beasts spoke to us. A treasure without price, but a disappointment to Bhagadasa and the Makara *raja* if they had found it.”

Hamsa sucked in air, gazing wide-eyed at the tooth as Mohinder re-wrapped it.

“Now if you allow it, Master-ji,” the Tiger Aunt said, “I wish to speak with Dharm and Arun.”

Dharm and I walked to the verandah steps.

“The gods have brought you safely to Master-ji,” said the Tiger Aunt, “as they’ve brought my daughter

back to me.”

“And Roshani too,” said Amba, glancing at Dharm and me. Roshani hunched over, hiding her face.

Don’t distress her, I thought. Don’t draw attention to her.

“The new *raja* of Makara city had no wish to hold an adopted sister he’d never known,” said the Tiger Aunt, “and after she was spurned by the Sindhapuri prince, the old Makara *raja* had no interest in her either, so Amba is returned to me.”

Go-ma passed out bowls of buttermilk to the group on the verandah.

“Dharm,” said the Tiger Aunt, “I promised you another task. Are you ready?”

“Yes, Tiger Aunt,” said Dharm.

“I’ve watched over you ever since Master-ji sent word you’d been banished to the forest. For it was

clear to us both you were a boy of promise. And see how it worked out. You carried a message to Bhagadasa, and now his power's broken, you settled a dispute and now Thakur's village lives in peace, you were thrown into captivity with my daughter, and now you know her true worth, you were thrust into Satya *raja's* presence, and now your sister is draped in gold and silk. So I ask you again. Are you ready for the next task?"

"Yes," said Dharm. "As I have said, whatever Master-ji permits I'll gladly do."

"Master-ji has already approved," said the Tiger Aunt, "and your parents too."

Master-ji's eyes sparkled and Go-ma's mouth trembled on the edge of a smile. Mohinder lifted his hand to his face to hide his grin.

"Dharm, I require a son-in-law," said the Tiger Aunt. "I want to see you married to my daughter. This is the third task."

Dharm gasped. Amba held her breath, her eyes wide with anticipation.

“Well, Dharm, will you do my bidding?” the Tiger Aunt asked.

Dharm swallowed, struggling to speak.

“Tiger Aunt,” I blurted out, “that’s his greatest wish, to have Amba as his wife.”

“Arun,” cried Dharm, his voice suddenly strong. “It’s not your place to speak such words.”

I lowered my head, pretending to be contrite. But I was glad I had spoken up. I glanced toward Roshani, hoping she was watching me.

“Dharm,” said Master-ji, “Here at the *ashram* Devadatta will soon finish and leave for the forest. You, Dharm, will take his place, leading the others.”

Dharm and I were the only ones to show surprise, our mouths falling open. The others looked on as if

they had been given old news. Devadatta smiled at Dharm, Amba and her mother smiled at each other, Hamsa grinned beside me as if the plan had been his.

“But you dismissed him,” I said. “How can he carry on Devadatta’s work?”

“What do you think, Dharm? Did you do wrong, lying to Bhagadasa, speaking rudely?”

“Master-ji,” said Dharm, “though I lied, I believe the gods still smile on me.”

“That’s what I sent you off to learn” said Master-ji. “You learned well the precepts I taught you. But now you know these rules are servants, not masters. A servant wraps the shawl around the master’s shoulders, but the master rearranges the folds as he wishes. Is it not so?”

“Yes, Master-ji,” said Dharm.

“You’ve learned when to follow the path laid out

and when to make your own path,” said Master-ji. “So in time, it’s into your hands and Amba’s that we’ll place this school.”

Dharm folded his hands, wide-eyed and trembling. Amba slumped against her mother, her mouth round with surprise, her hand clutching at her thick braid.

“When is a lie not a lie?” shouted Hamsa, hopping in glee, waving his arms.

“Tell us,” said Master-ji, “for you’ll keep asking till we listen.”

“When it’s a garland round the neck of a future Master-ji,” said Hamsa.

I grinned at Hamsa, then turned toward Roshani where she crouched at Amba’s side. For an instant, before she pulled her shawl across her face, she smiled at me.

Acknowledgements

cover image modified from a photo of a "Stone Tiger, Sisian, Armenia" by Shaun Dunphy, 2010